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Children with Disabilities in Early Care in Ghana

Abstract

This study examined the experiences of teachers who teach 4- to 8-year-old children with special needs in Ghanaian public school classrooms. Also examined were the management strategies put in place to assist the children in dealing with their unique situations. A team of five researchers interviewed 68 teachers who teach children with special needs. Results indicate that a majority of the teachers support inclusion of children with special needs in their classrooms but were concerned about the lack of appropriate resources for proper instruction. In addition, participants indicated that about 60% of children with special needs did not want to participate in group work. The most challenging issues for the teachers involve difficulty getting some of the children to follow basic instructions and also getting parents to participate in the education of their children with special needs. This study recommends parent-teacher associations advocating for the participation of parents in schools in Ghana. The study additionally recommends employing special education teachers, nurses, and social workers to assist teachers in Ghanaian classrooms.

Keywords: Early care, inclusion, Ghana, special needs, narrative analysis.

Introduction

King (2003, p. 152) defines inclusion as “all students in a school—regardless of their strengths, weaknesses, or disabilities in any area—become part of the school community.” From the above definition, it may be noted that an important facet of inclusion involves including students with special needs in general education classrooms.

Believers in the inclusionist philosophy also argue that it is the best protocol for all children (Gargiulo, Sluder, & Streitenberger, 1997; The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization -UNESCO, 2009), and that separate classes for students with learning disabilities have failed to live up to their initial promise and the high hopes that parents and professionals have for them (McLeskey & Waldron, 1995, p.

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82). In particular, the above authors and advocates have noted that separate programs for students with special needs have not met the high standards set by those describing them as they would ideally run (Pugach & Warger, 1993), and that it is beneficial for children with special needs (Banerji & Dailey, 1995; Salisbury, 1991; UNESCO, 2009) to be included in the general education classroom.

A study by Baker, Wang, and Walberg (1994, p. 95) has bolstered the claim that children with special needs educated in inclusive settings perform better academically and socially than comparable students in non-inclusive settings. UNESCO's (2009) policy brief on early childhood education also agrees with the above facts and calls for inclusion of children with special needs in early care settings.

The work of Tichenor, Heims, and Piechura-Couture (1998) points to the fact that parents of special needs children favor inclusion, and most of them advocate for inclusive settings for their children. Likewise, special needs young people in the United Kingdom felt it was their right to receive an inclusive education (Rieser, 2008). On the other hand, studies such as those by Fuchs and Fuchs (1995) and Shanker (1995) point to the fact that some parents of special needs children oppose full inclusion because they fear that most general education classroom teachers lack an understanding of learning disabilities (Sharpe & Hawes, 2003). Consequently, they fear that special needs children may not receive an appropriate education and might lose the range of services available to them.

The literature on inclusion also shows concerns raised by some parents of children without special needs. For example, Tichenor, Heims, and Piechura-Couture (1998) note that some parents fear that, in an inclusive classroom, some teachers may spend too much time with special needs children, leaving insufficient time to attend to non-special needs children, subsequently resulting in falling educational standards for the children with no special needs. Staub and Peck (1995), also, note three common concerns about the inclusion philosophy, namely (a) whether inclusion will inhibit academic progress of non-special needs children, (b) whether non special needs children might lose teacher time, and (c) whether non special needs students learn undesirable behavior from students with special needs.

Like parents, reactions of teachers and students to the inclusionist philosophy are mixed. According to Siperstein et al. (2007), middle school children with peers who have intellectual disabilities have both negative and positive attitudes towards an inclusive classroom. There is no doubt, however, that the works of Gargiulo, Sluder, and Streitenberger (1997), and McLesky and Waldron (1995), among others, point to the immense benefit, especially that of participatory spirit (in the school, home, and other social domains) by students with learning disabilities who are educated in inclusive settings.

Given the benefits as well as the problems explicated by the scholarly works above on

inclusion, and in view of the fact that research indicates that people who live in the developing world have a larger special needs population than those in the developed world (i.e., 80% of the 650 million disabled people in the world live in developing countries, according to a 2009 United Nations document). Furthermore, in view of the dearth of scholarly research on inclusion in early years in Africa in general and in Ghana in particular, this study fills the aforementioned knowledge gap by examining the following areas: (a) teachers' experiences with children (4- 8-year-olds) with special needs in Ghanaian classrooms; and (b) early care teachers' views on the inclusion of special needs children in general education classrooms.

Method

Participant selection and procedure

Eighty teachers from a school district in Ghana were recruited through purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990) upon approval from the Institutional Review Board of Indiana University's Human Subjects Committee. Sixty-eight teachers participated in the research, resulting in a response rate of 85%. Some of the teachers could not participate because of schedule conflicts. Participation was restricted to teachers who teach children (4- 8-year-olds) in order to find out their unique experiences at that early age. The teachers were contacted in their schools. The study was done in 2006, and the instrument consisted of both survey and interview questions; the interviews were carried out face to face. Teachers completed the survey before the interview. The face-to-face interviews were conducted for about an hour in order to get in-depth answers needed for this study. To ensure validity of the research the researchers went back to participants after two weeks to verify the information that was given to them. Participation was voluntary.

Instrument

The instrument used to collect data for this study was an 18-item questionnaire developed by the author after extensive review of the literature on inclusion of children with special needs and after teaching courses on children with special needs in general education classrooms. The interview questions were structured in a way that enabled participants to narrate their experiences and at the same time allow them to ask pertinent questions during the interview. The instrument consisted of a set of closed- and open-ended questions. The first part consisted of questions that dealt with participant demographics. The second section covered participants' experiences in the classroom with both special needs children as well as non- special needs children.

To ensure the validity of the instrument, the above questions were pilot-tested with 20 teachers to make sure the wording, level, and nature of the written questions were appropriate for early care teachers. To ensure that none of the participants had seen the questions, none of the teachers who took part in the pilot study participated in this study.

Coding and analysis

The data generated was closely examined by two qualitative researchers. Each researcher performing the coding of data examined the data separately. Two broad common themes were derived by the coders upon examining the data based on teachers' narratives: (a) teachers' experiences with children with special needs and (b) teachers' views about inclusion of children with special needs in the classroom. Analysis was based on the themes derived from the participants' utterances and their statistical data; the meaning of utterances and the statistical data were explained in the analysis.

Results

Results are discussed as follows: (a) teachers' demographics, (b) teacher's experiences with children with special needs in their classrooms, and (c) teachers' views about inclusion.

Teachers' demographics

Of the 68 teachers who participated in the study, 47 (69.1%) identified themselves as preschool and kindergarten teachers, and 21 (30.9%) identified themselves as teachers of children in grades one to three. The majority of the teachers who were interviewed were female, and the average age of the participants was 35.2 years. A majority of the teachers had over 10 years of teaching experience.

Teachers' experiences with children with special needs in their classrooms

Nature of children's disability

All participants characterized disability in children as deviation from what their society considered to be 'normal' child growth. In particular, they noted that the diagnoses and recognition of the children's disabilities were based on their own understanding of what they believed to be a deviation from normal child growth in their society. Thus, their definition and/or characterization was not diagnosed or determined by a health professional or specialist. Forty-five percent of the surveyed participants reported behavioral problems in their classrooms. The above figure was based on participants' own views and/or characterization of disability. Most of the participants who reported behavioral problems were female teachers of grades one to three. Forty percent of the participants teaching in grades two and three reported having children with visual problems in their classrooms, and 15% reported having children in their classrooms who had various forms of physical disabilities. Participants reported that the number of children with special needs ranged from 2–7% of the class make-up.

Teachers' classroom experiences and their views on inclusion

The Table 1 quantifies the teachers' experiences in their classrooms.

Special activities for children with special needs

Out of the 68 research participants, only 28% (n=19) reported generating special activities for children with special needs in their class; 72% had none. Examples of special activities reported to take place in participants' classrooms included assistance

with reading, music, and mathematics. One teacher reported assisting with what she called exercise (physiotherapy) even though she had no special training in physiotherapy. Specific answers provided by some participants are given in Table 2

Table 1
Teachers' experiences in classrooms

Questions	Yes	No	Partially	No Opinion
Do you have special activities for the children with special needs?	19	49	0	0
Do the children with special needs in your class enjoy being in school?	33	28	7	—
Do you enjoy "teaching" these children?	35	16	—	17
Do you face any challenges?	28	27	—	13
Are you up to the task of taking care of these children with special needs? If no, will you be willing to attend workshops to help improve your competency?	5	59	4	—
Is the school district doing enough to help educate children with special needs?	0	64	4	—
Do parents offer the necessary support toward the care of their children with special needs?	1	65	2	—
Do you support inclusion of children with special needs in your classroom?	48	15	5	—

Note: Dashes represent no available data

Table 2
Extracted responses concerning the question of assistance in the classroom

Participants	Narratives
Teacher	Mary could not see well at all. She could not read what was on the board from where she used to sit, which was the back of the class. The other teacher had told me that she was not clever but on the second day of class, I saw her squinting. I asked her to read and she couldn't. When I made her stand next to the board, she could read perfectly well. The only major assistance I gave her was to make her sit on the front row sometimes and at other times to read to her. It was always rewarding to see her answer all my questions correctly once I read to her or once she sat on the front row and could read.
Teacher	Walking was Sam's biggest problem. He had his crutches most of the time but could barely walk. Playing with the other kids was therefore practically impossible. I did my possible best to assist him walk and play by holding his hand and sometimes throwing the football to him. Sometimes he kicked it with his foot and other times with his crutches. You could see he wanted to be like the other kids but was inhibited by his special condition.

Challenges faced by teachers

Rejection of group work

Thematic results of the interview indicated that about 60% of the children with special needs did not want to be part of any group work in their classroom. Some citations of participants are given in Table 3. Two other participants who were successful in getting two children with behavioral problems to participate actively in class/group work made comments similar to those in Table 3.

Table 3

Extracted responses concerning inclusion in group work

Participants	Narratives
Teacher	A participant with over a decade experience teaching children with special needs noted: Three of the four children with behavioral problems in my class want to have nothing to do with the rest of the class when it came to group work. They appeared disinterested and no amount of encouragement or reward would make them participate in such discussions. It was like I was hitting my head against the wall. One student in particular said no to every single every activity.
Teacher	It was sometimes tiring and exhausting. I wish I had the magic wand to come up with one single activity Aba who has behavioral problems could be interested in. She sat motionless and stared at her group members despite persistent effort by her group members to encourage her to get involved in the activities. In short, I could not get her to work with the other students and I came out everyday saying: "Maybe I could have done better."
Teacher	A participant who managed to get a child with behavioral problems to work with her classmates wrote: We rewarded her by clapping for her and with shouts of "Good job; wonderful job" and that did the trick. She knew she would be appreciated and she came to school ready to work on her own and with her classmates. If the applause did not come, or if we failed to recognize her participation and/or achievement, then she would look at me and sometimes at the other group members as if to say: <i>Are you not going to recognize my participation.</i> It was fun and rewarding to work with her.

Bullying and teasing

About 30% of the teachers reported bullying and teasing of children with special needs in their classrooms. The teachers viewed this as a distraction to successful inclusion and a hindrance to the special needs children's success in academic achievement and advancement. Extracted citations are reported in Table 4.

Table 4

Extracted responses concerning bullying and teasing

Participants	Narratives
Teacher	John always dreaded school. He knew each and every day that school was going to be principally made up of some children kicking or punching him. He had ebb's palsy and did not have full use of his left arm. Even if he wanted to stop an attack on him, it was practically impossible. I did everything within my power to protect him but too little avail. Had the head-teacher not punished those bullies, John would have left school. One could, however, observe withdrawal and disinterest in studying on his part whenever he was bullied.
Teacher	A participant who observed a child with a physical disability in her class being constantly teased by some of the students wrote: Adu was a good boy and highly disciplined so it was heartbreaking to see the naughty boys, especially Joe, teasing him time and again. Because he was teased so often by three children with behavioral problems, he kind of withdrew from the group and would not participate until I gave him full and complete assurance that I'll punish whoever teased him. He would always come to me if he felt uncomfortable with a group member or if he felt threatened. If only the other boys would behave, Adu would have definitely participated in all activities and sometimes, even possibly come on top the class. What is worrisome is the feeling of losing control of the class when some students, disabled or not, are prevented from participating fully and gaining optimally from the class.

Children without special needs spending excessive time assisting special needs children
Some teachers were concerned about particular children spending a considerable amount of their time helping some of the children with visual problems. Specifically, they noted that such a situation adversely affected the non-special needs children. Table 5 provides excerpts from some of the participants' answers.

Table 5
Extracted responses concerning non special needs students spending excessive time with special needs children

Participant	Narrative
Teacher	It is nice to see the children who are without special needs helping the special needs children. It becomes a problem, however, if they spend too much of their study time assisting them. Esi, for example, spent so much time helping Adam that it negatively affected him physically and intellectually. I could observe him getting tired but she wouldn't stop even after several cautions and a warning from me. The bond between them was so great that even at that age, she felt not helping Adam was bad. Eventually, I had to help Adam more so that Esi would have time to work on her own and with the other kids on their group activities.

Inability of some children with special needs to follow instructions

The most challenging issue reported by teachers about the children with behavioral and visual problems was their inability to follow instructions. In particular, some teachers noted that, despite their efforts, some children either simply could not perform basic activities they were taught or could not understand directives, which led to frustration on the part of both the teachers and the students. One participant's answer is provided in Table 6.

Table 6

Extracted response concerning the inability of special needs students to follow instructions

Participant	Narrative
Teacher	Even though I took extra pains to systematically teach children with special needs to write, he merely scribbled. Initially, I thought it had to do with his vision so I drew his parents' attention to it and they sent him to the eye doctor. Later we discovered that he was just not up to the task. He was very frustrated because he did everything possible to write and it just did not work. May be if I had extra training, I could have assisted him more. It was kind of frustrating for me also.

Attitudes of children with special needs toward school and group work

Regarding the attitudes of children special needs toward school, attention to the data suggests that even though some of the children with behavioral problems enjoyed going to school, some did not want to be part of any group work. In some cases (three participants), the children sobbed when they were asked to join one group or the other. The reason given by one child was that the other children did not like her. The teacher, whose answer is provided in Table 7, however, explained the situation differently.

Table 7

Extracted response concerning a special needs child's attitude toward group work

Participant	Narrative
Teacher	It was like she was always looking for a misstep or any action or reaction at all from the other children in order to quit the group. The only partner she was comfortable with was me; but, I felt the best thing would be for her to join with the other children. She wanted considerable attention and felt such attention was not going to be available if she joined the other children.

Teachers' perception of teaching children with special needs

Whether or not teachers enjoy teaching children with special needs

From the transcripts, we observed that a majority of the teachers enjoy teaching children with special needs. Two of the teachers noted that they felt it was their calling to render service to such children. However, despite their love for teaching children with visual and physical problems and inclusion of them in the general education classroom, the teachers noted that the school did not show much appreciation for their efforts. Others also noted that some parents were not appreciative of the teachers' efforts. Citations from participants' answers are given in Table 8.

Table 8

Extracted responses concerning the participants' attitude toward teaching special needs children in an inclusionist setting

Participants	Narratives
Teacher	I enjoyed having the three children with physical and visual problems in my class despite the fact that the work involved was enormous. In fact, I saw it as my calling to help such children and I did help them with all my heart. What was surprising was that the school did not appreciate my efforts. I remember when a parent of one of the children complained that her son could not finish his homework. Not only did she not have the courtesy to ask me what happened; she went to the head of the teachers who instead of checking the facts with me, questioned my competence. She later apologized when she learned about the facts of the case. I love teaching all the children irrespective of their special needs.
Teacher	I love teaching DK. She is an angel. She brings so much joy to all of us. Despite her unique situation (physical disability), she puts in maximum effort and we count her as a blessing in the class.

Teachers' competence

With respect to whether or not the participants felt up to the task, had the requisite training in, or were competent enough to teach children with special needs, 86.8% (n=59) reported that they did not have the necessary formal training to handle such classes. They noted that in-service training workshops organized by special education professionals and academics for them would give them confidence and significantly help to improve their professional competency. An answer from one participant is shown in Table 9.

Table 9

Extracted response concerning teacher competence to assist special needs children

Participant	Narrative
Teacher	We do our best to make the children comfortable and create an enabling environment for them to survive and prosper in the classroom. However, since none of us is trained to handle such students, we can only do so much which may neither be enough nor even proper or appropriate. If I was trained, maybe I will be able to come up with ways to help them better. It is possible the method I am using presently may not be the best one but what can you do if you have not been trained? It is sometimes frustrating but we are doing our best.

Of the 7.4% (n=5) of participants who indicated that they were up to the task in educating the children with special needs, one indicated that she had completed a course on special education in college but that the course was geared toward helping only children with reading problems, making it difficult at times to help children with needs other than reading. The rest of participants did not have any training. All five of these participants were in favor of attending a workshop that would enhance their competence in teaching such children. One answer from this group is given in Table 10.

Table 10

Extracted response concerning willingness to enhance teacher competence

Participant	Narrative
Teacher	I have been teaching this class for about 12 years and have had six children with different disabilities. I have a lot of patience and experience dealing with such kids. What they need is love and care. The academic side of things is often difficult because it is difficult to bring them up to speed with the other children in the class. They need a lot more time. The problem that with 54 children in one class, it is impossible to give any of such children the time they need. Also, even though I'm up to the task, the sheer magnitude of work means, one's performance in class as a teacher is always compromised. It is simply tough. Life in the classroom is hard.

Support for inclusion

A majority of the research participants (67%) supported inclusion but were concerned about the lack of appropriate resources for its proper implementation in their classrooms. Some went as far as to point out that segregating the children with special needs from the mainstream was a form of discrimination. This opinion can be seen in the citation in Table 11.

Table 11

Extracted response concerning the discrimination of special needs children in education

Participant	Narrative
Teacher	How would you feel if a child with special needs was yours? That is the way to look at it. It does not help if you merely look at the child as someone else's. Depriving the children with special needs of the benefit of interacting with the other children in the class causes isolation and negatively impacts their academic progress and socio-emotional development. It is best to educate them and the non-disabled children in one and the same classroom and at the same time. I'm all for inclusion but we need adequate resources to make it work.

Discussion

From the surveyed participants' narratives, as well as from the statistics derived from the teachers' responses to the questionnaire, we learned about the disastrous impact of bullying on the feelings that children with special needs have toward schooling. Specifically, this study showed that some of the children with special needs disliked school as a result of bullying. The above finding corroborated the findings of earlier research (Smith & Pepler, 2004). Specifically, this study has confirmed and amplified the seminal work of Smith & Pepler (2004) and other educationalists and researchers in explicating the extent and scope of bullying on children by showing the extent to which the physical, emotional, and social needs of bullied children are negatively affected. This study also demonstrates the need to rectify this unfortunate situation and work to meet the needs of bullied children both inside and outside of the classroom.

This study has also shown that the lack of interest shown by some teachers in teaching children with special needs is due primarily to the lack of support from their school district/authorities. The lack of support, as stated by the teachers, makes teaching unpleasant as well as burdensome on them. The participants were also concerned about the lack of participation on the part of parents in the education of their children with special needs. This situation is not unique to the current study. A study conducted by Harry, Allen, and McLaughlin (1995) alluded to similar problems.

The results of this study also tell us that although research has shown that individual instructions, curricular modifications, and adapted materials (Giangreco & Putnam, 1991; Rogers, 1993; Sailor, Gee, & Karasoff, 1993; Snell & Janey, 1993) work well for children with special needs, most of the teachers surveyed in this study did not use special instructional activities that could have benefited the children. In particular, some of the surveyed participants indicated that they did not conduct any special activities unique to the needs of the special needs children, which resulted in a lack of academic participation from some of the children. This state of affairs points to the fact that the enthusiasm and willingness of children with special needs to study and/or participate in academic and other activities could be improved considerably if appropriate activities were implemented by the teachers. This is particularly so given the fact that some of the

children enjoyed being in school. Thus, the pleasure that some of the children with special needs derived by being in school could be sustained and improved by improved in-class activities.

The inability of some of the children to participate in group work, as indicated by some of the teachers, stemmed from the fact that the children with special needs were not able to follow instructions and, therefore, did not have the knowledge and skills that would enable them to function in group work. This suggests that it is essential for teachers to be trained in a way that will enable them to assist the children to learn about and improve upon their academic skills and knowledge. From the results, we learned that well over 90% of the teachers admitted a lack of training in requisite areas in dealing with children with special needs and, therefore, called for such training given its potential to provide them with the tools to foster the betterment of the children.

Conclusion and Recommendations

From the many problems faced by early care teachers in Ghana, concerning their work with children with special needs, the inclusion of special education teachers, physical and occupational therapists, nurses, and social workers will go a long way to ease some of the problems faced by grade school teachers in caring for children with special needs. In addition, it is highly recommended that parent-teacher associations advocate for the active participation of parents in Ghanaian schools in general, and in schools with children with special needs in particular, since participation will help ease the challenges that confront teachers in their daily work with children with special needs.

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