Integrating Children with Disabilities in Mainstream Education: An Exploratory Study of the Challenges in Ghana

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Abstract

The primary objective of the study was to conduct an in-depth investigation into challenges affecting the successful implementation of inclusive education in Ghana. The study was conducted via critical examination of extant studies on integration of children with disabilities into mainstream schools in Ghana. The results of the study revealed that there is a dichotomy of understanding regarding what inclusive education entails among stakeholders. Children with disabilities are marginalised due to impractical policies and programmes, and the government is limited financially to fully implement inclusive education nationwide. It was also discovered that though there are different forms of inclusive education practiced in Ghanaian basic schools, most of them are not compatible with the criteria of inclusive education. However, there are a few cases of mainstream schools with special resource teachers handling both children with special education needs and their peers without special education needs. At present, integration of children with disabilities into mainstream schools in Ghana is still at the rudimentary stage. Hence, it is recommended that policies, programmes, and curriculum on inclusive education be revised. Sensitisation programmes should be organised to mitigate stereotypical norms alongside socio-cultural orientation which fosters unfair treatment of children with disabilities in Ghanaian basic schools.

Keywords: integration, disability, children, education, challenges

Introduction

In his extensive study, Adams (2016) lauded the progress made in integrating children with disabilities in mainstream education in Ghana. He indicated that most of the children with special education needs (SEN) are improving academically. However, Ntuli and Traore (2013); Lamptey (2015); Deku and Vanderpuye (2017) disagreed with such a conclusion because they indicated that the curriculum for inclusiveness in mainstream education is impractical and rigid, and unable to properly address the needs of learners with SEN.

Opoku, Agbenyega, Mprah, McKenzie, and Badu (2017) disagreed with the notion claiming that most of the children with SEN are not really progressing due to inability to adequately cope with the environment they are thrown into.

Pekeberg (2012) and Deku and Vanderpuye (2017) discovered that there is no consensus among educationists on how to integrate children with disabilities in mainstream schools in Ghana. A thorough examination of the concept of learning in educational psychology, according to James and Busher (2006) and Razaeinejad, Azizifar, and Gowhary (2015), revealed that pedagogy is a complex process requiring teachers' undivided attention to the varied physical and academic status of their pupils. Including children with disabilities in the classroom requires special training for teachers to meet students' needs as James and Busher (2006) and Razaeinejad et al. (2015) indicated. Vuuro (2017) and Ofori (2018) posited that a larger percentage of teachers lack the requisite skills for teaching students with severe disabilities due to lack of adequate training regarding inclusiveness in special education. Several studies (Adedoyin & Okere, 2017; Oguntade, 2017) demonstrated that students integrated into mainstream education lack the needed resources and physical facilities to promote academic achievement.

It is pertinent to resolve the contradictory evidence gap along with gaps in knowledge identified in the studies reviewed above. This forms the nexus of the present study.

Literature Review

This section comprises the review of related literature relevant to the study. It dwells on adequate examination and evaluation of the existing literature as it underscores the focus of the study. The essence of review is an attempt at surveying scholarly articles, books and other sources such as dissertations and policies that are relevant to inclusive education. The thrust of this section in theoretical and empirical.

Theoretical Framework: Vygotsky's Theory of Proximal Development

As a constructivist, Vygotsky (1962) believed that learning takes place with the help of the mind and therefore stressed on what goes on in the mind of the learner during the learning process. Constructivists are of the view that learners are active agents that construct their own knowledge in their mind irrespective of disability. They also believe that learning is a social activity and the environment that people learn in has a great influence on them. In the same vein, Vygotsky (1978) sees intellectual abilities as being much more specific to the culture in which the student is reared (Dahms, Geonnotti, & Passalacqua, 2007; Bunyakarte, 2010). Vygotsky came to understand through observations and studies that people adapt to their surrounding environment based on their interpretations and individual perceptions of it. By this, he meant that humans are not born with knowledge nor is knowledge independent of social context. Rather, knowledge is gained as one develops by way of socially interacting with peers and adults. Vygotsky sees social interaction and language as the two primary means of learning. Social interaction among students is enhanced via language which takes different forms such as verbal, written or sign. Experiences are shared and enhanced among students. Noting this basic fact about human existence, which emphasize inclusiveness, Vygotsky proposed the zone of proximal development (ZPD) to underscore how humans gain knowledge through social interaction. Vygotsky defined ZPD as the distance between the actual developmental level of a student (cognisance of disability) through personal effort and the level of potential development when supported by the teacher and other students with no disability. The ZPD can otherwise be explained as the difference between what the student can learn on his or her own considering his or her inability due to health conditions and what he or she can learn with the help of others (teacher and students without disability). This, therefore, indicates that as long

as a person has access to an adult or a more capable peer, any problem can be solved. This brings in the relevance of inclusive education.

Vygotsky refers to what disabled students or those with limited understanding can do on their own in the learning process as their 'level of actual ability' and what they can do with the help of 'others' as their 'level of potential ability'. The 'others' refers to what he describes as the "More Knowledgeable Other (MKO)." The MKO is anyone who is not affected by the particular disability the disabled student is subjected to, and therefore has a better understanding. This will readily refer to the teacher or other learners without a disability. Inclusive education in this study represents all the systematic efforts by the Government of Ghana to integrate children with disabilities into mainstream education. Henceforth, inclusive education was used for an educational system involving both children with disabilities and children without disabilities in the same learning environment which represent efforts at integrating children with disabilities in mainstream education.

The main objective of the study is to conduct an in-depth investigation into challenges affecting the successful implementation of inclusive education in Ghana. Specific objectives of the study are to:

1. Explore educationists' perceptions of inclusive education in Ghana.
2. Ascertain the current condition of inclusive education in Ghana.
3. Enumerate the challenges confronting the successful implementation of inclusive education in Ghana.

In order to achieve the objectives of the study, it was guided by the following questions:

1. What are the perceptions of educationists on inclusive education in Ghana?
2. What is the current condition of inclusive education in Ghana?
3. What are the challenges confronting the implementation of inclusive education in Ghana?

Research Method

Methodology, according to Mohajan (2018), is the "logic of development of the process used to generate theory that is the procedural framework within which the research is conducted" (p.15). Creswell and Poth (2018) provided a clearer understanding by stating that methodology entails the logical steps and procedures through which the research problems are resolved. This section on methodology outlines the procedure adopted in exploring the several challenges facing the implementation of inclusive education in Ghana. It covers the research design, population, sample and sampling procedures, and the instrument used for the study. It further looks at the data collection and data analysis procedures.

Research Design

Sarantakos (2005) and Creswell and Poth (2018) defined research design as the basic structure of a study, the nature of the hypothesis, and variables involved in the study. Providing additional insight into what constitutes research design, Fink (2000) stated that research design refers to all the stages and processes involved in reaching the participants. Hence, the focus of research design entails attainment of the following goals: 1) Offering a guide that directs the research activities and helps rationalise the use of time and resource and reduce cost, 2) Helping to introduce a systematic approach to the research question, 3) Enabling accurate assessment of the validity and reliability of the study among others.

Research designs are grouped under three types of research methodologies, namely: quantitative, qualitative or a mixture of both qualitative and quantitative methods. For this study, the qualitative research method is selected.

Sauro (2015) and Creswell and Poth (2018) posited that qualitative research methods entail exploration and in-depth comprehension of the meanings of individuals or groups associated with human or social problems. This means, qualitative researchers often take note of "emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant's settings, data analysis (inductive) based on emerging themes and patterns. As a result, inductive analysis, participants' individual meaning and clarity of report on the complex and naturally occurring phenomenon under study are paramount in qualitative research. Depicted in Table 1 are five types of qualitative research designs (Hoelzle, 2018; Sauro, 2015). The phenomenological approach to qualitative study was employed for data analysis. Through rigorous and highly critical analysis, the phenomenological approach aids an in-depth understanding of the meaning of participants' lived experiences regarding inclusive education (Mohajan, 2018; Tuffour, 2017).

Table 1
Types of qualitative research approaches and their characteristics

Approach	Focus	Sample Size	Mode of Data Collection
Case Study	Organisation, entity, individual, or event	-	Interviews, documents, reports, and observations
Ethnography	Context or culture	-	Observation & Interviews
Grounded Theory	Development of a theory based on field data	20 – 60	Interviews, open and axial coding
Phenomenological	Participants with lived experience of a phenomenon	5 – 25	Interviews
Narrative	Individual experience in sequential order	1 – 2	Stories from individuals (primary source) & documents (secondary source)

Source: Adapted from Creswell & Poth (2018)

The appropriateness of the phenomenological approach was informed in view of Creswell and Poth (2018) and Mohajan's expression that this type of approach helps in gaining insight into challenges involving inclusive education in Ghana. Through in-depth inquiry and exploration, participants can rehash their experiences concerning inclusive education and its challenges (Chilisa, 2011; Constant & Roberts, 2017; Sarantakos, 2005). Appropriateness of this research design can also be seen from the perspective that in-depth interview helps researchers probe deeper into participants' feelings, emotions and motivations. This limits bias in the study, leading to rich, reliable, and well-validated research findings.

Sample and Sampling Procedure

Babbie and Mouton (2001) indicated that population refers to "theoretically specified aggregation of study elements" (p. 247). This means the population entails individuals with specific characteristics common to the focus of research. For this study, the target population comprises head teachers, teachers, and students in senior high schools within the Cape Coast Metropolis.

Punch (2013) and Latham (2013) indicated that since it is not possible to study every stakeholder and student in the senior high schools, it is paramount that a sample must be selected. Sarantakos (2005) posited that participants selected should be representative of the entire population related to the study. Latham (2013) indicated that in a qualitative study, once the saturation point (usually 12 participants) is reached, it is assumed that the sample is enough. However, for the efficacy of the research investigation, Crouch and McKenzie (2006) and Sauro (2015) recommended that fewer participants (5 to 25) are appropriate for a qualitative study. As a result, the researcher employed 24 participants for the study comprising 4 head-teachers and their assistants, 8 classroom teachers and 12 students.

This study employed a judgmental or purposive sampling technique. Sarantakos (2005), Tongco (2007) and Mohajan (2018) asserted that this sampling technique involves selecting only individuals or participants that meet the criteria for the study and that would generate rich data to augment knowledge on the study. Hence, by means of a purposive sampling technique, most suitable and relevant participants to the focus of the study were selected.

The instrument for data collection was a structured interview guide. The structured interview guide was employed for data collection as it is deemed very useful and appropriate for the study. Sarantakos (2005), Creswell and Poth (2018) and Kamwendo (2018) posited that unlike unstructured interview guides, the structured guide helps in reducing the volume of information retrieved thereby facilitating retrieval of the most valuable information for the study. Creswell (2008) also indicated that it helps the researcher understands the nature of challenges, the objective feelings of educationists (without fear or favour) and the extent to which it affects the successful implementation of inclusive education. The structured interview is also easy to administer since it follows a specified pattern and aids the researcher from rigmarole (Kamwendo, 2018). Employing interviews for the study aided the researcher in critically evaluating respondent's non-verbal behaviour, attitude and habits and develop the strategy of handling the respondents. It is also considered to be the most appropriate technique for revealing information about emotionally laden issues or for probing the sentiments that might underlie an expressed opinion. Moreover, since the interview will be on a personal basis, there is the possibility of a high level of co-operation (Montrieux, Vanderlinde, Schellens & Marez, 2015).

Data Analysis

In achieving the objectives of the study, the present study employed content analysis of data collected. After a thorough examination of the data collected from respondents in the field, they were sorted, grouped, relevant themes and patterns were underscored. This was thoroughly analysed and inferences were made in relation to their implications for the study.

Ethical Considerations

Each of the participants of the study and appropriate authorities were provided letters and forms required by the ethics committee for the successful completion of the research. These letters and forms dwelled on seeking permission from school authorities and participants and intimating participants of what the study entailed and their rights if they decide to participate. The participants were assured of confidentiality and given the information that the findings of the study will be used for academic purposes only. Respondents were not coerced to participate and were informed about the procedures involved in research and their consent to participate were elicited. All respondents are entitled to the right of privacy and dignity of treatment. No personal harm were caused in this research. The research employed all avenues and opportunities to ensure that all issues that are considered unethical in the context of the study were addressed. Questions to be included were ethically considered to avoid personal sensationalism and sentimentalism.

Findings and Discussion

Vygotsky's postulation underpins the present study since it demonstrated that it is counterproductive when students with disabilities are kept in a separate school such as a special education school. Rather, children should be integrated into the mainstream schools. Vygotsky's theory also shows that there is a need for regular and effective training of teachers in special education so that they can address issues a student with a disability may face. The theory also shows that the classroom should be designed to accommodate students with disabilities and they should be provided with amenities and tools to aid improved understanding. For example, classrooms, corridors and walkways should be designed to accommodate a wheelchair; teachers should be trained in sign language to help hearing-impaired students. Freden and Vogel (2003) opined that teachers should not shy away from assisting students with disabilities rather they should be willing to go through training and help these students. When these are applied, then inclusive education will be functional and aid students with disabilities in achieving profound academic progress (Oguntade, 2017).

Educationists' perceptions of inclusive education

In their studies, Pekeberg (2012) and Deku and Vanderpuye (2017) discovered that there is no consensus among educationists on what inclusive education entails. Ntuli and Traore (2013) and Lamptey (2015) indicated that the curriculum for inclusive education is impractical and rigid, unable to properly address the needs of learners with Special Education Needs (SEN). Vuuro (2017) and Ofori (2018) posited that a larger percentage of teachers lack the requisite skills for teaching students with severe disabilities due to lack of adequate training regarding inclusiveness in special education. These studies demonstrated that educationists are not conclusive about the effective way of implementing inclusive education in Ghana. While some feel special education schools should be built for students, others felt they should be included in the mainstream. Yet, others claim that it is difficult to teach students with disabilities since schools are ill-equipped in terms of teacher training and infrastructural needs.

These studies demonstrated that the dichotomy of opinion among experts and educationists on inclusive education is a major challenge interfering with the successful implementation of inclusive education. For example, Deku and Vanderpuye (2017) indicated that this confusion extends to policymakers, which has caused the policies formulated to guide the implementation of this form of education to be flaws. Teachers and supervisors are not fully cognizant of how to address issues involving the coalition of children with SEN and those without SEN. As the authors indicated, the structure of the curriculum favours a separate infrastructure and specialised training for teachers to cope with the arrangement.

The studies reviewed showed that there is empirical evidence suggesting that teachers are not at grips with the policies on inclusiveness and supervisors are in a quandary about how to adequately address the issue due to the prevailing controversy on what really constitutes inclusiveness within the Ghanaian socio-cultural context.
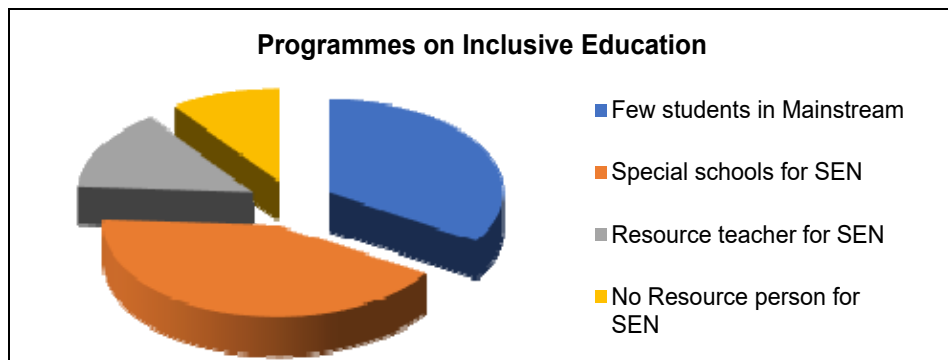
The state of inclusive education

Findings of the study by Oguntade (2017), Deku and Vanderpuye (2017) and Opoku et al. (2017) revealed that, currently, inclusive education is still at the rudimentary stage. The government has introduced an integrated educational programme for learners with low vision, built special schools for the deaf and a few blind learners with hostel support. In addition, the government has initiated programmes which facilitate learners with and without SEN to attend mainstream schools, with the availability of special resource teachers, as well

as programmes which involve learners with and without SEN attending mainstream school without special resource teacher support.

In 2011, according to a published report on the authoritative website of the Ministry of Education in Ghana (MoE), there were only 29 districts in seven regions of Ghana involved in inclusive education, but recently the programme has been expanded to include 46 districts in all the sixteen regions of Ghana (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2015; Nketsia, 2017). Additionally, according to Deku and Vanderpuye (2017), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2012) has been working tirelessly with the MoE in implementing inclusive education in 14 additional districts, so that as of 2017, 3,022 inclusive schools are operative in all the regions of Ghana. Though progress has been made towards the implementation of inclusive education in Ghana, its full realisation, in terms of access, participation and support are crippled by several limitations as enumerated by the findings of several studies.

In essence, the review showed that at present there are four types of education that are oriented towards inclusiveness with vastly different objectives. However, only the one that allows the integration of students with disability or SEN into mainstream schools with special resource teachers is in line with the theoretical framework of Vygotsky's theory of proximal development. In this form of inclusiveness, students with or without SEN can readily participate in classroom discussions facilitated by the main teacher and special resource teacher. Moreover, education is accessible to all based on the provision of adequate support. These also tally with the focus of policies stipulated by World Conference on Special Needs Education in Salamanca, Spain in 1994 and findings of studies conducted by Pekeberg (2012), Hornby (2015), and Deku and Vanderpuye (2017) that inclusive education should celebrate differences, adequately support learning and respond to students' individual needs. The theoretical framework for this study and the findings of the above-mentioned studies are divergent to the other three forms of inclusive education since they lack important components of inclusive education as shown above.
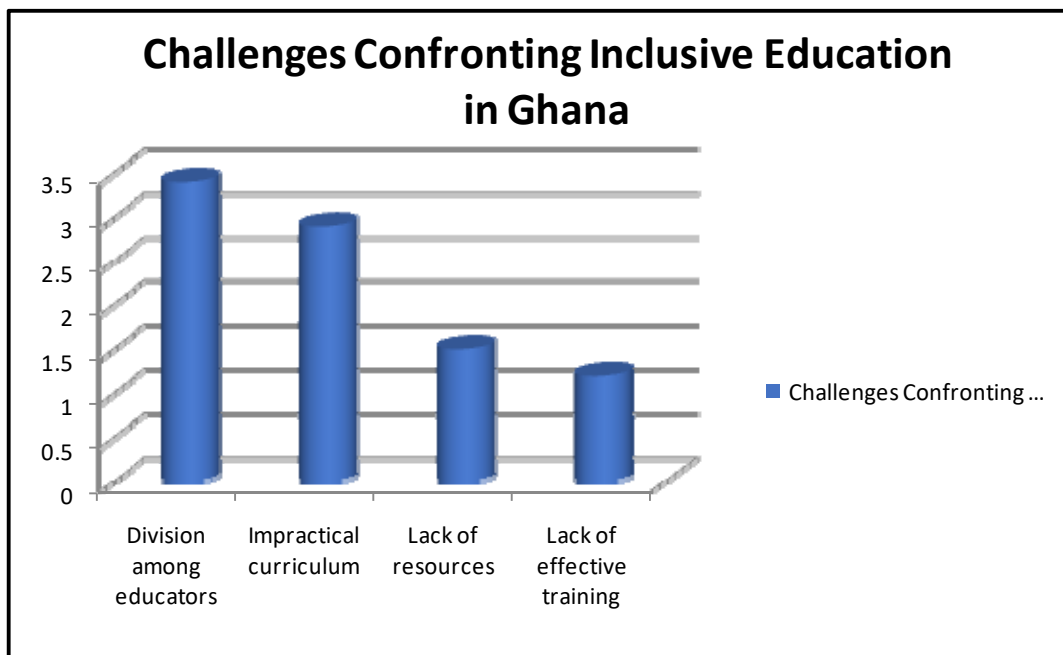

Source: Researcher's Construct (2019)

Figure 1. Status of inclusive education in Ghana

A closer look at the chart in Figure 1 revealed that most of the several forms of inclusive programmes in Ghana lack the three focal components of inclusiveness – Equity, Participation, and Support. These programs are divergent and run contrary to the theoretical framework upon which the present study is based. Whereas there are few schools upholding inclusiveness that tally with the theoretical foundation of this study and the resolution adopted at the World Conference on Special Needs Education in Salamanca, Spain (1994) which demands the adaptation of mainstream schools to include every child, celebrate differences, support learning, respond to individual needs and effectively mitigate discriminatory attitudes (UNESCO, 2009, 1994; Hornby, 2015).

Challenges confronting implementation of Inclusive education

In their extensive studies, Agbenyega (2007), Opoku et al. (2017) and Dake, Opoku-Asare, and Obosu (2018), discovered that several members of the teaching staff do not fully understand what inclusiveness entails. However, according to Agbenyega (2007), Opoku et al. (2017) and Dake et al. (2018), integration of children with SEN into mainstream education should comprise access, equity or participation, and support. It means teachers must be proactive and adapt to the condition of their students to achieve these three cardinal features of inclusive education. For example, inclusiveness can be observed in situations where there are no blackboards, chairs, and tables in the classroom, yet the teacher improvised materials to provide access to education, ensure all students participated and provided needed support for them.

Several studies (; Adedoyin & Okere, 2017; Oguntade, 2017) have demonstrated that students in inclusive education lack the needed resources and physical facilities to promote academic achievement.

Source: Researcher's Construct (2019)

Figure 2. Challenges mitigating inclusive education in Ghana

A critical examination of items in Figure 2 revealed that there are four major challenges confronting the successful implementation of inclusive education in Ghana. Of all these challenges, division among educators regarding what constitutes inclusive education and how it is to be operated to fulfil the lofty resolution at the Salamanca Conference in 1994 ranks first. This is followed by the impractical curriculum due to unavailability of resource materials and teachers to actualise or implement the comprehensively designed curriculum. Unavailability of effective and ongoing on-the-job training for teachers comes last on the list. Such training will also include approaches and techniques on how to handle various types of disabilities to foster accessibility, equitability and enabling environment in mainstream schools.

In view of the deep insights garnered during the course of the study and critical analysis of the underpinning studies, the following recommendations are appropriate. The

researcher recommends that the Ministry of Education (MoE) in Ghana, should work collaboratively with other stakeholders in education to review policy direction on inclusive education so as unite the conception regarding what should constitute inclusiveness in classroom. They should also counteract the effect of the socio-cultural situation of Ghana by fostering the integration of students with SEN in mainstream schools without discrimination or marginalisation. It is recommended that the government make a concerted effort through sensitisation policies and programmes to promote and extend the activities of the few basic schools practicing inclusiveness in their classroom to the remaining senior high schools that are yet to fully embrace inclusiveness in their classrooms. It is also recommended that MoE help in the provision of requisite on-the-job training for teachers on special education alongside accessibility to resources and facilities fostering inclusiveness in classrooms.

Conclusion

The critical exploration conducted, through synthesis and evaluation of extant studies, regarding the integration of children with disabilities into mainstream education in Ghana clearly demonstrated that there is a dichotomy of understanding regarding what inclusive education entails among stakeholders. Students with disabilities are marginalised due to impractical policies and programmes and the government is limited financially to fully implement inclusive education nationwide. The study also concludes that though there are different forms of inclusive education practiced in Ghanaian basic schools, most of them are not compatible with inclusive education. However, there are a few cases of mainstream schools with special resource teachers handling both children with SEN and their peers without SEN. Essentially, the study has demonstrated that, at present, inclusive education has not been fully implemented in Ghana due to several crippling limitations. These limitations range from a lack of result-oriented curriculum to a serious lack of physical structures and facilities to foster inclusiveness in the classroom.

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