



Towards an inclusive teaching: Examining educator's skills in identifying children with special needs in inclusive classroom in Adansi North District, Ghana

Research article



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Abstract

The study examined the skills regular education teachers in the Adansi North District have in identifying children with special needs in inclusive classroom. The descriptive survey design was used for the study. The census sampling technique was used to sample 120 regular education teachers from public basic schools for the study. A 49-item questionnaire was used for data collection and the Cronbach's coefficient alpha for the questionnaire was 0.79. Frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations were used to analyse the data. The results revealed that, regular education teachers in the Adansi North District were prepared in identifying children with special needs in inclusive classroom. The teachers indicated that they collaborated with professionals and also performed routine screening to identify individuals with special needs in their classrooms. The study recommends that teachers need to be motivated by the Government of Ghana to show more commitment in ensuring effective implementation of inclusive education in their classrooms.

Keywords: inclusive education, instructional strategies, programme modification, regular education, special needs



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Public Interest Statement

Inclusive education is being implemented nationwide and it is imperative to examine the readiness of teachers towards the policy. It is also necessary to find out how basic school teachers in regular education in the Adansi North District have prepared to implement the policy in the district. Even though no research has been conducted in the district with regard to teachers' readiness towards inclusive education, informal interactions with some teachers during off campus teaching practice supervision in the district revealed that some of the teachers have knowledge in inclusive education but as to whether they are ready to implement inclusive education in their classrooms, is an issue which demands investigation. It is as a result of this that the study sought to find out how ready are regular education teachers in the Adansi North District to implement inclusive education in the district.

1. Introduction

Educational systems across the world are experiencing major changes. One of these changes is related to the increase in the diversity of school populations (Acedo, Ferrer & Pamies, 2009). This means that the educational system in many countries is increasingly becoming responsible for including a large number of pupils with diverse needs. This suggests that educational systems are becoming more inclusive. In other words, classrooms are now becoming more diverse with respect to students' abilities and disabilities.

Inclusion is a widely accepted programme according to United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2005). Gadagbui (2008) opined that inclusive education ensures the participation of all students in schooling and involves restructuring the culture, policies and practices in schools so that they can respond to the diverse needs of students in their localities. The goal of inclusive education is to break down barriers that separate general and special education and make the included students feel liked, and become members of the general education classroom. This provides individual students with special needs opportunities and confidence in learning independently concepts, skills and strategies. The fundamental principle of inclusive education is that all children should learn together, wherever possible, regardless of any difficulties or differences that may arise. As such inclusive classrooms must recognize and respond to the diverse needs of their students, accommodating both different learning needs, pace and rates of learning and ensuring quality education for all through appropriate curricula, organizational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use and partnership with their communities.

Avoke (2008) pointed out that there was a rapid move towards inclusive programme in the 1980s and by 1994 the scope had expanded. Society has changed the direction of the way in which it educates its children. The trend which got momentum in the 1970s, is the merger of regular or general education with special education known as inclusion. Inclusive education is the most common approach to address the educational needs of all children.

Deku and Vanderpuye (2017) stated that one of the factors that accounts for the growth and development of education is the teacher. For that matter, no country can afford to neglect the education and training of teachers. However, too often change in education has failed because there is not much attention on the current practices and needs of those who are expected to put it into effect (Wearmouth, Edwards & Richmond as cited in Hay, Smith & Paulsen, 2001). A research

conducted by Wearmouth et al authors in South Africa revealed that teachers in South Africa revealed a marked lack of knowledge on issues related to inclusive education. This is to be expected when considering the lack of experience and training that the respondents had had in dealing with children with special educational needs. The teachers in South Africa furthermore felt unprepared and unequipped to teach integrated classes, and ascribed this to inadequate training, inadequate time, large classes, inadequate facilities, and inadequate teacher experience (Hay et al). Another research conducted by Mngo (2017) in Cameroun also revealed that teachers have negative attitude toward inclusive education. They however had positive attitude toward managing students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms, and about the outcomes and benefits of inclusion.

2. Literature Review

Teachers Readiness in Identifying Children with Special Needs in the Classroom

Children with special needs come from different family backgrounds and mix-up freely with the other children with/without disability, some of them may pass through the school system without being identified. It is therefore imperative that efforts should be made to identify those with special needs. Kirk, Gallagher, Anastasiow and Coleman (2006) intimate that children with hearing losses are usually identified through screening at birth or public health screening before they enter school. Kirk et al. adds that the student can also complain of earaches, discomfort in the ear or strange noises in the ear.

Teachers should also be ready to work collaboratively with parents of children with special educational needs[SEN] since communication between teachers and families is a critical aspect of the educational process, especially as it relates to inclusion (Tichá, Abery, Johnstone, Poghosyan & Hunt, 2018). This aspect of teacher readiness is very important because when families and educators work together as partners, it ensures that all children have positive and successful learning experiences. In addition, the regular education teacher should be adequately prepared to be able to work with other professionals in special education. These professionals include the psychologist, counsellor, special educator, the school nurse, social worker and others. Tichá et al. listed the following as some of the roles of the regular education teacher in working collaboratively with these professionals: helps to develop, review and revise individualised education plan, helps to determine appropriate interventions and strategies for the student, helps in determining programme modification for the student, identify supports that school personnel need to help the student progress in the general instructional strategies and maintains communication between the school and home.

Regular education teachers acquire skills and competences from colleges and universities in identifying children with special needs in their classrooms. This could be done effectively and efficiently when regular education teachers are able to identify and teach children with special needs in the classroom. Hardman, Drew and Egan (2002) contended that prepared teachers have skills, expertise and knowledge to teach their students. This helps teachers to understand classroom practices within inclusive education institution. Whitworth (2001) opined that to prepare teachers to teach in settings that are inclusive and meet the needs of all students will require a different model. Whitworth further argued that teacher preparation in identifying students with

special needs require teachers gaining the requisite knowledge and competencies in handling students.

A study conducted by Hay, Smit and Paulsen (2001) on teacher readiness for inclusive education in South Africa and discovered that teachers felt unprepared and unequipped to teach inclusive classes. They ascribed this to insufficient training and inadequate teacher experience. Mprah, Dwomoh, Opoku and Owusu (2016) assessed the knowledge, attitude and readiness of teachers towards Inclusive Education in Ejisu Juaben Municipality in Ashanti Region of Ghana and reported that teachers in inclusive classrooms lacked adequate knowledge and skills to practice inclusion due largely to the fact that they were not adequately prepared for the programme. Without adequate training and preparation, it is obvious that teachers would be less knowledgeable and insensitive to the needs of children with special needs. This has the tendency of affecting the participation and performance of the children with special needs. Teachers who do not have the requisite training in inclusive education philosophy would have difficulty to offer the necessary attention to a pupil with disability in the class.

Regular education teachers should be ready to consult parents for more information about their children when they want to identify individuals with special educational needs. This will regular education teachers to identify the root cause of the students' disabilities. Identifying the root cause of the disability would enable the teachers to put in the appropriate interventional strategies to help the children overcome their learning difficulties. Kirk et al., (2006) report that teachers are prepared in identifying children with special needs when they consult with parents. In the literature, Kirk et al. indicated that the success of inclusive education depends on variety of support from various personnel. This would help the regular education teacher to provide a healthy educational environment for all students. Shea and Bauer (1994) add that teacher's consultation with parents helps them in developing strategic plans to help manage children with disabilities. Paasche, Gorrill and Strom (2004) indicate that teachers identify children with special needs through behaviour and appearance.

Regular school teachers collaborated with other professionals for support in terms of identifying children with special needs. Oppong (2003) reported that teacher readiness includes teachers collaborating with professionals such as doctors, nurses, psychologist, counsellors and special educators for assessment and possible treatment of children with special needs. Oppong further adds that prepared teachers collaborate with parents and families of children with special needs for information about their children. The information helps teachers to effectively manage the individuals with special needs in inclusive classroom. Kirk et al., (2006) indicated that students are taken through routine vision screening before they enter school. This helps to identify students with possible developmental problems. They added that most school systems have formal screening programmes for vision, hearing and communication disorders. It was noted that often parents or teachers request that a child be screened. The purpose of screening is for detection, not diagnosis and it must be well planned, fast and accurate. Dunn (2006) observed that students referred for special education services are those who are seen as having low ability, low grades, an inability to read, truant behaviour, an inability to function in a classroom with peers, and irregular contact with the school. Dunn argues that a better understanding of classroom teachers' criteria

for special education referral would help define the important initial step in the special education identification process.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The descriptive research design was adopted for this study. It is used by the researcher to describe how ready teachers in the Adansi North District are, in terms of implementing inclusive education in the district. This design was used to describe the views of regular education teachers on their skills in identifying children with special needs in their classrooms. It enabled the researcher to describe how regular education teachers adapt the instructional strategies to meet the needs of individuals with special needs and how they are equipped to ensure effective socialization of individuals with special needs in their classrooms.

3.2 Population

The population for the study comprised all regular education teachers in basic schools in the Adansi North District. In this study, the target population was the set of teachers in all the public basic schools in Adansi North District. For the purpose of the study, the accessible population consisted of all teachers in three selected educational circuits in the Adansi North District. The size was 120 teachers.

3.3 Sample

The sample for the study consisted of 120 regular basic school teachers. All the teachers teach in public basic schools in the Adansi North District. Majority of the teachers were males (76) whilst (44) were females. The average ages of the teachers were 30 to 39 years. Majority of the teachers had Bachelor's degree and Diploma in Basic Education whilst few had MA/M.ED/M.PHIL degrees. Most of the teachers have taught for about 10 years while few of them had taught for more than 16 years. These teachers are all working with learners with diverse needs in their classrooms

3.4 Research Instrument

The research instrument used to gather data was questionnaire. The questionnaire was ordered into five sections for participants. That is section A, B, C, D and E. The total number of items on the questionnaire was 49. Section 'A' comprised 5 background information (gender, age, educational level, training in inclusive education and teaching experience). The section, 'B', constituted 7 items on skills of teachers in identifying individuals with special needs in an inclusive classroom. Section 'C' also contained 15 items on curricular adaptation. In addition, Section 'D' was made up of 8 items on socialization of individuals with special needs and section 'E' had 14 items on challenges teachers face in inclusive classrooms. These items were selected, reviewed and contextualized from sufficient previously reviewed literature.

4. Findings/Results

What skills do regular education teachers in Adansi North District possess in identifying children with special needs in their classrooms?

The purpose of the research was to find out the extent to which regular education teachers in the Adansi North District are prepared in using various skills to identify children with special needs in their classrooms. Respondents were requested to provide responses to eight (8) items. The criterion in Table 1 was calculated by dividing the range (3) by the number of categories (4), giving 0.75. Then the criteria are 1.00-1.74 = Not Prepared (NP), 1.75-2.49 = Not Very Much Prepared (NVMP), 2.50-3.24 = Prepared (P), 3.25-4.00 = Very Much Prepared (VMP), were used. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Analysis of Results of Teacher Readiness (n=120)

Readiness of Teachers Through:	Mean	SD	Remarks
1. Acquired skills obtained from College/University.	3.52	.63	VMP
2. Consultation with parents.	3.42	.69	VMP
3. Identifying children with special needs using appearance, behaviour and complaints.	3.35	.64	VMP
4. Collaboration with professionals.	3.22	.75	P
5. Routine Screening.	3.02	.72	P
6. Referral	2.96	.86	P
7. The use of specialised materials and equipment such as snellen chart and otoscope.	2.61	.96	P
Overall mean	3.15	.85	

Field Data, 2020

From Table 1, the results revealed that in general regular education teachers indicated that they are prepared in identifying children with special needs in their classrooms ($M=3.15$, $SD=.85$). The respondents mentioned that they are prepared in identifying children with special needs in inclusive classroom through: (a) collaboration with professionals ($M=3.22$, $SD=.75$), (b) routine screening ($M=3.02$, $SD=.72$) and the use of specialized materials and equipment such as Snellen chart and otoscope ($M=2.61$, $SD=.96$). Furthermore, the results of the study revealed that respondents are prepared in identifying children with special needs in inclusive classroom through: (a) acquired skills obtained from College/University ($M=3.52$, $SD=.63$), (b) consultation with parents ($M=3.42$, $SD=.69$) and (c) using appearance, behaviour and complaints ($M=3.35$, $SD=.64$).

Discussion

What skills do regular education teachers in Adansi North District possess in identifying children with special needs in their classrooms?

The purpose of this research question was to find out how regular education teachers are ready in identifying children with special needs in inclusive classrooms. The findings of the study revealed

that, in general, regular education teachers in basic schools in the Adansi North District are ready in identifying children with special needs in inclusive classrooms. Regular education teachers' readiness includes (a) acquired skills obtained from College/University, (b) consultation with parents, (c) using appearance, behaviour and complaints to identify children with special needs, (d) collaboration with professionals, (e) routine screening and (f) referral.

The findings indicated that regular education teachers acquired skills and competences from colleges and universities in identifying children with special needs in their classrooms. This could be done effectively and efficiently when regular education teachers are able to identify and teach children with special needs in the classroom. The findings of this study corroborate with findings of Eileen (1999), Hardman, Drew and Egan (2002), who contended that prepared teachers have skills, expertise and knowledge to teach their students. This helps teachers to understand classroom practices within inclusive education institution. Whitworth (2001) opined that prepared teachers teach in settings that are inclusive and meet the needs of all students. Whitworth added that teacher preparation in identifying students with special needs require teachers gaining the requisite knowledge and competencies in handling students.

The findings, however, is at variance with findings of Hay, Smith and Paulsen (2001), who conducted a study on teacher readiness for inclusive education in South Africa and discovered that teachers felt unprepared and unequipped to teach integrated classes. They ascribed this to lack of training and teacher experience. Mprah, Dwomoh, Opoku and Owusu (2016) assessed the knowledge, attitude and readiness of teachers towards Inclusive Education in Ejisu Juaben Municipality in Ashanti Region of Ghana and reported that teachers in inclusive classrooms lacked adequate knowledge and skills to practice inclusion due largely to the fact that they were not ready for the programme. Without adequate training and preparation, it is obvious that teachers would be less knowledgeable and insensitive to the needs of children with special needs. This has the tendency of affecting the participation and performance of the children with special needs. Teachers who do not have the requisite training in inclusive education philosophy would have difficulty to offer the necessary attention to a pupil with disability in the class.

The findings revealed that regular education teachers consulted with parents in identifying individuals with special educational needs. This would assist regular education teachers to identify the root cause of the students' disabilities. Identifying the root cause of the disability would enable the teachers to put in the appropriate interventional strategies to help the children overcome their learning difficulties. The finding is consistent with findings of Kirk et al., (2006) who reported that teachers are prepared in identifying children with special needs when they consult with parents. Kirk et al. indicated that the success of inclusive education depends on variety of support from various personnel. This would help the regular education teacher to provide a healthy educational environment for all students. Shea and Bauer (1994) added that teacher's consultation with parents helps them in developing strategic plans to help manage children with disabilities.

The study revealed that regular education teachers identified children with special needs using appearance, behaviour and complaints. The finding agrees with findings of Paasche, Gorrill and Strom (2004), who indicated that teachers identify children with special needs through behaviour and appearance. According to Paasche et al., children with special needs exhibit behaviours such as being emotionally unstable, appearing anxious, agitated, irritable or depressed.

It was found out that regular education teachers collaborated with other professionals for support in terms of identifying children with special needs. Teachers' collaboration with other professionals helps teachers to refer children with special needs to appropriate professionals for assessment and treatment. The finding is consistent with previous findings of Oppong (2003). Oppong reported that teacher readiness includes teachers collaborating with professionals such as doctors, nurses, psychologist, counsellors and special educators for assessment and possible treatment of children with special needs. Oppong further added that prepared teachers collaborate with parents and families of children with special needs for information about their children. The information helps teachers to effectively manage the individuals with special needs in inclusive classroom.

It was revealed that regular education teachers identified children with special educational needs through routine screening. The screening helps to identify children who are suspected of having various kinds of exceptionalities. The findings support previous findings of Kirk et. al., (2006). The authors revealed that students are taken through routine vision screening before they enter school. This helps to identify students with possible developmental problems. They added that most school systems have formal screening programmes for vision, hearing and communication disorders. It was noted that often parents or teachers request that a child be screened. The purpose of screening is detection, not diagnosis and it must be well planned, fast and accurate.

The findings revealed that regular education teachers were ready to refer children with special needs to the appropriate specialist for more intense assessment of the individual's condition. It helps to obtain information on a child's exceptionality. The findings corroborate with finding of Dunn (2006). Dunn found that students referred for special education services are those who are seen as having low ability, low grades, an inability to read, truant behaviour, an inability to function in a classroom with peers, and irregular contact with the school. Dunn added that a better understanding of classroom teachers' criteria for special education referral would help define the important initial step in the special education identification process.

5. Conclusion

The study revealed that regular basic teachers in the Adansi North District are ready to identify children with special needs in inclusive classrooms. Regular education teachers' readiness included (a) collaboration with professionals, (b) routine screening (c) the use of specialized materials and equipment like snellen chart, otoscope etc (d) acquired skills from college or university (e) consultation with parents and (f) using appearance, behaviour and complaints.

Recommendations

Even though regular education teachers are ready to implement inclusive education, the researcher recommends that teachers need to be motivated by the Government of Ghana to show more commitment in ensuring effective implementation of inclusive education in their classrooms.

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