



Attitude of teacher trainees towards children with disabilities in the Northern Region of Ghana

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ABSTRACT

The study assessed the attitude of teacher trainees from the Evangelical Presbyterian College of Education in Bimbilla towards pupils with disabilities in basic schools in two districts in the Northern Region of Ghana. The aim was to assess the relevance of the newly introduced special education course in the colleges of education on the attitude of teacher trainees. A descriptive survey involving 150 teacher trainees from the Evangelical Presbyterian College of Education were selected from final year students through a stratified random sampling technique. A Likert scale was used to assess the attitude of teacher trainees and independent sample t-test was computed to determine gender disparity in attitudes. The findings from the study revealed that although attitude of teacher trainees in the study area towards children with disabilities seemed to be positive, they lacked deeper understanding of disability and issues affecting the inclusion of children disabilities in general schools. The general positive attitude of the teacher trainees towards pupils with disabilities suggests that the new course has the potential of developing positive attitudes among teachers. However, the content of the current course seems inadequate to sufficiently provide teachers with the knowledge and competence they need to handle children with disabilities.

Keywords: Attitude, children with special needs, teacher trainees, Ghana

INTRODUCTION

Teachers are key resources and major stakeholders in education and, as a result, their role in the implementation of inclusive educational reforms is very essential. For this reason, teacher training is considered crucial and a fundamental element in the process of implementing new educational policies. Adequate teacher training and preparation ensures that teachers acquire the desired knowledge and aptitudes that will shape their attitudes towards new educational policies. The success of any educational reforms therefore hinges on the availability of teachers possessing the requisite knowledge and competencies.^{1,2}

With the current shift towards inclusive education, teacher training and preparation has particularly become more essential

than before. Inclusion requires that teachers are well prepared to handle the new challenges of handling children with diverse learning needs in the general setting. Providing teachers with the right training enables them to understand the philosophy of inclusion, develop positive attitudes, and build the needed capacity to handle pupils with diverse needs in inclusive schools. Thus, for teachers to be receptive to inclusion, their training should go beyond preparing them to address the demand for academic excellence; it should also include providing them with skills that will enable them to meet the needs of diverse groups of pupils in their classrooms.^{3,4}

In spite of the importance of teacher preparation towards inclusive education, studies have indicated that many teachers are not conversant with the basic practices governing inclusion, because of inadequate preparation and training.⁵ As a result, some teachers have expressed concern about their ability to handle children with special needs, while others exhibited negative attitudes towards students with disabilities and their inclusion in general classrooms.⁶ This concern is borne out of the perception that teaching students with disabilities can be difficult, stressful, and also, their inclusion can impact negatively on the achievements of other students.⁷ Even when teachers expressed positive attitude towards inclusion, their degree of willingness wanes when the concept of inclusion is

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personalized, for example, when they are asked if they would be willing to teach students with disabilities.⁸

The importance of teachers in the implementation of inclusive education demands that general education teachers in Ghana are adequately prepared to assume the responsibility of educating children with special needs. However, studies in Ghana have identified negative attitudes among teachers towards children with disabilities, suggesting inadequate teacher preparation towards inclusion. For example, Yekple and Avoke⁵ found that teachers expressed uneasiness and doubts about their ability to handle children with special needs, while J. S. Agbenyega⁹ cited the use of derogatory names and maltreatment by teachers as some of the factors impeding enrolment and retention of children with disabilities in the general classroom. This attitude of teachers is largely due to the fact that teacher training and preparation in Ghana, especially at the initial training colleges, did not include courses on special needs education. So teaching methodologies in these training programmes were directed towards practices in general schools. Consequently, teachers were not trained to teach towards differential learning outcomes and their teaching methods tended to be examination driven. Teaching and assessment practices have, therefore, tended to alienate children with special needs.¹⁰

It is for the above reasons that a three hour introductory course in special needs education has been introduced in the curriculum of all colleges of education in Ghana. The pre-service training programme is meant to provide teachers with appropriate training on persons with disabilities to foster positive perception and attitude towards persons with disabilities. However, it has been observed that such introductory programmes do not offer enough course work on inclusive education to adequately prepare teachers to work in inclusive classrooms, so newly trained teachers are not well prepared to teach in inclusive setting.^{11, 12} However, since the introduction of the course, little is known about the impact of the course on the teacher-trainees.

The purpose of this study is therefore to ascertain the relevance of the course on the perception and attitude of teacher trainees at the Bimbilla Evangelical Presbyterian (E.P.) College of Education towards pupils with disabilities. The study specifically examined the kind of attitude that teacher trainees at the Bimbilla E. P. College of Education held towards children with disabilities and what perception teacher trainees held about the impact of new course on their attitudes towards children with disabilities. In addressing these issues, the study provided insights into the impact of the newly introduced course in special education on the perception and attitude of the teacher-trainees towards children with disabilities.

METHODS

Study design: This study adopted a descriptive survey design to ascertain teacher trainees' attitude towards basic school pupils with special education needs in the Nanumba North and South districts. According to S. Martyn,¹³ a descriptive research

design involves observing and describing the behaviour of a subject without influencing it in any way. That is, descriptive research design makes it possible for the subject under study to be observed completely in its natural and unaltered environment. Since the intent of the researchers was to use a less intrusive method to measure and describe teacher trainees' attitude towards children with disabilities, a descriptive survey was deemed more appropriate.

Population and sample size: This study specifically targeted the final year students of Bimbilla E.P College of Education who were in the "out" segment of their programme. The "out" segment is the last component of the 3-year in-in-out programme introduced in the colleges of education in Ghana which allow students to spend two years in academic work and the last year for internship in basic schools. Out of the total final year population of 283, made up of 121 females and 162 males, 150 (53%) (equally males and females) students were selected for the study.

Sampling technique: A stratified random sampling technique was used to select the respondents for the study. This involves dividing the population into males and females and then taking a simple random sample in each group. This technique is preferred to simple random sampling because it ensured that each subgroup in the population (males and females) was equally represented in the study. It also made it possible for analysis across each subgroup to be conducted. Ahead of the data collection, the researchers met the heads of the basic schools where the teacher trainees were undertaking their internships to introduce themselves, explained the purpose of the study, and sought their approval to conduct the study in their schools. This was followed by a visit to the schools two days later to meet the selected teacher trainees to brief them on the purpose of the study, selection procedures, eligibility criteria, and to solicit their cooperation. All prospective respondents were given informed consent forms to read through a day before recruitment.

Research instrument: A questionnaire was prepared which consisted of two parts, was used to collect data from the respondents. Part A collected bio-data on the respondents – gender, age, and area of origin. Part B consisted of 24 items that examined teacher trainees' perception and attitude towards persons with disabilities by asking them to rate the extent to which they agree or disagree to items on a Likert-scale. The scales included strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree. The main issues that were captured in part B included teacher trainees' views on the needs of basic school pupils with special education, and their perception of the pupils' academic capabilities and achievements.

Pre-testing the study tool: In order to test the suitability of the questionnaire used for the study, the researchers piloted the study on 10 teacher trainees in a different college of education. After items in the pilot questionnaire had been answered, respondents made suggestions which were incorporated in the final instrument. The pilot ensured that irrelevant and vague items were excluded.

Ethical consideration: The researchers ensured that participants' privacy and confidentiality were maintained by deleting their names and all personal identifiers from the data. All respondents were taken through informed consent process, which included information on the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of the study, and their right to withdraw without any risk. In addition, clearance was obtained from the Committee for Human Research Publication and Ethics at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology before the fieldwork. Before the commencement of the data collection, the researchers sought permission from the principal of the Bimbilla College of education and all heads of the basic schools where the teacher trainees were practicing.

Data collection and analysis: The data collection involved distributing the questionnaires to the respondents to complete within a week. All the questionnaires were self-administered. After gathering all the completed questionnaires from the respondents, the responses were coded and entered into statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) data file, and relationships among variables and differences in responses across gender computed. Comparative analysis by gender was done using independent sample t-test, at 95% level of significance. Tables were used to summarize the frequencies of the responses on the questionnaire items. In order to simplify the analysis and avoid confusing, responses for "strongly agree" and "agree" were merged as "agree", while "strongly disagree" and "disagree" were also merged as "disagree".

RESULTS

Perception about children with special needs

The results showed that while 57% of the trainees thought that students with disabilities can actively participate in

the classroom activities with their peers without disabilities. Majority (92%) of them thought that special needs students are those who need exclusive attention to maximize their potentials. Thus, although slightly more than half of the trainees (57%) thought that students with disabilities can be in the inclusive setting almost all the trainees thought students with disabilities can only do so if given special attention. Also, 39% thought that students with disabilities can be educated only in special schools.

On academic achievement of students with special educational needs, the responses revealed that nearly three quarters (73%) of the trainees thought that students with special needs can benefit academically, although about two-thirds (59%) held the perception that special needs children are slow learners. Interestingly, 59% of the trainees were of the view that teacher trainees were concerned that having students with disabilities in their classrooms may affect teaching and lower the overall academic performance. This seemed to support their perception that children with disabilities are slow learners.

With respect to treatment of students with disabilities in the general schools, 65% of the trainees agreed that students with special needs are treated fairly. Even though 55% of the trainees view students with disabilities as quick tempered, almost the same number, 57%, thought that students with disabilities are friendly. In addition, about four-fifth (80%) agreed that students with disabilities will improve socially when educated in the general schools with their peers without disabilities. On the causes of disabilities, it was revealed that about a third (36%) of the trainees held the erroneous perception that disability is caused by evil spirits.

The responses from the questionnaire items are summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Views of Trainees about Persons with Disabilities

Statement	Agree	Disagree
Special needs students are those who need exclusive attention to maximize their potentials	138(92%)	12(8%)
Students with disabilities can actively participate in classroom activities with their peers without disabilities	86(57%)	64(43%)
Students with disabilities improve socially when educated in regular school	120(80%)	30(20%)
Students with disabilities can be educated only in special schools	59(39%)	91(61%)
Teacher trainees are concerned that having students with disabilities in their classrooms may lower overall academic performance	62(41%)	88(59%)
Teacher-trainees regularly have close contact(one –on- one) with students with disabilities	117(78%)	33(22%)
Students with special needs are fairly treated in regular schools	97(65%)	53(35%)
Students with disabilities are quick-tempered	82(55%)	68(45%)
Students with disabilities are friendly	85(57%)	65(43%)
Students with disabilities are slow learners	88(59%)	62(41%)
Students with disabilities can benefit	110(73)	40(27%)
Disability is caused by evil spirits	54 (36%)	96 (64%)

Gender Difference on Teacher-Trainees' Perception on Disability

Table 2: Gender Difference on Teacher-Trainees' Perception on Disability

Question items	Gender	N	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value
Special needs students are those who need exclusive attention to maximize their potentials.	Male	75	1.547	.721	-.702	.484
	Female	75	1.627	.673		
Through special needs education, trainees have developed positive perception towards students with disabilities.	Male	74	1.703	.806	-1.474	.143
	Female	75	1.920	.983		
Teacher-trainees regularly have close contact (one –on- one) with students with disabilities	Male	75	2.120	.677	1.512	.133
	Female	75	1.933	.827		
Students with special needs are fairly treated in regular schools	Male	75	2.320	.681	.111	.912
	Female	75	2.307	.788		
Students with disabilities are quick tempered.	Male	75	2.267	.935	.088	.930
	Female	75	2.253	.917		
Students with disabilities are friendly	Male	75	2.320	.701	-.302	.763
	Female	75	2.360	.910		
Disability is caused by evil Spirit	Male	75	2.840	1.014	.512	.610
	Female	75	2.760	.899		
Disability is caused by evil Spirits	Male	75	2.840	1.014	.512	.610
	Female	75	2.760	.899		
Parental negligence causes disability.	Male	75	2.400	.869	-.374	.709
	Female	75	2.453	.874		
Teacher-trainees' perceptions are as a result of past experiences with persons with disabilities	Male	75	2.253	1.002	-1.198	.233
	Female	75	2.453	1.044		
Students with disabilities are included in regular schools	Male	75	1.786	.741	-3.596	.026
	Female	75	2.106	.981		
Students with disabilities can Get their educational needs met only in special schools	Male	75	2.813	.865	2.499	.014
	Female	75	2.440	.961		

P < 0.05

In terms of gender, the results indicated that both male and female trainees appear to be holding similar perceptions on all items except two; there was no statistical significant difference between male and female teacher trainees in terms of their attitudes towards persons with disabilities on all but two items of the measure. The items were “Students with disabilities are included in regular schools” ($t = -3.596$; $p = .026$) and “Students with disabilities can get their educational needs met only in special schools” ($t = 2.499$, $p = .014$). Table 2 above presents a summary of independent sample t-test on gender differences in perception towards children with disabilities among the teacher trainees.

Impact of new course on teacher trainees

The findings from the study indicated that most of the teacher trainees thought the introduction of special education has had some impact on their perception of disability as 85% of them agreed to this assertion. This viewpoint is supported by the readiness of most of the trainees to accept student with disabilities in their classrooms; 77% of the trainees were ready to handle student with disabilities because they have gained vital information about persons with disabilities. Somewhat consistent with their responses on the positive impact of special education on their perception of disability, 77% of them claimed that through the special education course, they have developed positive attitude towards students with disabilities. Table 3 below summarizes the response of teacher trainees' perception of the impact of special education course on their attitude.

Table 3: Impact of special education course

Statement	Agree	Disagree
The introduction of special needs education has equipped trainees with relevant knowledge and skills to handle students with special needs	127(85%)	23(15%)
Teacher-trainees have knowledge and skills to handle students with disabilities in their classrooms	116(77%)	34(23%)
Through special needs education, trainees have developed positive perception towards students with disabilities	116(77%)	34(23%)

DISCUSSIONS

Although the sample for the study is limited to teacher trainees in just one college of education in Ghana, the findings provide useful insights into the potentials of the newly introduced course on the perception and attitude of teacher trainees towards children with disabilities. A fundamental assumption about teacher training is to ensure that teachers acquire the knowledge, understanding and skills to address the needs of different learners.¹⁴ The finding from the study that teacher trainees exhibited positive attitude towards children with disabilities as a result of their exposure to the special education course is consistent with this basic assumption and also in agreement with tenets of inclusive education.

The importance of teacher training, especially at the pre-service level, on teachers' attitude towards children with disabilities is crucial and cannot be underestimated. It has been observed that lack of training in inclusive practices for teachers at the pre-service level largely accounts for the negative teacher attitude towards the inclusion of children with disabilities. For example, studies have indicated that teachers without sufficient training in inclusion often felt stressful, apprehension and concerned about their ability to teach children with special needs in inclusive settings.⁵ It is in line with this view that V. Donnelly¹⁵ suggested that teacher education should prepare people to be responsive individually and collectively for improving the learning, teaching and participation of children with diverse needs. Therefore, if the teacher trainees have developed positive attitude as result of the inclusion of special education in their curriculum, as the findings seem to suggest, it implies the course is having the desired effect.

However, the seemingly positive attitude of teacher trainees towards children with disabilities as reported in the findings should be interpreted with caution; it is doubtful if the course was making any impact on the teacher trainees' attitudes. It is important to note that the teacher trainees self-reported their own perception and attitude towards children with disabilities. They made claims about their own perception and attitude that appears to be incorrect. This is because some of their responses create doubt about the claim that their level of knowledge and attitude towards children with disabilities had improved. For instance, the perception that children with special needs can only be educated in special schools cannot be seen as positive and knowledgeable of the potentials of children with special needs. This is buttressed by the findings that trainees thought special needs children are slow learners and their inclusion in general classrooms could affect teaching and lower standards. Also, many of the trainees were still holding onto misconceptions about the causes of disability, and were prejudicial and stereotypical in some of their views about students with disabilities.

Moreover, the perception by the teacher trainees that special needs children are treated fairly in schools is inconsistent with many studies that have cited negative attitude of teachers, and sometimes, peers as factors impeding their inclusion. According to Y. E. Yekple, M. Avoke⁵ many children with

disabilities in general schools are labeled by their teachers as stupid and lazy because they are unable to cope with instructions that are not tailored to meet their needs. Similarly, J. S. Agbenyega⁹ identified the used of derogatory labels and bullying by teachers as some of the treatment meted out to children with disabilities in general classrooms. Note that one of the main reasons for introducing special education in the colleges of education is to stem such negative behaviors among teachers.

Indeed, studies have indicated that introductory courses in special education are not enough to change attitude of teacher trainees. It has been observed, for instance, that for many teachers, their only exposure to the area of inclusive education is an introductory course in special needs education, which is woefully inadequate to handle children with special needs in the general classroom.^{11, 12} This view has been supported by A. Hodkinson¹⁶ who indicated that there are skills and knowledge that teachers should acquire in order to work in inclusive classrooms, but pre-service teacher training courses do not adequately cover these areas.

IMPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The study indicated that contact with children with disabilities appeared to have changed the perception and attitude of the teacher trainees towards children with disabilities. In the light of this finding, efforts should be made to increase interaction between teachers and children with disabilities to reduce misconceptions about disability and make teachers more tolerant and responsive to the needs of pupils with special needs.

Moreover, more courses in special education should be introduced in teacher training institutions to equip trainees with adequate knowledge and skills on disability issues since the current course appears to be inadequate. In addition, the educational studies department of the colleges of education should organize educational visits to special schools, and trainees should be given opportunities to experience inclusive education practices in the pilot inclusive schools. These will enable teacher trainees have firsthand experience on how various categories of special needs students receive instruction from special education teachers in both the special and general schools. Lastly, re-fresher courses such as seminars, workshops and conferences should regularly be organized for teachers, especially, those who have not taken courses in special education, to update their knowledge and skills on children with special needs.

CONCLUSION

Teacher training and preparation is essential for educating students with disabilities in both general and special schools. The current shift towards inclusive education makes it even more pressing to have *teachers* who can effectively handle children with diverse needs. Therefore, providing teacher trainees with the relevant skills and attitude is vital since teachers are the foundation for the implementation of the inclusive programme. It is within the context to prepare teachers

adequately to handle exceptional children that special education was incorporated into the curriculum of colleges of education. The findings from the study suggest that trainees' exposure to disability issues in special needs education seemed to have impacted on their perception and attitude towards children with disabilities. However, there are doubts about the impact of the course on teacher trainees' attitude. Since this study focused on just one college of education out of the 40 colleges in the country, more investigations need to be conducted on the issue

to an in-depth understanding of the impact of the course on teacher trainees.

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