

Inclusive Education at the Crossroads in Ashanti and Brong Ahafo regions in Ghana: Target not achievable by 2015

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: *Inclusive education, widely acknowledged as an alternative method of making education accessible to children with special needs, has been piloted for 10 years in selected districts of Ghana. This article aims to discuss the feasibility of implementing it throughout the country, by assessing the inclusive education programme piloted in Ghana's Ashanti and Brong Ahafo regions.*

Method: *One round of in-depth interviews was conducted with 31 participants, to collect data on the issue under study. Participants were officials of Special Education at the national Head Office, District Special Education Coordinators, Resource Teachers, Headmasters and Classroom Teachers of inclusive education.*

Results: *The study findings indicated that the pilot programme did not live up to expectations when faced with challenges such as inaccessible environments, lack of resources, lack of funds, lack of qualified teachers, poor teaching methods and negative attitudes of teachers towards children with disabilities.*

Conclusion: *It is very unrealistic to commence inclusive education programmes unless practical measures are put in place, such as adequate funding from the government and provision of sufficient resources for inclusive schools.*

Key words: *Inclusive education, children with disabilities, Salamanca Declaration, assessment.*

INTRODUCTION

In June 1994, over 300 representatives of 92 governments and 25 international organisations attended the World Conference on Special Needs Education, in Salamanca, Spain. Delegates at the Conference agreed that the education

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of all children with disabilities should be delivered through the inclusive approach (Forlin, 2001; UNESCO, 2005; Kuyini, 2010). The Conference adopted a new Framework for Action which guaranteed that mainstream schools should accommodate all children, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional and linguistic backgrounds (UNESCO, 2005). The new Framework for Action recognised the necessity and urgency of providing education for all children, young people and adults within the regular education system. Inclusive education can thus be effective in fighting against discrimination and in increasing access to education for majority of persons with disabilities (Gadagbui, 2008; Kuyini, 2010).

Ghana is a signatory to the Salamanca Declarations and is working towards the implementation of inclusive education by 2015. Thus, in 2003, the Special Education Division (SPED) of Ghana Education Service drafted an Education Strategic Plan for the period 2003-2015, which is the timeline to achieve total inclusion of children with disabilities in general schools (Gadagbui, 2008; Agbenyaga and Deku, 2011; Danso et al, 2012). According to the Ministry of Education (2013), "the education strategic plan has a goal to provide education to excluded children by including them where possible within the mainstream system." In line with this, the policy of inclusive education seeks to place children with mild and moderate disabilities in mainstream public schools.

Consequently, inclusive education was begun in 2003/4 academic year, with 60 schools chosen for piloting from 11 districts in Central, Eastern and Greater Accra regions (Gadagbui, 2008; Agbenyaga and Deku, 2011). In 2011, the programme was extended from 60 to 429 schools in 46 districts in all the 10 regions of the country. As of the 2012/13 academic year, a total of 16,596 children with disabilities were enrolled in the inclusive school (Ministry of Education, 2013). There is no doubt that with the introduction of inclusive education Ghana has made some progress in the enrolment of children with disabilities, as there has been improvement in the intake of children with disabilities in general schools. Since the programme's inception however, there has been no assessment to determine whether the schools selected for the inclusive programme are accessible to children with disabilities or not. Additionally, at a press conference on September 22, 2014, the Special Education Division of Ghana Education Service announced that it was satisfied with the 10-year inclusive pilot programme in selected districts across the country, and that inclusive education would be rolled out countrywide, in all the basic schools, starting from the 2015 academic year. Therefore, judging

from the practice in Ashanti and Brong Ahafo regions, this study aims to find out whether Ghana is ready to roll out the programme in 2015.

METHOD

Study Design

This exploratory case study has employed qualitative data collection methods. One advantage of the qualitative method is the use of open-ended questions, which allows participants the opportunity to respond in their own words rather than being forced to choose from fixed and predetermined responses (Osuala, 2005; Baxter and Jack, 2008; Creswell, 2008). According to David and Sutton (2004) and Osuala (2005), qualitative methods enable researchers to investigate how people perceive their world and understand events. In addition, qualitative methods provide more insights as they help to elicit in-depth information from respondents. Creswell (2003) attributed the chief purpose of conducting qualitative study to exploratory research. He stated that exploratory research is undertaken if “not much has been written about the topic or the population being studied and the researcher seeks to listen to participants and build an understanding based on their ideas” (Creswell, 2003, p.30). The feasibility of inclusive education in Ghana has hardly been documented, and therefore an exploratory study was appropriate.

Study Site

Ashanti and BrongAhafo, both centrally located regions in Ghana, are among the regions chosen for the pilot project on inclusive education. The inhabitants of these regions are engaged in agricultural activities. These areas are well-known for cocoa production and are the major site of Ghana’s gold mining industry. They were chosen for the study because they were among the regions with the highest population of children between the ages of 3 and 18 years who were out of school in 2010 (Ghana Statistical Service, 2012).

Although there is no information about the number of children with disabilities who were out of school in these regions, it is possible that they formed a high proportion among the school dropouts. In a study on the reasons for the high rate of school dropouts in the BrongAhafo region, Imoro (2009) identified poverty, shortage of teachers, broken homes and single parenthood, teenage pregnancy, peer influence, unattractive school environment, poor examination results and poor

image of school due to poor academic performance, as the main causes. Children with disabilities are more likely to be affected by most of these factors than children without disabilities, but the extent to which they are influenced by these factors is not known. Moreover, being centrally located, the population of these regions is generally heterogeneous, comprising people from all over the country. Hence the views of study participants from these regions provided a fair understanding of the factors that hinder access to education for children with disabilities in Ghana.

Participants

The study population consisted of officials from the Head Office of Special Education Division (SPED) of Ghana Education Service (Accra), District Coordinators of Special Education, Headmasters and Teachers in inclusive and special schools, and Resource Teachers attached to inclusive schools. A total of 31 respondents were interviewed for the study. Four officials from SPED (the Deputy Director, the Head of Inclusive Education, the officer in-charge of Deaf and Blind schools, and the Head of schools for the Intellectually Disabled) were interviewed to elicit their opinions on education for children with disabilities in Ghana. At the time of the study there were six districts, three each in Ashanti and BrongAhafo regions, which were piloting the inclusive education programme. All the six District Special Education Coordinators from these districts were interviewed for information on the programme being piloted in their respective districts.

Moreover, eight Headmasters were interviewed from inclusive schools in the two regions. These schools were selected on the basis of suggestions from the District Special Education Coordinators. Only one Headmaster was selected from BrongAhafo region because only one school was practising the inclusive system, even though three districts from the region were selected for the inclusive programme. One Classroom Teacher was selected from each of the schools practising the inclusive programme, making it a total of eight Teachers. Furthermore, five Resource Teachers attached to the five schools practicing inclusion at the time of the study, were interviewed in both regions. One Resource Teacher was attached to each of the three inclusive schools selected in Ashanti Region while two Resource Teachers were attached to the only inclusive school in BrongAhafo.

Sampling Technique

The purposive sampling technique was chosen for this study. With purposive sampling, the researcher employs his or her own judgment about who to include

in the sample frame based on certain characteristics (Payne and Payne, 2004; Babie, 2005; Osuala, 2005). According to David and Sutton (2004), in purposive sampling “the units are selected according to the researcher’s own knowledge and opinion about which ones they think will be appropriate to the topic area”. This connotes that purposive sampling is targeted and specific to particular respondents. In this study, the sampling technique enabled the researchers to select respondents who could give satisfactory answers to the interview questions. Respondents were selected on the basis of certain characteristics they possessed, namely, their involvement in educating children with special needs and their knowledge of the existing educational facilities for children with disabilities in Ashanti or Brong Ahafo regions.

Data Collection and Analysis

A semi-structured interview guide was developed to collect data from participants. Interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis and audio-recorded with permission from participants. Semi-structured interviews are usually conducted face to face with the interviewer, and the participants allow the researcher to control the process and also provide opportunities for them to express their thoughts (O’Leary, 2004). The choice of this instrument was therefore based on its flexibility, which allowed the researchers to modify questions as and when required. The participants were asked questions about the number of children with special needs, the needs of children in general schools, the types of resources available, and teaching strategies and challenges that teachers faced in teaching children with special needs.

Apart from the interviews, the researchers observed teachers and pupils during teaching and learning activities in the classroom. They observed instructional strategies, classroom management techniques, and teaching and learning materials. This provided supplementary information about the condition of physical facilities in the school and also served as a means of verifying statements made by participants during interview schedules.

The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researchers. To ensure accuracy, the researchers listened to the audio recordings several times before transcription. A Microsoft word file was created for the transcripts, which were saved and password-secured on a portable computer accessible to only the researchers. The researchers read through the transcripts several times before developing themes and sub-themes based on the research questions. Supporting

quotes from the transcripts were linked to their respective themes using Weft Qualitative Data Analysis software (Weft QDA). Weft QDA is a free qualitative data analysis programme that helps to identify and merge similar themes from respondents.

Ethical issues

Before the fieldwork, ethical clearance was obtained from Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology's Institutional Review Board. The researchers respected the rights of the respondents and ensured that informed consent was given before carrying out any interview.

RESULTS

Physical Inaccessibility

Respondents from all the schools were asked about the accessibility of the physical environment to children with disabilities. The study findings indicated that the physical environment was not accessible to children with physical disabilities and to children with visual impairment, but caused no problems for those who were hard of hearing or had intellectual disability. Two Special Education Coordinators claimed that the physical environment in the selected inclusive schools was not accessible, making it hard for wheelchair users and those with visual impairment or low vision to move freely. A Resource Teacher also complained about the inaccessibility of the environment and the need to do something about it, but lack of funds was a hindrance. The Resource Teacher stated,

"The environment is not too bad but it is not the best. It has become very difficult for us to tell the headmaster that we need ramps, pavements and rails around here or cementing the area because the capitation is not enough. The school has been built for the normal children without disabilities."

Personal observations by the researchers confirmed assertions by the respondents that the physical environment was inaccessible to children with physical disabilities. The terrain was rough and there were no ramps, pavements, rails and accessible toilets. The schools were built without taking into consideration the needs of children with disabilities.

Lack of Qualified Teachers

The scarcity of qualified teachers to handle children with special needs in the inclusive classroom generated a great deal of discussion. All the participants agreed on the limited availability of qualified teachers in the schools. According to them, the available teachers were neither knowledgeable about inclusive education nor serious about addressing the special needs of these children. For example, one Resource Teacher alleged that the classroom teachers were not helping to make the inclusive programme work due to lack of understanding of the inclusive system. Another Resource Teacher concurred,

“Most of the teachers are not serious with the education of children with special needs. They don’t show much concern. Some are coping but a lot are complaining that teaching children with special needs is a demanding task for them.”

The District Special Education Coordinator also corroborated the assertions by the Resource Teachers and stated,

“There is a problem because most of the general teachers have little knowledge about inclusive education. They only did special needs in the training college, not inclusive education. Most teachers teach in abstract which does not help the course of the children. Some of the teachers think they know, so when you are having discussions with them, they don’t pay much attention.”

Responses from the Teachers seemed to be in line with the claims that teachers in the classrooms lacked knowledge of the inclusive system. Many of the Teachers expressed frustration at teaching these children. Some of them confirmed that they did not have the training required to teach children with special needs. One Teacher explained the difficulty he faced in teaching children with different needs in the same classroom and did not think *“educating them (children with special needs) in the general school is the best because we, the general teachers, can’t teach them as we lack the skills to do so.”*

Another Teacher expressed her frustration,

“One problem I do have among children with special needs has got to do with communication problems. Sometimes, they want to tell me something but due to communication problems, I can’t understand them. The problem we are facing is that we are not trained to teach children with special needs.”

Lack of knowledge and frustration in handling children with special needs seemed to make an impact on the disposition of some teachers. Some participants claimed

that certain teachers did not have the patience to teach children with special needs because they lacked the necessary training. Consequently, participants suggested that the general classroom teachers should undergo more training to improve their knowledge of inclusive education and enable them to handle children with special needs. Another suggestion was that teachers should draw children with special needs closer to them, in order to make them feel welcome. It was also suggested that more qualified teachers should be posted to inclusive schools so as to increase the strength of the school staff.

Lack of Funds

Lack of funds was identified as a problem hampering the smooth implementation of the inclusive system in the districts. Funding was a major problem at all levels: district, circuits and schools. The District Special Education Coordinator lamented that lack of funds was hindering efforts to train teachers,

“The Ministry (of education) only pays lip service to the education of children with special needs. We are sacrificing enough to support the sustenance of the programme; even in the absence of funds to organise programmes, we do our best to have in-service training for the teachers. It is my own pocket money I use for these visitations and workshops. I only depend on my salary with no other source of income for the work. I can’t continue doing this from own pocket.”

As with the District Coordinator, Resource Teachers were also affected by the lack of funds and had to use their own money to conduct school visits to assess the children and monitor their progress. According to some of the Resource Teachers, the lack of funding was making it difficult to effectively monitor and supervise the inclusion programme. One Resource Teacher observed,

“Getting to various schools is a big problem for me. There is no means of transportation and I have to find my way there from my pocket. I will be in a school and a teacher will call me to come and assess a child in his or her classroom. All my movements are from my pocket.”

Lack of funds was also making it difficult for the schools to acquire teaching and learning materials for children with special needs. Two Head Teachers commented,

“The education system designed tells me that children with special needs were not taken into consideration. Even the capitation doesn’t cover them. The resources are

woefully inadequate. The materials and equipment are not forthcoming. You ask and the only response is there is no money."

"Some of them need hearing aids and others need counselling. There is no finance available to get it for them. If there is no support, they can't learn effectively and efficiently; so for them to learn very well, they need equipment to enable them to learn. The capitation is not enough so we don't make provision for them when purchasing teaching and learning materials."

The Classroom Teachers were facing similar difficulties due to unavailability of funds to purchase materials required to work with children with special needs. One Classroom Teacher noted,

"We are yet to receive any financial assistance from anywhere and I am still using the same text books for all children. I feel pity for them here in this class but there is nothing I can do as there are no funds for us to use to take care of them. At times too, materials to study are not available in the school for the teacher to use. The teacher will have to sacrifice and buy some from his or her own pocket."

Some participants therefore suggested that the government should disburse timely funds to facilitate the effective implementation of the inclusive programme.

To sum up, funding is crucial to the implementation of any project. Thus, if there are no funds as claimed by the participants, it would certainly affect the smooth implementation of the inclusive programme because the resources needed by the children cannot be provided.

Attitude of Teachers

Some participants attributed the challenges faced by children with disabilities to the negative attitudes of teachers. A Classroom Teacher alleged that,

"The way teachers talk to children with disabilities discourages them from coming again. For example, telling them 'you are good for nothing' and also telling them it is better for them to stay home and stop coming to school."

According to the respondents, some of the teachers are, by nature, against the education of children with disabilities. Additionally, some teachers were against the use of Resource Teachers to assist children with disabilities in their classrooms. For example, a Resource Teacher stated,

“Some of the teachers are not cooperating with us. I could remember sometime ago when we were going round as team screening. You get to one class and want to take them out and do the screening but some of the teachers told me I’m busy and we are doing exercise.”

A District Special Education Coordinator also claimed,

“At times, I enter a class and introduce myself as resources teacher who is helping children with disabilities. The class teachers don’t co-operate with me. Some may think you have come there to sabotage their work. Some tell me no child is having disability in their class but I know the children are there. The commitment of the regular teachers is questionable in accepting the inclusive concept.”

From the above, it could be seen that the attitude of teachers, who are important stakeholders in the education of children with disabilities, appeared to be hampering a policy that aims at promoting education for all.

DISCUSSION

Physical Conditions of Schools

The results of the study showed that the physical environment in most of schools was neither accessible nor disability-friendly. Most of the schools did not have ramps, had terrain that was unsuitable for wheelchair users and those with visual impairment, and lacked classrooms that could accommodate the needs of different categories of children with disabilities. It should be noted that the inclusive schools were built specifically for children without disabilities. The results of this study are consistent with findings by United Nations International Children Emergency Fund (2007) and World Health Organisation (2011) that the built environments in most public schools are not disability-friendly and limit access to schools for children with disabilities.

Lack of Resources in the Schools

The study participants acknowledged the need to provide resources for children with special needs, to enable them to participate equally in the general classroom alongside their contemporaries. However, study findings indicated that most of the resources were unavailable in the schools practising the inclusive system in the circuit, and there were no immediate plans by the government to provide these resources. Since the availability of appropriate resources is vital for the

smooth implementation of any programme, the lack of the resources for schools will undoubtedly hamper implementation of the inclusive system. In particular, the findings that the schools did not receive specialised materials and equipment for children with special need simplified that these children were probably not receiving the required support services. It is worthwhile to note that some Class Teachers, peers and the Resource Teachers were in all probability providing some form of support services for the children; however, this form of support may be unplanned, unstructured and insufficient to meet the needs of the children.

Many studies have revealed the importance of resources and support services for children with special needs in the inclusive system (Kristensen et al, 2003; Hardman et al, 2005; Charema, 2007; Deku and Vanderpuye, 2008; Stubbs, 2008; Hayford, 2013). Findings from these studies corroborate the fact that the lack of specialised resources and support services limit the ability of children with special needs to study in the same classrooms as their peers without special needs. Additionally, Hossain (2004) advised that inclusive education must recognise and respond to the diverse needs of students, accommodating both different styles and rates of learning, and ensuring quality education to all through appropriate curricula, organisational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use and partnerships with communities. In other words, there should be a continuum of support services and resources to match the continuum of special needs encountered in every school.

Lack of Funds

Finance is needed to procure resources and for the day-to-day administration of the schools. The lack of financial resources will therefore seriously affect the smooth implementation of the inclusive system. Thus, the findings that there were no funds for the District Special Education Coordinator and his supporting Resource Teachers to carry out their duties, is a serious setback to the implementation of the programme. If the Resource Teachers have to use their meagre income to fund their operations, such as organising workshops for teachers and monitoring the performance of the teachers and pupils, they are likely to be constrained and the implementation of the inclusive programme will suffer severely. According to Kristensen et al (2003), adequate funding for resources such as teaching materials are essential for the successful implementation of inclusive education. The Ministry of Education (2013), Ocran (2011) and Avoke and Avoke (2004) also found that lack of adequate funding to acquire teaching and learning materials,

affects the ability of schools to meet the learning needs of children with special needs.

Lack of Qualified Teachers

The study found that almost all teachers in the general schools were not trained to handle children with special needs. This suggests inadequate preparation on the part of the Ghana Education Service, towards the implementation of the inclusive system. It could possibly explain why most of the teachers had negative attitudes towards children with special needs and why many had bucked against the inclusive system. Without the right training, it is obvious that teachers would have limited knowledge and find it difficult to handle children with special needs in the classroom. It is therefore probable that the classroom teachers were not catering to the learning needs of such children in the general classrooms. Farrell (2000) and Eleweke and Rodda (2002) found that teachers in general schools favoured educating children with special needs in special schools rather than in general schools. According to the authors, most teachers in the general schools had no training in special education and had negative perceptions about the capabilities of children with special needs. As result, they did not see the need to educate them in the general setting. This study's finding also corroborated studies by Farrell (2000), Forlin (2001), Eleweke and Rodda (2002) and Luckner (2002), which found that many teachers in general schools had difficulty handling children with special needs because they lacked training and the requisite skills in special needs education.

Attitude towards Children with Disabilities

The study findings showed that negative perceptions of families, parents, communities and teachers in schools served as obstacles to educating children with disabilities. For example, there were indications that some families hide their children with disabilities from public view. This hinders the drive to promote education for children with disabilities. In Ghana, families see the birth of children with disability as a misfortune and, as such, do not tolerate them (Kuyini, 2010). Also, the capabilities of persons with disabilities are often doubted. These beliefs create barriers to access opportunities for children with disabilities, such as attending school. The few who get the opportunity encounter even worse challenges, as their needs are often not factored into learning and teaching activities, and teachers treat them unfavorably. Studies have shown that

teachers in regular classrooms often resist attempts to have children with disabilities placed in their classrooms, and that negative attitudes of teachers, families, parents and school teachers have had negative repercussions on efforts to educate children with disabilities (Save the Child, 2002; Fefoame, 2009; Akyeampong, 2010).

CONCLUSION

The findings of the study suggest that children with disabilities in inclusive schools are not getting the necessary support to enable them to participate. This is a result of lack of appropriate resources in schools, including equipment and infrastructural facilities, and support from teachers, peers and their families. The situation seemed to be putting pressure on the few resources available. In addition, teachers were compelled to adopt teaching strategies that were unlikely to benefit these children. These findings are consistent with other research on education for children with disabilities in Ghana and other countries.

Implications for Policy-making

The study has implications for policy-making with regard to educating children with different learning needs.

A key finding of the study was lack of resources for children with special needs in the general schools. In view of this, there is need to increase the supply of resources to the schools selected for the pilot inclusive programme. In addition, there should be adequate budgetary allocations for the inclusive schools so that more funds could be made available to provide resources, modify the school infrastructure and organise workshops for Head Teachers and Teachers.

Since most of the inclusive schools were not built for children with special needs, extensive infrastructural modification is required to make the schools accessible and safe for students with different learning needs. For example, there is need to provide adequate and appropriate lighting and acoustic facilities in the classrooms, as well as technology to deliver the curriculum. The provision of ramps, concrete surfaces, wide doors, and disability-friendly sanitary facilities is also required to make the physical environment accessible to wheelchair users and the visually impaired.

Thirdly, since lack of qualified teachers was a hindrance to the implementation of the inclusive system, teachers should be offered adequate training. This training should focus on the philosophy and concept of inclusive education, and

strategies for assisting, evaluating and motivating teachers to plan together and share information. It has been observed that mutual planning among teachers yields effective outcomes. Where teachers and support staff are able to plan and work effectively together, the severity of the pupils' learning difficulty can be diminished. Moreover, more Resource Teachers should be employed to match the large numbers of children with special needs. This will reduce the burden on the existing few Resource Persons and leave them more time to provide adequate and meaningful assistance to teachers and pupils.

Lastly, since the study identified the problem of insufficient knowledge about inclusive education among teachers, the curricula of colleges of education and teacher training institutions should, as matter of urgency, be overhauled to include more components of special needs education. Trainee teachers should be given structured opportunities to experience practical sessions of inclusive education. They should observe children with special needs being taught in inclusive settings. This is one of the essential requirements to break barriers and build positive perceptions among teachers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors wish to thank the Special Education Division of Ghana Education Service for its approval and contribution to the success of the study. They express profound gratitude to Dr. Wisdom Kwadwo Mprah for his guidance throughout the study. They would also like to thank all the study participants for their time and efforts.

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