

# ACCESSING THE GENERAL CURRICULUM FOR STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Serefete Molosiwa, Sourav Mukhopadhyay and Emmanuel Moswela

*Every student has a right to access the general curriculum to realize the aims of education for sustainable development. Accessing the general curriculum remains a critical component in the teaching and learning process of learners with learning disabilities and difficulties. Existing literature indicates that teachers must use suitable strategies to accommodate curriculum needs for students with learning disabilities and difficulties. This paper analyses how curriculum access for students with learning disabilities and difficulties has been promoted and achieved in the context of Botswana. The focus of this paper is therefore to outline the progress made so far towards enhancing curriculum access to the general education curriculum for learners with disabilities and difficulties.*

**KEYWORDS:** Access to Curriculum, Special Educational Needs, Learning Disabilities, Botswana, Multi-level Model

## INTRODUCTION

Evidently, ensuring that students with disabilities have access to the general curriculum has gained significant currency in the last decade. Mhlanga (2008) notes that past policies in most countries within Southern Africa emphasise physical access, and Botswana has not been an exception Mhlanga attests to an apparent shift towards epistemic access as well as mediating against poor

---

Serefete Molosiwa 

Lecturer, Department of Educational Foundations, University of Botswana  
Email: molosiwasm@mopipi.ub.bw

Sourav Mukhopadhyay

Senior Lecturer, Department of Educational Foundations, University of Botswana  
Email: sourav@botsnet.bw

Emmanuel Moswela

Manager, Disability Support Services, University of Botswana,  
Email: Emmanuel.Moswela@mopipi.ub.bw

quality education practices because values at the core of the teaching/learning processes for students with and without disabilities are the same (Giangreco, 2007), thus, the expectation is to have similar learning objectives for all. Additionally, while ensuring access to the general education curriculum as mandatory for all special educators, holding high expectations for students with disabilities that affect their learning should not be compromised (Orkwis & McLane, 1998; Morocco, 2001; Wehmeyer, Sands, Knowlton, & Kozleski, 2002).

The Botswana National Commission on Education (Government of Botswana, 1993) notes that students with disabilities are not accessing the general education curriculum as equally as their counterparts without disabilities. The Commission therefore recommends that all the necessary arrangements must be made to promote access to the general education curriculum for students with disabilities. The Revised National Policy on Education (RNPE) also states that the Government of Botswana is committed to equal educational opportunities for students with disabilities (Government of Botswana, 1994). However, the Commission recommendations section is not as vocal on issues of the curriculum including accessing it. In 2002, the first seminar on Curriculum and Special Needs was organized (Ministry of Education, 2002). This seminar called for identifying strategies for developing a comprehensive accessible National Curriculum. However, it remained elusive on how to design a Universal Curriculum that caters for students with disabilities. Ironically, there are reports that Botswana is committed to Universal Education, but achieving universal school access remains a challenge (MIET, 2012; Masalela, 2008). Evidently, the Special Education model of service delivery in Botswana failed to promote equal education opportunities enshrined in the RNPE (Republic of Botswana, 1994), which should have been partly demonstrated through curriculum access.

## DEFINING ACCESS

Access in this paper refers to the opportunities available that facilitate the learners' enjoyment of meaningful benefit from the existing school curricula. Such a benefit is characterised by the acquisition of knowledge and skills that individuals would use to sustain themselves. However, as documented in the literature, access to the school curriculum faces some challenges. The definition of access was provided from the perspective of general and special educators for high school learners with significant cognitive disabilities. General educators' definition of access focused on those learners receiving the same curriculum and materials as students without disabilities in the general education classroom with appropriate support from a special educator or paraprofessional. However, for most special educators, access means accessing an adapted curriculum that is relevant and meaningful to the

student's life and needs..

## **BARRIERS TO ACCESS**

Many barriers that impeded access to the school curriculum are documented in the literature. For example, Masalela (2009) describes some barriers to access as poor quality of the teaching, weak school management or curriculum that is irrelevant to people's needs. She further notes that access may be interfered with by poverty, ethnicity, disability, gender or membership to a minority group.

Some result analysis indicates that students with Special Educational Needs (SENs) generally perform poorly (Karande & Kulkarni, 2005). This poor performance raises concern for parents, teachers and policy makers. One of the reasons for such poor performance in Botswana could be the inflexible curriculum noted by Author (2010) and later alluded in Pansiri (2011). Flexible curriculum does not mean simplified curriculum, which leads to low expectations. The curriculum needs to challenge the students and promote higher expectations. Therefore, learners with SENs should go through the same school curriculum with appropriate accommodation and adaptations that could lead to improved overall performance.

## **DEFINING THE GENERAL EDUCATION CURRICULUM**

Defining general education curriculum is both simple and complex. Sands, Kozleski and French (1999) summarized the meaning of the general education curriculum as a plan for classes offered by a school, including materials used to present information to students, the courses offered in a school; and the planned experiences of the learners under the guidance of the school (p.8). Currently there are a growing number of efforts to conceptualize how to gain access to this general curriculum for learners with SENs. A few of these have addressed the educational needs of learners with learning disabilities (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 1999) since it is a commonly misunderstood and leads to multiple representations.

## **ACCESSING THE GENERAL EDUCATION CURRICULUM**

Access means different things to different people. Educators working with people with disabilities may think the term 'access' in relation to the inclusive movement (Mulholland & Patel, 1999); or as in access to the general education classroom (Winzer & Mazurek, 2011). Educators who are working with learners with sensory impairments might think of access as modification of the curriculum so that the students might access the general education curriculum (Sensory and Physical-Physical Impairment, 2011). Indicators of access to the general curriculum are acquisition of skills, competencies and knowledge

required by the general education curriculum and good academic performance for continuous assessment as well as in the national examinations (Wehmeyer, Lance & Bashinski, 2002; Scruggs, Mastropieri, & Magnusen, 2006). Access to the general curriculum goes far beyond the physical presence of learners with SENs in schools Mhlanga (2008). It means learners with SENs must learn and attain the skills, competencies and knowledge required by the general education curriculum (Wehmeyer, et al., 2002; Spooner & Browner, 2006). These authors highlight access to the general education curriculum as involving progress and participation in achieving the benchmarks outlined in the school curriculum.

The intention of this paper is not to argue “why” the general education curriculum, it is “how” to make the general education curriculum accessible for learners with SENs. In this paper children with learning disabilities are used as a point of reference for understanding the concept of promoting access to the general education curriculum. Based on the concept of the general curriculum and knowing the characteristics of students with learning disabilities, this paper proposes curriculum decision using the Multi-level Model by Wehmeyer, Lattin, and Agran (2001) that takes into account both the general education curriculum and a student's unique learning needs.

## **THE MULTI-LEVEL MODEL**

The multi-level-model is a framework that underscores the importance of using multi-modal or multi-sensory teaching while incorporating the use of technology to promote successful learning. The authors of this paper argue that if such a model could work for learners with intellectual impairments, then there are higher chances that it will work for those with learning problems. Wehmeyer, Sands, Knowlton, and Kozleski (2002) propose a model with steps that facilitates progress for learners with intellectual impairments and Table 1 display those steps. In this paper, this model is used as a framework to study the feasibility of this model for students with learning disabilities in the context of Botswana.

### **Step 1: Curriculum Planning and Design**

Ensuring access to the general education curriculum for students with learning disabilities must begin with curriculum planning and the design process. This is attained through the in-built principles of universal design (Rosetti, 2006). Universal design principles recognise the heterogeneity of students with learning disabilities. Synoptically, in Rosetti's view, these principles include equitable use, flexibility during usage, simplicity and intuitiveness in use, information that is accessible to all, tolerance for errors, low levels of physical effort, and suitable space for approach and usage. The universal design is recommended for these reasons and the fact that it facilitates meeting students'

unique learning needs. For example, if an assignment on the History of Botswana is given to students, those with learning disabilities are not likely to produce credible work. Thus, the need to use alternate assessment or open-ended standards such as oral presentations, video clips, dramatisation, could be employed to evaluate such students' content knowledge. Research suggests that open-ended designs allow for greater flexibility especially regarding topics which have content based on what, when, and how questions (Stainback, Stainback, Stefanich, & Alper, 1996). These designs are aligned with universally designed curriculum as they ensure that more students including those students with learning disabilities can show progress in the general education curriculum (Wehmeyer, et al. 2002).

In the case of Botswana where standards are written in a close-ended (inflexible) format, and the curriculum planning and design processes are not shaped by principles of universal design, it may be difficult to promote access for all to the general education curriculum (Kisanji et al. 2003). At the centre of debates on access to the general education curriculum is the issue of whether a learner requires an individualised educational plan or not. Because of the uniqueness of the needs of students with disabilities, they often would require an individualised educational plan.

**Table 1**  
**Steps to Gaining Access to the General Curriculum for Students with Learning Disabilities.**

Action Step	Description
Standard Setting and Curriculum Design	Standards are written open-ended. Curriculum planning and design processes are informed by principles of universal design to promote progress in the general curriculum.
Individualized Educational Planning	Designing IEPs is shaped by the general curriculum taking cognizance of the student's individual unique learning needs.
School-wide Materials and Instruction	Curricular materials are universally designed and the school uses instructional strategies, which challenges all students to progress in the general curriculum.
Partial School and Group Instruction	Targeting students who require intensive assistance. Developed instructional practices built into the lesson, unit, and classroom to facilitate student's ability to progress and participate in the general curriculum.
Individualized Interventions	Ensuring progress in the general curriculum is actualized through additional curricular content and instructional strategies which harmonise well with student's learning needs not met by school-wide efforts or partial school efforts.

Source: Adopted from: Wehmeyer, M.L., Lance, D., & Bashinski, S. (2002).

## Step 2: Individualized Educational Planning

The education of learners with SENs has always emphasized the importance of Individualized Educational Planning (IEP) and illustrations as its point of departure; a value that should not be abandoned when focusing on the general education curriculum. Wehmeyer, et.al. (2001) suggested a curriculum decision-making model that promotes involvement of the IEP teams. These teams begin with educational planning and have knowledge of the general education curriculum (standards/benchmarks) for students who are of the same age and grade level as the student who require the IEP. In designing of the IEP, the information about unique student learning needs must be considered (based on input from multiple stakeholders and assessment sources). It should be highlighted that there should not be a special curriculum for learners with learning disabilities. Instead, learners with learning disabilities should participate and progress in the general education curriculum with accommodations and /or modifications provided as needed. This model is detailed in Wehmeyer, et al. (2001).

Firstly, the IEP team should do a complete assessment and find out suitable assistive technology that can compensate students' limitations or limited functionality. For example, a student with a specific learning disability such as dyslexia may be allowed to use the word processor or a type writer (for those without spelling problems) for writing his/her assignments. It remains the job of the IEP team to make sure that the student is able to access a computer and gets the necessary training required to operate the technological aid. Once assistive technology is considered, it is the responsibility of the team to focus on the three levels of curriculum modifications. These are curriculum modification, curriculum augmentation and curriculum alteration (Wehmeyer, et al. 2001)

The first level is curriculum modification, which refers to efforts to adapt the curriculum's presentation and representation to ensure the student's engagement with the curriculum. Once this level is established, the second will be to focus on curriculum augmentation where additional content is included to challenge the students while monitoring progress. Learners with learning disabilities require additional strategies such as self-regulation strategies or 'learning -to learn'. These strategies enhance the ability of learners with learning disabilities to effectively progress through the general curriculum. At these levels, the content required by the general education curriculum is not changed. It is at the third level of the model that curriculum alteration occurs. The general education curriculum adds specific content to address student's needs that might include traditional functional skills or other skills not usually in the general

education curriculum. If learners are to maximally benefit from and progress in the general education curriculum; IEP teams need to agree on accommodations, curriculum adaptations and augmentations before considering designing an alternative curriculum. The point about flexibility of the curriculum is important because if curriculum modifications and augmentations are built into the curriculum planning stage and design, the general education curriculum is broadened enough to cover functional areas pertinent to the unique needs of individual learners. With such practice, the need for an alternative curriculum is limited or dismissed. Promoting access to the general education curriculum may remain elusive in Botswana where critical issues of curriculum modifications and curriculum accommodations are not mandatory for students' learning to take place. Therefore, in-service training in these curriculum adaptations is more than warranted to promote the learning of those experiencing challenges with the existing school curriculum. With more teachers made aware of how to adapt the curriculum for learners' specific needs, Botswana educators are likely to begin to recognise that most learners can make the grade with appropriate support and services.

### **Step 3 : School-Wide Implementation of High Quality Instructional Strategies**

Instructional deliveries are inherently guided by the curriculum. Research has shown that the use of learner-centered instructional methods enables learners with learning disabilities to learn skills, competencies and knowledge required by the general education curriculum (Wehmeyer & Agran, 2006). These pedagogical styles were ideal for learners with learning disabilities. These include the inquiry-based approach, the thematic approach, concept mapping, cooperative learning, peer tutoring, role-playing, simulations and discussion (Schirmer, 2000). Learner-centered methods improve the academic performance of learners with learning disabilities significantly. They also enable the learners with learning disabilities to learn skills, competencies and knowledge required by the general education curriculum. These methods appeal to various learning needs and styles of learners with SENs, which determine how individuals learn (Keenngwe, Onchwari & Onchwari, 2009).

Traditional methods of teaching such as lecture method, chalk and talk and textbook-based approaches do not promote access to the general curriculum for learners with learning disabilities. These methods are oriented towards verbal, factual recall of information. Consequently, learners with learning disabilities do not learn effectively when such pedagogies are adopted



(Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1994; Scruggs, Mastropieri & Magnusen, 2006).

The implementation of high quality, empirically validated instructional strategies is a critical feature (Wehmeyer, Lance & Bashinski, 2002) if access to the general education curriculum for learners with learning disabilities is to be realised. Too often, instructional strategies that demand higher cognitive functions are not always “appropriate” for learners with learning disabilities. This kind of approach to teaching needs to be refocused and the tasks which demand higher cognitive strategies such as problem solving, critical thinking and creativity need to be embedded in the teaching-learning processes but bearing in mind that some learners may find them to be challenging. Therefore, to overcome some of these instructional issues, it is imperative that aligning the curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices is adhered to as a core value of a high quality educational programme for all students (English, 1992). It is crucial that the teacher's choice of methods should orchestrate with students' individual learning needs. In Botswana where classroom research indicates the pervasiveness of the authoritarian approach, this might fail (Tabulawa, 1997). Hence, it is important that in-service training is refocused to address how teachers relate with learners and the issues of the impact of context in the teaching of students with learning disabilities.

A teacher needs to utilize a variety of instructional groupings or arrangements ranging from independent seatwork, small group instructions and whole group instructions. Nevertheless, for learners with learning disabilities (indeed students with disabilities in general), as “whole-class and independent seatwork arrangements often pose the most problems” (Udvari-Solner, 1993, p.4), it is important to reemphasize that learners with learning disabilities are a heterogeneous group with varied learning needs and styles. Mass teaching without varied instructional strategies may not connect well with diverse learning styles. For example, some learners with learning disabilities are predominantly visual learners, while others are auditory learners. Giving information in one mode might lead to a mismatch with the learning style of students. Appropriate teaching strategies that accommodate students' learning needs will increase the likelihood that learners with learning disabilities to access to the general curriculum (Bowe, 2000).

We strongly feel it would be enlightening to examine some of the neglected principles of universal design, which are critical to a discussion of the applicability of this design to the education of learners with learning disabilities in the context of Botswana. To most teachers it seems that universal design solely relates to captioning videos, students changing the font face, size and colour, or providing texts on computer disks so that students can listen to them through screen reading software. Research indicates that providing flexible materials is undoubtedly an important part of universal design for learning for all learners Wehmeyer et al. (2002). In order for learners with



learning disabilities to progress and participate in the general education curriculum, it is necessary that educators must employ the principles of universal design to shape the learning experiences as well as their teaching practices or routines. Based on Bowe's (2000) examination of the principles of universal design (which emerged from architecture and technology) as they apply to education, Lance and Wehmeyer (2001) developed a list of principles (refer to Table 2) for use in evaluating the degree to which instructional materials incorporate principles of universal design. Our purpose is to expand the discussion about universal design by examining how teachers might incorporate these principles to increase access to the school curriculum for learners with learning disabilities.

**Table 2**  
**Principles of Universal Design Applied to Education.**

Principle	Strategies
Equitable Use	Materials harmonise well with varied students' needs at various levels of cognitive taxonomies, and offer alternatives that appear equivalent.
Flexible Use	Materials endowed with multiple means of representation, presentation and student expression.
Simple and Intuitive Use	User-friendly, clear, and concise directions with examples provided.
Perceptible Information	Employs all the senses, communicate needed information. Essential information and details are highlighted and redundancy included.
Tolerance for Error	Offers students ample time to respond, adequate practice time, feedback and monitor progress of students.
Low Physical and Cognitive Effort	Materials present information in chunks that can be completed in a reasonable time frame

Source: From Wehmeyer, M.L., Lance, D., & Bashinski, S. (2002).

**CONCLUSIONS**

The intent of access to the general education curriculum is to ensure that all learners with SENs have access to benefit from a challenging school curriculum, and that they are held to high standards and expectations. If this is to be an outcome achieved by learners with learning disabilities, educators and other stakeholders in the education process need to focus on every aspect of the education process, from the planning and design of curriculum and standards, the implementation of such curriculum, the educational decision-making process, and the design and implementation of instruction and assessment. Materials will need to take into account all aspects of universal design. In the

end, it is likely that such efforts will not only ensure that students with learning disabilities gain access to the general education curriculum, but that all students benefit as enrichment of the general curriculum is likely to benefit all the learners.

While promoting access to the general education curriculum is a radical step towards enhancing equal educational opportunities for students with learning disabilities, it will be difficult to perceive the practicality of accessing the curriculum to most learners without determining the imminent structural and philosophical problems. In order to contextualize ideas alluded to that increase access to the curriculum in this paper, a large scale research study that addresses curriculum access to students with learning disabilities is required. Amongst other factors that this envisaged study will include is for the researchers to understand that access to meaningful education is attainable through the implementation of validated programs, processes and procedures. Thus, the need for teachers to collaborate and to apply well-founded, research-based classroom practices is the key (Beckman, 2001). Thus, the Botswana education system should be informed by innovative practices that are research-based.

## REFERENCES

- Bowe, F. G. (2000). *Universal design in education: Teaching non traditional students*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.
- Dymond, S. K., Renzaglia, A., Gilson, C. L., & Slagor, M. T. (2007). Defining access to the general curriculum for high school students with significant cognitive disabilities. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities (RPSD)*, 1, 1-15.
- English, F. (1992). *Successful schools series: Vol. 4. Deciding what to teach and test: Developing, aligning, and auditing the curriculum*. Newbury Park, CA: Corwin Press.
- Giangreco, M.F. (2007). Extending inclusive: How can students with disabilities meaningfully participate in the class if they work many levels below classroom peers? *Educational Leadership*, 34-37.
- Government of Botswana. (1993). *The national commission on education*. Gaborone: Government Printers.
- Government of Botswana. (1994). *Revised national policy on education*. Gaborone: Government Printers.
- Karande, S., & Kulkarni, M. (2005). Poor school performance. *Indian Journal of Pediatrics*, 72, 961-967.
- Kisanji, J., Mthunzi, C., Khame, D., Chipazi, L., Ramaribana, V., & Makgonatsothe, P. (2003). *Situational analysis for the adaptation and modification of the basic and senior secondary curriculum for hearing-impaired learners*. Gaborone: Curriculum Development and

Evaluation Department.

Lance, G. D., & Wehmeyer, M. L. (2001). *Universal design checklist*. Lawrence, KS: Beach Center on Disability, University of Kansas.

Mhlanga, E. (2008). *Quality assurance in higher education in southern africa: the case of the universities of the witwatersrand, Zimbabwe and Botswana*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand, Pretoria. Retrieved from <http://wiredspace.wits.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10539/7599/PhD%20Thesis%20Quality%20Assurance%20in%20Higher%20Education.pdf?sequence=1>.

Ministry of Education. (2002). *A report on the proceedings of the recommendation 122 seminar*. Francistown: Curriculum Development and Evaluation Department. Gaborone: Government Printers.

Orkwis, R., & McLane, K. (1998). *A curriculum every student can use: Design principles for student access*. ERIC/OSEP Topical Brief, Reston, VA: Council for Exceptional Children.

Pansisri, N. O. (2011). Silent Exclusion: The unheard voices in remote areas of Botswana. *International Journal of Education Science*, 3(2), 109-118.

Rossetti, R. (2006). *The seven principles of universal design*. United Spinal Association. Retrieved April 11 from <http://www.udll.com/media-room/articles/the-seven-principles-of-universal-design/>.

Schirmer, B.R. (2000). *Language and literacy development in children who are in deaf schools*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge.

Scruggs, E., & Mastropieri, M.A. (1994). Science for students with disabilities. *Review of Educational Research*, 62, 377 – 411.

Scruggs, E., Mastropieri, M.A., & Magnusen, L. (2006). Activities – oriented science instruction for students with disabilities. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 22, 240 – 263.

Soukup, J. H. (2012). Classroom variables and access to the general curriculum for students with disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, 101-120.

Spooner, F., & Browner, D.M. (2006). *Teaching language arts, math, and science to students with significant cognitive disabilities*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

Stainback, W., Stainback, S., Stefanich, G., & Alper, S. (1996). Learning in inclusive classrooms: What about the curriculum? In S. Stainback & W. Stainback (Eds.), *Inclusion: A guide for educators* (pp. 209-219). Baltimore: Brookes.

Tabulawa, R., (1997). *Teachers' perspectives on classroom practice in Botswana: Implications pedagogical change*. Gaborone: Ministry of Education.

Udvari-Solner, A. (1993). *Curricular adaptations: Accommodating the instructional needs of diverse learners in the context of general education*. Topeka, KS: Kansas State Board of Education. Newbury Park, CA: Corwin Press.

Wehmeyer, M.L., & Agran, M. (2006). *Teaching language arts, math, & science to students with significant cognitive disabilities*. Baltimore: P. H. Brookes Publishers.

Wehmeyer, M.L., Lance, D., & Bashinski, S. (2002). Promoting access to the

general curriculum for students with mental retardation: A multi level model. *Education and Training in Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities*, 37(3), 223-234.

Wehmeyer, M. L., Sands, D. J., Knowlton, H. E., & Kozleski, E. B. (2002). *Teaching students with mental retardation: Accessing the general curriculum*. Baltimore: Paul H.

Wehmeyer, M.L., Lattin, D., & Agran, M. (2001). *Achieving access to the general curriculum for students with mental retardation: A curriculum decision-making model*. Baltimore: P. H. Brookes Publishers.