

**THE PERCEPTION OF TEACHERS TOWARDS THE INCLUSION OF PUPILS
WITH LOW VISION IN REGULAR PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN THE WINNEBA
MUNICIPALITY, GHANA**

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Abstract

This study investigated the perception of teachers towards the inclusion of pupils with low-vision in the Winneba Municipality of the Republic of Ghana. The study was premised on the assumption that regular teachers believe children with special needs have no place in regular classrooms since their inclusion will make their work difficult, time-consuming and burdensome. It was also speculated that headteachers in regular schools do not admit children with special needs because they believe the presence of such students will lower the academic standard of the school. A descriptive survey was used for the study. A ten-item self developed opinionnaire, a semi-structured interview guide and work sample analyses were used to collect data from teachers, headteachers and the low-vision pupils. The results of the study revealed that the teachers were ignorant about the visual problems of the students. It also came to light from the study that the headteachers were reluctant to register the low-vision pupils for the final examination because they feared their inability to do well will threaten the overall performance of the schools in the Basic Education Certificate Examination. The study also revealed that most of the low vision pupils were socially withdrawn and isolated from sports and games. Recommendations for addressing the problems were also made.

Keywords: low-vision pupils, inclusive education, visual impairment, regular schools

Introduction

Arguments about the inclusion of individuals with special needs in mainstream facets of life have taken centre stage at many fora on the international scene. It is interesting and redeeming that Erasmus Mundus Special Needs Consortium has made it an annual affair to deliberate on inclusionary practices. While we acknowledge that this is a healthy practice, it is equally important to remind ourselves as stakeholders – teachers, parents and policy-makers that we have consciously or unconsciously failed to provide appropriate education for children with special education needs hence the global call for inclusion. What the writers imply is that for whatever reason, children with special needs have been excluded from mainstream schools and that is unacceptable (Ainscow, 1999).

The term inclusion is quite difficult to define or explain. It has varied interpretations. However in this work, it has been explained in educational context to mean the opportunity for all persons with or without disabilities to participate fully in all facets of life – education, recreation and other community life (Tilstone, et al 1998).

Though inclusion or inclusive education appears contentious, the underpinning philosophy is the removal of all forms of obstacles and discrimination in mainstream settings for children with special educational needs (SEN). In educational parlance therefore, inclusive education refers basically to removal of barriers which impede the provision of increased access and appropriate education for all children irrespective of their differences. In fact on the global scene, there is no other topic in the profession of education that stimulates discussion and fervent debate than that of inclusive education. It is not surprising that the 48th International Conference on Education (ICE) held in Switzerland was themed “INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: THE WAY OF THE FUTURE” (Topping and Maloney, 2005).

According to Bailey (1998), inclusion refers to being in an ordinary school with other students, following the same curriculum at the same time, in the same classroom, with the full acceptance of all, and in a way which makes the student feel no different from others. In this regard, some developed and developing countries such as Canada

and Tanzania have made significant efforts toward the inclusion of persons with disabilities in mainstream schools rather than in segregated special schools based on the principles of non-discrimination, equity, social justice and fundamental human rights (Knight, 1999; UNESCO, 1994).

Sharma, et al (2006), think inclusion promotes social justice and equal educational opportunities for all students regardless of the presence of a disability. In spite of this, it has been shown that teachers in mainstream schools are more reluctant to include pupils with complex needs in their classes for a variety of reasons, some of which may be a feeling of inadequacy and the lack of appropriate skills (Deppeler, 2006).

In Ghana, the education system is in two broad categories namely the regular education system and the special school system. Thus, there exist two special schools for the visually impaired at the basic level of education. The schools are known as “schools for the blind.” Interestingly, while the pupils with visual impairment are segregated at the basic level, they are much included at the secondary and tertiary levels (Hayford, 2005).

Available literature in the field indicates that attitudes of many teachers account for the non-acceptance of learners with disabilities into regular classrooms (Shade & Stewart, 2001). In order for inclusion to be successful in Ghana and elsewhere, general education teachers should be guided by the philosophy that children can learn and belong to the mainstream of school and community in which they live.

Statement of the Problem

In Ghana, the concept of inclusive education is relatively new to many practicing teachers particularly those who have been teaching for over fifteen years. Such teachers are of the opinion that children with special needs have no place in regular classrooms. Additionally, most headteachers do not admit children with disabilities in ‘their schools for the simple reason that children with special needs will lower the academic standard of the school. As noted by Avoke (2005), “schools are aiming at results, so the regular classroom teachers do not want to see the pupils with special needs, so they decide for parents of children with disabilities to send their wards to special schools.” Moreover, some teachers also feel that having pupils with special needs in their

classrooms will be time-consuming, unrewarding and burdensome. On the basis of the stated problems, the writers decided to find out the perception of teachers towards the inclusion of pupils with low-vision in primary schools in the Winneba Municipality Ghana.

Purpose of the Study

The study was intended to investigate

- a) the views, attitudes and perceptions of teachers and headteachers towards the inclusion of pupils with low-vision in regular primary schools in the Winneba Municipality.
- b) the reasons why headteachers feel reluctant to register pupils with low-vision for final examinations.
- c) the rationale behind the unwillingness of regular teachers to include pupils with low-vision in their classrooms.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study.

- a. What are the views of regular teachers towards the inclusion of pupils with low vision in primary schools in Winneba?
- b. Why do headteachers in primary schools in Winneba feel reluctant to register pupils with low-vision for final examinations?
- c. Why are regular teachers unwilling to include pupils with low-vision in their classrooms?

Significance of the Study

The findings of the study would help teachers to develop positive attitude towards the concept of inclusive education and also accept the pupils with low-vision in their classes. Such a move will urge teachers to adapt the curriculum and modify their teaching to suit the differential needs of all learners. The study will serve as a working document for headteachers and other stakeholders to provide professional development through in-service training for practising teachers to accept and teach all learners irrespective of diverse differences. Finally, the study will inform policy-makers to formulate and put in place clear and specific education policy for pupils with low-vision in the country as they oscillate between the totally blind and the sighted.

Literature Review

Empirical and theoretical literature for the study covered attitudes of teachers in regular schools towards the inclusion of children with disabilities with particular reference to pupils with low-vision based on perception as a psychological construct. Many studies have been conducted concerning the attitudes of teachers with regard to the inclusion of children with special education needs in regular primary schools (Agbenyega, 2005; Beckwith & Mathews, 1995; Smith, 2000).

From the studies, teachers have portrayed negative attitudes towards the inclusion of children with disabilities in their classrooms. Minke (1996) found out that both general educators and special educators with inclusive education experience hold more positive views of inclusion while general educators in traditional classrooms have the least positive perceptions and view classroom adaptations as less feasible.

Obeng (2005) conducted a similar survey in Ghana and established that some teachers were unhappy having children with disabilities in their classrooms. Agbenyega (2005) also studied the concerns of teachers and their attitudes towards inclusive education in Ghana and noted that inclusion as practised in Ghana is not leading to equal and appropriate educational outcomes, particularly for students with disabilities. Agbenyega enumerated inappropriate school practices such as rejection of students with disabilities by the regular teachers, inadequate resources, large class size, incompetence, and teachers' beliefs among others as the major obstacles to inclusive education.

In Papua New Guinea, Mapsea (2006) also conducted a survey and found out that the teachers supported the notion of inclusive education and would like to implement it. However, the teachers indicated that there needed to be a change in attitudes of teachers, peers, parents and other caregivers to provide assistance for children with special needs. Avoke (2002) also mentioned critical barriers to free universal basic education for students, particularly those with special needs as negative attitude and prejudice.

In Ghana today, the concept of visual impairment is not properly understood by many people. Visual impairment is usually considered to be total blindness or inability to see. Meanwhile, authorities in the field notably, Scholl (1986) and Best (1992) point out that visual impairment is a continuum ranging from total blindness to

various forms of limited vision. In broad terms, visual impairment can be put into two major categories namely the totally or stone blind and the low-vision individuals. According to Avoke and Ocloo (2000), there are different categories of learners in Ghana including those with low-vision.

Low-vision individuals who have been studied in this work have the advantage of reading (large) print and depending on their residual vision; they are capable of being educated in the regular classrooms with the necessary networks of support. Individuals with low-vision constitute the majority of the visually impaired population. Ironically however, pupils with low-vision are often not catered for in either schools for the blind or the regular public schools in Ghana (Avoke & Ocloo, 2000). The burning question to find answer(s) to is “how do (regular) teachers perceive the inclusion of children with low-vision in their classrooms/ schools?”

Arguably, the contentious dimension of inclusive education and special needs education and diversity is the link between theory and practice. The ways in which the concepts are emphasized and conceptualized by the experts may not be reflected in the perceptions of teachers with regards to implementation issues.

Perception is one of the fundamental psychological processes used for analyzing human behaviour. Davies and Houghton (1991) and Hayes and Orrel (1987), all consider perception as the process of interpreting information we receive through our senses. In their opinion, perception is an active process of acquiring, interpreting, selecting and organizing sensory information. Feldman (1996) also defines perception as the sorting out, interpretation, analysis and integration of stimuli from our sensory organs. Thus, it can be said that perception is the process underlying our ability to give meaning to stimuli. Teachers in regular schools therefore have various views and attitudes about pupils with low-vision in Ghanaian public schools.

Methodology

A descriptive survey design was used for the study as it has the potential to provide the requisite information needed (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2000). Fraenkel and Wallen have pointed out that the purpose of descriptive research is to observe, describe and document aspects of a phenomenon as it naturally occurs.

Population

The population was made up of sixty regular teachers, four headteachers and five hundred and thirty-six pupils drawn from four regular public schools in Winneba where pupils with low-vision were identified.

Sample and Sampling Technique

Thirty (30) respondents were sampled for the study. These subjects were selected because they happened to fall within the variables the researchers were interested in. These were pupils with low-vision, teachers who taught in schools that include those pupils with low vision and the heads of the schools that included the pupils with low-vision. The purposive sampling technique was employed to select ten (10) pupils identified to have low-vision, sixteen (16) teachers who were teaching in classrooms that had pupils with low-vision, four (4) headteachers in whose schools some pupils with low-vision were identified. The rationale behind the use of purposive sampling for the study was that the researchers intended to work with people who were directly involved in working with pupils with low-vision and the pupils with low-vision themselves. In view of this, the researchers selected only teachers who taught in classrooms which included pupils with low-vision, headteachers who had pupils with low-vision in their schools as well as the pupils with low-vision.

Instrumentation

The instruments used for data collection were self-developed ten-item closed-ended opinionnaire for the teachers and semi-structured interview guide for the headteachers and work sample analysis where exercise books of the pupils with low-vision were examined. The opinionnaire was designed to find out why headteachers feel very reluctant to admit pupils with low-vision in their schools. The

instrument also sought to find out the perception of headteachers and regular classroom teachers towards the inclusion of pupils with low-vision in their schools. The semi-structured interview sessions were conducted to find out the rationale behind the unwillingness of regular teachers to include pupils with low-vision in their classrooms.

Data Administration and Collection Procedures

The researchers apportioned the task of data collection among themselves. The first researcher conducted the interviews for the headteachers. The second researcher administered the opinionnaire to the regular teachers while the third researcher conducted the work sample analysis by examining the exercise books of the pupils with low-vision to look out for writing difficulties such as clumsy writing, writing across lines, omission of letters as well as word or phrase omissions.

Analysis of Data

The interpretive method of analysis was used. Verbatim responses from respondents were recorded. Examination of pupils' work samples were also described and analysed. Finally, all five researchers held meetings with the teachers to discuss emerging issues pertaining to the study for possible interventional measures to be put in place. The study made use of simple percentages to analyse the data.

Findings

The teachers were of the view that they were not aware of the problems of the pupils with low-vision. Some of the teachers also expressed the view that the pupils with low-vision pupils were only pretending to be visually impaired so they could cover up for their poor academic performance

Another finding from the study was that whereas the teachers who had taught for between two to six years made some effort to assist the students with low-vision by writing boldly and clearly on the chalkboard as well as allowing such students to select suitable seating places in the classroom, those teachers who had taught for over fifteen years displayed total ignorance about how to handle students with low-vision in their classrooms

It was also found from the study that all the four headteachers involved in the study were reluctant to register pupils with low-vision in their schools for final examination.

It also emerged from the study that the teachers in a school where two students who were albinos were included claimed that those students were cursed since none of their family members were "coloured". The teachers and the regular students mocked the students who were albinos and even concluded that they were wizards since they could see well in the dark but could not see clearly during day time.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perception of regular school teachers towards the inclusion of pupils with low-vision in regular primary schools in Winneba. More specifically, the study was intended to find out how regular teachers are prepared to accept pupils with low-vision in their classrooms. Generally, the results of the study indicate that regular teachers do not have adequate knowledge about pupils with low-vision and are therefore not professionally prepared to include them in their classrooms.

The results of the study reveal that many of the regular teachers were not aware of the problems of pupils with low vision and were even of the opinion that the students were only pretending to have visual problems in order to cover up their poor academic performance. Those teachers who expressed these sentiments were found to have been in the teaching profession for between fifteen to twenty years and have not had any formal training in special needs education. In fact, such teachers were found to lack very basic knowledge in special needs education and have also not had prior experience with inclusive education. This finding is consistent with the finding of Minke (1996) that both general and special educators with inclusive education experience hold more positive views of inclusion while general educators in traditional classrooms have the least positive perception and view classroom adaptations as less feasible. The result of the study suggest further that regular teachers who have taught for between two to six years and who were found to have undergone courses in special education tended to assist pupils with low vision by writing boldly and clearly on the chalkboard and also assisted

the low vision pupils to choose suitable seating places in the classroom. However, it came to light from the findings that those teachers who had taught for over fifteen years and had not been exposed to special education were ignorant about how to handle pupils with low vision in their classrooms. This finding supports the view of Marchesi (1998) that professional training of teachers is one of the key factors of successful inclusion.

The results of the study again revealed that the headteachers in the study were reluctant to admit pupils' with low-vision in their schools. The headteachers were also unwilling to register pupils with low vision for final examination. This decision was informed by the fact that they were afraid that these students will not perform well and a result affect the position of their schools on the academic league table. This finding confirms the assertion by Avoke (2005) that schools are aiming at results, so teachers do not want to see pupils with special needs in their schools.

The findings also revealed that the teachers and pupils in two of the schools where two albinos were included looked at these pupils as people who were cursed by the gods because they did not understand why the parents of the pupils were not 'coloured'. They did not also understand why the albinos could not see well during daylight but could see well during the night.

Limitations of the Study

The main limitation of this study was the failure of some of the respondents to return the opinionaire. Another limitation of the study was the reluctance of some teachers in the study area to make themselves available to be interviewed.

Conclusion

This study has made it clear that the regular teachers were not aware of the problems of students with low vision in regular schools in the Winneba Municipality of Ghana. It was also realized from the study that teachers who had taught for between two to six years made some effort to adapt their teaching to assist students with low vision. The study also revealed that headteachers were reluctant to students with low vision for final examination. It also emerged from the study that

teachers in the study area were ignorant about the problems confronting students with low vision.

Recommendations

It is recommended that prospective teachers are given intensive pre-service training in inclusive education to equip them with the knowledge of special needs cases they would meet later in their classrooms.

It is also recommended that elaborate and periodic in-service training programmes are organised for teachers to update their knowledge and skills to prepare them adequately to meet the challenges of the regular classroom.

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