

Pre-Service Teachers' Perceptions on Procedures to Identify and Assess Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities: The Case of Tutors' of Colleges of Education in Ghana

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Abstract

The study aimed at exploring the perceptions tutors in Colleges of Education have on how the Colleges of Education Curriculum adequately prepare pre-service teachers to enable them identify and assess children with special educational needs and disabilities for effective inclusive education in Ghana. A descriptive survey design was adopted and the purposive sampling technique used to select three of the ten regions of the country. Out of the three regions, 13 Colleges of Education were purposively selected and the convenience sampling technique used to select 235 tutors. Percentages and frequencies were used as statistical tools to analyse the research data generated from questionnaire instrument. The findings revealed that 119(53.36%) of the respondents agreed that the curriculum enables pre-service teachers to identify various categories of children. Respondents who agreed that the curriculum teaches pre-service teachers how to screen were 73(32.74%), while 86(38.57%) agreed that the curriculum teaches pre-service teachers how to seek for parental consent before referral. Only 13(5.83%) agreed that the curriculum exposes pre-service teachers to the various assessment centres in Ghana where children who are suspected to have disabilities can be referred to. There were 44(19.73%) who agreed with the statement that the curriculum enables pre-service teachers to develop Individualised Education Programme for children with special educational needs and disabilities. On the basis of the findings, some recommendations were made for tutors of the Colleges of Education to clarify identification and assessment procedures to pre-service teachers when teaching. This will prepare them for inclusive education in the country.

Keywords: Identification and assessment, Pre-service teachers, Tutors, Inclusive education, Ghana

Introduction

Students with disabilities have been increasingly receiving special education services in general education classrooms (McLeskey & Henry, 1999; McLeskey, Henry & Hodges, 1999). Consequently, special and general education teachers are expected to provide services in general education classrooms that were historically provided in two different educational settings. This is now conceived as inclusive education. Inclusion is a generic term that refers to "the practice of educating students with moderate to severe disabilities alongside their chronological age peers without disabilities in general classrooms within their home neighborhood schools" (Alper, 2003, p. 15). The inclusion philosophy is based on the principle of equal opportunity for all people. Accordingly, in a democratic society, students with disabilities should not be denied access to public education based on their disabilities.

According to Allan (2008), recent debates on inclusion has placed premium on full participation by all and respect for the right of others. Allan further indicated that a society which can nurture, develop and use the skills, knowledge, talent and strengths of all her members will enlarge her collective resources and eventually likely to be more at ease with herself. Here, the emphasis is on all, which does not exclude individuals with special educational needs and disabilities.

Teacher education therefore is a crucial step in improving education and ultimately the lives and contribution to national development of individuals with special educational needs and disabilities. Educating teachers in the concept of inclusive education involves both methodological and organizational changes to create child-centered teaching and learning environments. As a result, teachers need to be given proper and appropriate training to reflect current educational practices. Indeed, it is a truism that a child mis-educated is a child lost. This re-echoes the need for Ghana to diversify the training of teachers to be abreast with current trends of educational practices.

Consequently, the training of general education teachers at pre-service and in-service levels should address the issue of education of all children with special needs adequately so that teachers are better equipped to work in an inclusive setting. Some of the issues in teacher preparation that will have to be considered include: the methodology needed for identifying children with special needs, management of the classroom and use of

adequate and appropriate teaching methodologies, skills for adapting the curriculum to cater for diversity, development of teaching-learning resources that are multi-sensory in nature and refocused the use of assessment (Jorgensen, Schuh & Nisbet, 2005).

Assessment plays very important roles in special needs education. According to Gyimah, Ntim and Deku (2010), without assessment, there will be no special education. Hence, special needs education begins with assessment and ends with assessment. The identification of the child's conditions will mark the beginning of the assessment process and continues until the child's condition does no longer exist. Without assessment, it will be very difficult for professionals to identify the child's needs and provide certain services to him or her.

For inclusion to be a reality, it requires novelty in assessment practices to foster participation of all learners. The assessment must be carried out according to set procedures and principles lay down by law. It is against the law for the assessment to discriminate against any child because of race, sex, religion or disability.

Due to the critical role assessment plays, Gyimah (2010) cautioned that assessment should not be engaged in anyhow. There are ways to carry it out in order to identify and meet special educational needs. Assessment is a process and therefore, has number of steps to follow in carrying it out. These steps are as follows:

Screening: Screening is generally considered as the first stage of the assessment process. It is the process of collecting information to determine whether a more intensive assessment is needed. Screening enables us to know whether a child is likely to be eligible for special education services. It can be seen from the foregoing that without screening, identifying those who are at-risk becomes difficult. Assessment techniques such as observation, interviews, and test can be used for screening, and can be conducted by both professional and non-professional. It must however, be noted that results of screening should not be used for decisions relating to instructional planning and implementation.

Referral: referral is the next step we take when assessment results indicate that an at-risk condition is present. It is the process of asking more qualified professional to help you know more about the nature of a problem.

Gyimah and Yidana (2008) were of the view that if teachers have to make referral, they must first attempt remediation efforts. By remediation efforts, it explains the initial steps the teacher takes to help a child to overcome a suspected difficulty. In referral stage, teachers must collaborate with parents for the necessary referral. They must be sought for parental consent and the reason for the referral must be explained in detail to parents before referral is done.

Determining eligibility: in determining eligibility we determine whether a student qualifies for special education or whether the child has a school performance problem related to a disability. A student's intellectual, academic, physical, and sensory, health and behavioural are analyzed to establish the severity of disability or ability as in the case of gifted and talented results obtained from referral go a long way to aid determination of eligibility. This stage is very important as vital decisions such as when to place the child and the type of programme the child has to undergo will have to be decided based on eligibility. It can clearly be seen that the determination of eligibility is not an individual affair. It involves various professionals as well as parents and this makes special education multidisciplinary.

Individualized Education Programme (IEP): the next step in assessment in special education involves drawing up an Individualized Education Programme for the child. The Individualized Education Programme (IEP) is a writing document that provides information on the child's strengths and weakness and what measures to help the child. Data from educational assessment is used to draw the IEP. The goal stated in the IEP is based on the needs of the child. The IEP is prepared by a team of experts. Parents also form part of this team. There are some important areas the IEP must cover and these include current level of the child's performance, long term and short term goals, individual responsibility, time to begin and end the programme and the time for evaluation of the programme.

Placement: educational placement is critical in the assessment process. It involves deciding where to place the child for the most appropriate educational service. The current philosophy being circulated is inclusive education (UNESCO, 1994). This advocate, the school should adopt their environment to suit the needs of the child and as much as possible segregation which leads to exclusion must be abolished. The inclusive drive is aimed at making schools conducive for all. Assessment results are used to make placement decisions and this decision will have to be guided by where one will place the student such that he or she will be successful and not feel constrained.

Monitoring Progress: there is the need to monitor the progress the child is making on the programme drawn for him or her. Monitoring is done on daily basis by gathering information about the progress the student is making as far as the short term goals stated in the IEP are concerned. This will provide information as to how effective the instructional strategies are and, it gives opportunity to modify or change instructional techniques used in teaching the child.

Programme Evaluation: The final step in the assessment process is programme evaluation. Individual Education Programme must be evaluated. In evaluation, all the members of the multidisciplinary team including parents examine the results of the programme and decide whether to continue the programme, modify the

programme or to discontinue the programme.

To take any of these decisions, information on the student's performance during the programme is used. The process involved in assessment in special education indicate that assessment cannot take place in a vacuum, it goes through some processes and this process must be observed during assessment of children with special educational needs and disabilities. Assessment must be part of a cycle. The assessment must inform planning, the plan must then be implemented, the implementation must then be reviewed, which may lead to further assessment (Barnados, 2006).

Education being a right for everybody should not be considered as a privilege for those who are culturally, physically and intellectually advantaged. In this wise those who are vulnerable like individuals with special educational needs and disabilities also have the right to education. The training of teachers should therefore be diversified to embrace inclusive-orientation programme. This calls for training of teachers who are armed with knowledge, skills to identify and assess children with special needs in the regular classroom.

Although, teachers in the general education classrooms have positive attitudes towards including students with disabilities in the regular school classrooms, it appears they have limited knowledge of identification and assessment practices in special education. This is because most children with special educational needs and disabilities are unable to succeed in the regular classroom as results of general education teachers not being able to meet their unique needs. In Ghana, most teachers are unable to identify the learning needs of their students in the inclusive classroom.

Many general education classroom teachers in Ghana appear not to have the professional skills to identify and assess children with special educational needs and disabilities in regular classroom. Information gathered from resource teachers and the researchers' personal experiences reveal that teachers in the general classroom have difficulties in identifying and assessing special educational needs and disabilities. Without adequate information on identification and assessment procedures, the child at-risk to developmental disabilities or one with special educational needs risk marginalization or being segregated with its adverse effects (Ainscow & Kaplan, 2006; Corbett, 2001; Mittler, 2000).

The research questions that guided the study was:

What perceptions do tutors have about the extent to which the Curriculum of the Colleges of Education enable pre-service teachers to identify and assess children with special educational needs and disabilities in Ghana?

Methods

Participants and data collection

The data were collected from 235 tutors in thirteen (13) Colleges of Education in three out of the ten regions in Ghana. A multi stage sampling technique was employed. These included the use of a simple random (lottery method), quota, purposive sampling and convenient sampling techniques. Three regions were selected through the lottery method out of the ten in Ghana, hence giving the researcher Central, Brong Ahafo and Ashanti regions for the study.

This technique was employed to give equal chance to all the ten regions in Ghana. Purposive sampling was then used to select all the thirteen Colleges of Education in the selected regions. The researcher used all the thirteen colleges of Education in the selected regions per the researcher's judgment of how useful they would be for the study.

After this stage, quota technique was also employed to assign figures to numbers of respondents from the selected colleges in the regions. In selecting the actual respondents for the study, the researcher did so using convenient sampling technique. This technique was used resulting from the respondents' willingness to be part of the study. This sampling method was considered as the most appropriate because it was difficult to convince tutors to respond to the questionnaires because of their busy schedule. Therefore, the researcher visited the colleges and after introducing himself and the purpose of the study to the tutors, he pleaded for their voluntary participation of the study.

Results

On how the curriculum offered in Colleges of Education in Ghana enables pre-service teachers to identify and assess children with special educational needs and disabilities, the statistics in Table 1 show the frequency distributions of respondents' responses to the question.

Table 1: Perception of Tutors on how the Curriculum Enables Pre-Service Teachers Identify and Assess Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

SN	Items	SA		A		D		SD		Total	Mean	SD
		f	%	F	%	f	%	f	%			
1	It enables pre-service teachers to identify the various categories of children with special educational needs and disabilities in inclusive classroom.	47	21.08	119	53.36	39	17.49	18	8.07	100	3.2094	.40750
2	It exposes pre-service teachers to the various characteristics exhibited by children with special educational needs and disabilities.	82	36.77	99	44.39	31	13.90	11	4.93	100	3.4313	.52151
3	It teaches pre-service teachers how to identify the educational needs of children with special educational needs and disabilities.	53	23.77	92	41.26	23	10.31	55	24.66	100	3.1583	.33448
4	It teaches pre-service teachers how to select appropriate tool / instrument for assessment of children with special educational needs and disabilities.	39	17.49	75	33.63	71	31.84	38	17.04	100	2.7218	.85077
5	It teaches pre-service teachers how to screen a large class of students to identify those who are suspected to have disabilities.	43	19.28	73	32.74	43	19.28	64	28.70	100	2.7488	.34618
6	It teaches pre-service teachers how to refer children who are suspected to have disabilities for further assessment and diagnoses.	41	18.39	60	26.91	65	29.15	57	25.56	100	2.6917	.40012
7	It teaches pre-service teachers how to seek for parental consent before they refer a child for further assessment.	39	17.49	86	38.57	63	28.25	35	15.70	100	2.9844	.33139
8	It exposes pre-service teachers to the various assessment centres in Ghana where children who are suspected to have disabilities can be referred to.	9	4.04	13	5.83	161	72.20	40	17.94	100	2.6513	.36335
9	It teaches pre-service teachers how to engage other professionals from the field of medicine, education, psychology and social services etc to form multi-disciplinary team for assessment.	36	16.14	74	33.18	71	31.84	42	18.83	100	2.6985	.42553
10	It enables pre-service teachers to develop Individualized Education Programme (IEP) for children with special educational needs and disabilities.	39	17.49	44	19.73	54	24.22	86	38.57	100	2.6573	.41833
11	It teaches pre-service teachers the various placement options in special education and where to place a child with disabilities using assessment results.	51	22.87	67	30.04	83	37.22	22	9.87	100	2.7875	.86365
12	It teaches pre-service teachers how to monitor and evaluate Individualized Education Plan (IEP) to make a decision.	65	29.15	31	13.90	74	33.18	53	23.77	100	2.6750	.28606
Average											2.8679	0.46241

Source: Field data: December 2014

From the Table, the mean for all the respondents' on the perception of tutors on how the curriculum offered in Colleges of Education in Ghana enables pre-service teachers to identify and assess children with special educational needs and disabilities was 2.87. This lies in the score band of 2.6 – 3.5 which implies that the respondents had a good perception on how the curriculum offered in Colleges of Education in Ghana enables pre-service teachers to identify and assess children with special educational needs and disabilities.

The findings as indicated in the Table also reveal that 47(21.08%) of the respondents strongly agreed and 119(53.36%) agreed with the statements that, the curriculum enables pre-service teachers to identify the various categories of children with special educational needs and disabilities in inclusive classroom, whiles, 39(17.49%) disagreed and 18(8.07%) strongly disagreed with the statement. Also, the findings shown in the Table revealed that 82(36.77%) tutors strongly agreed and 99(44.39%) agreed with the statement that, the curriculum exposes pre-service teachers to the various characteristics exhibited by children with special educational needs and disabilities while 31(13.90%) of the respondents disagreed and 11(4.93%) strongly disagreed with the statement. It can also be seen from the Table that 53(23.77%) of the respondents strongly agreed and 92(41.26%) agreed with the statement that, the curriculum teaches pre-service teachers how to identify the educational needs of children with special educational needs and disabilities whiles 23(10.31%) of the respondents disagreed and 55(24.66%) strongly disagreed with the statement.

The Table further indicated that 39(17.49%) of the respondents strongly agreed and 75(33.63) agreed to the statement that, the curriculum teaches pre-service teachers how to select appropriate tool or instrument for assessment of children with special educational needs and disabilities while 71(31.84%) of the respondents disagreed and 38(17.04%) strongly disagreed with the statement. This means that majority (M = 2.7488, SD = .34618) of the respondents agreed to the statement.

Again, the findings as shown in the Table indicates that 43(19.28%) of the tutors strongly agreed and 73(32.74%) agreed with the statement that, the curriculum teaches pre-service teachers how to screen a large class of students to identify those who are suspected to have disabilities while 43(19.28%) disagreed and 64(28.70%) strongly disagreed. Additionally, the findings on the Table indicated that 41(18.39%) of the respondents strongly agreed and 60(26.91%) agreed with the statement that, the curriculum teaches pre-service

teachers how to refer children who are suspected to have disabilities for further assessment and diagnoses while 65(29.15%) disagreed and 57(25.56%) strongly disagreed with the statement. This indicates that majority ($M = 2.6917$, $SD = 40012$) of the respondents disagreed with the statement.

We can also see from the Table that 39(17.49%) of the respondents strongly agreed and 86(38.57%) agreed with the statements that, the curriculum teaches pre-service teachers how to seek for parental consent before they refer a child for further assessment, while 63(28.25%) of the respondents disagreed and 35(15.70%) strongly disagreed with the statements. Additionally, the Table indicates that 36(16.14%) of the tutors strongly agreed and 74(33.18%) disagreed with the statement that, the curriculum teaches pre-service teachers how to engage other professionals from the field of medicine, education, psychology and social services etc to form multi-disciplinary team for assessment, but 71(31.84%) of them disagreed and 42(18.83%) strongly disagreed with the statement.

Considering the statement that the curriculum exposes pre-service teachers to the various assessment centres in Ghana where children who are suspected to have disabilities can be referred to, nine (4.04%) of the respondents strongly agreed and 13(5.83%) agreed, while 161(72.20%) disagreed and 40(17.94%) strongly disagreed to the statement.

Also, 39(17.49%) of the tutors strongly agreed and 44(19.73%) agreed with the statement that, the curriculum enables pre-service teachers to develop Individualised Education Programme (IEP) for children with special educational needs and disabilities while 54(24.22%) disagreed and 86(38.57%) strongly disagreed. From the findings, it is apparent that majority ($M = 2.6573$, $SD = 41833$) of the tutors disagreed that the curriculum equips pre-service teachers with the knowledge in designing Individualised Education Programme (IEP) for persons with special educational needs and disabilities.

Discussion

The current finding of the study is consistent with the finding of Abasi (2011) who found in the Dar-el-Salam among secondary school teachers that they had a good perception on the national curriculum being able to assist teachers to identify children with special educational needs and disabilities. He indicated that out of the 179 respondents included in his study 82.36% of them held this perception.

Another study that confirms the finding of the current study is a study by Alanso (2012). She reported in Daranka, Gambia that a greater percentage of a cross sections ($M=3.614$, $SD= 0.9162$) of special educators indicated that the curriculum was a major indicator that had helped them bring to light children with special educational needs and disabilities. She explained further that the curriculum on which the training of teachers hangs had provided spectacles for teachers in citing children with special educational needs.

A study by Mereruko and Saeed (2012) was found to be incongruous to the current study. In a cross cultural study in Egypt and Iran, the two authors found that the curriculum available for pre-service teacher was not enough in equipping them in identifying children with special educational needs. They stated further that inclusive education in Egypt and Iran was teething and hence more advocacy and training need to go on.

We are of the opinion that identification of children with special educational needs and disabilities is very crucial because before a teacher can provide any special services to a child who has special educational needs and disability in an inclusive classroom, the teacher must first identify the child and know the type of support the child requires to succeed in the inclusive classroom. According to Kapp (1994), the pre-service teacher should be aware of the identification procedures that may be employed, such as screening, and criterion referenced tests. Knowledge in this area will assist the pre-service teacher to easily identify those children with hidden disabilities in the classroom. That is if teachers are not capable of identifying children with special educational needs in their classroom, they will not be in the position to offer such children any appropriate assistance to enable them overcome their problems and participate in learning activities effectively. In support of this, Gyimah, Ntim and Deku (2010) asserted that, early identification and intervention will ensure that services are provided to such children who may have special educational needs and their families for the purpose of lessening the effects of the condition.

However, the researchers are of the view that more could be done to improve the knowledge of pre-service teachers on selection of assessment tool or instrument for assessment because assessment plays a vital role in provision of special education service and for that matter when a child is misdiagnosed as a result of wrong use of assessment tools the right services will not be provided to that child. According to Gyimah (2010), if the way and manner our abilities, attitudes and behaviours are assessed are faulty, it will yield results that do not reflect the abilities, attitudes and behaviors of the one assessed and therefore affect the decision we make in terms of the services we give to them. It is only by carrying out assessment properly and in a meticulous manner that we can identify the real needs of who we assess and make well informed decisions about the provision of special education services, and the pre-service teacher can do this only when he or she is equipped with the necessary information to function effectively.

From the statistic, it may mean that the curriculum does not adequately equip the pre-service teachers with the knowledge on how to refer a child suspected of having disabilities in the classroom for further

assessment and diagnoses and therefore would not be able to do appropriate referrals in the inclusive classroom. Hence, measures should be put in place to ensure that pre-service teachers are trained on how to do referral in an inclusive classroom so that they can refer children suspected to have special educational needs and disabilities for more professional assistance. The findings indicates that majority of the tutors agreed to the statement that the curriculum teaches pre-service teachers the importance of parental consent in referral which will therefore enable the pre-service teachers inform parents of any child suspected to have disabilities in the classroom. Gyimah and Yiadana (2008) supported this assertion by saying that, teachers must collaborate with parents should the need arise to be referred. They further suggested that the reason for the referral must be explained to parents and make sure they have given their consent before referral is made. This finding indicates that the curriculum has not made provision to expose pre-service teachers to the various assessment centres we have in Ghana where children who are at-risk of having disabilities can be referred to for further assessment and diagnose. This means that teachers may not be able to do appropriate referral services in the inclusive classroom since they do not know the various assessment centres in Ghana.

It was also revealed that majority of the tutors do not agree that the curriculum offered in the Colleges of Education in Ghana teaches pre-service teachers how to form multi-disciplinary team for assessment. This means that teachers may not be able to bring other professionals on board to provide comprehensive assessment for children with special educational needs in the inclusive classroom since they are not taught how to collaborate with other professionals and even the professional whose services will be needed at a particular point in time. This will therefore affect the effective implementation of inclusive education in Ghana because children with special educational needs and disabilities have diverse learning needs and therefore a common curriculum cannot be used for all children in the inclusive class. Hence, teachers need to be trained on how to bring other professionals on board to design specific programmes that will cater for the unique needs of every child in the inclusive classroom.

On the statement that, the curriculum teaches pre-service teachers the various placement options in special education and where to place a child with disabilities using assessment results, higher percentage of the respondents accepted the assertion that the curriculum of the Colleges of Education in Ghana exposes pre-service teachers to various placement options in special education where children with special educational needs can be placed depending on the assessment report of that particular child. After the assessment of a child with special educational needs and disability, the next important thing is the placement of the child. That is where the child should be placed to receive instructions. It is therefore expedient that teachers are exposed to these placement options to enable them recommend proper placements for children with special educational needs and disabilities. However, it was evident that teachers are not taught how to monitor and evaluate the progress made by the child after he or she has been placed to receive instructions. There is the need for the teacher to monitor and evaluate to find out how the child responds to the programme designed for him or her. Gyimah (2010) supported this by stating that, it is not enough to place a child in an educational setting and leave him or her there. There is the need to monitor and evaluate to ascertain the progress made by the child.

Statistic in Table 1 again revealed that majority of the respondents agreed that the curriculum offered in the Colleges of Education in Ghana enables pre-service teachers to identify and assess children with special educational needs and disabilities in an inclusive classroom. That is, the findings revealed that the curriculum prepares teachers to be able to identify and assess children with special educational needs and disabilities in the inclusive class. However, much can be done to improve pre-service teacher's knowledge on identification and assessment in special education because assessment plays a very vital role in special education services. It marks the beginning of provision of any special services to any child in educational settings. Assessment enables caregivers to identify the needs of persons with special educational needs and disabilities. According to Gyimah (2010), without assessment, there will be no special education. Special education begins with assessment and ends with assessment. The identification of the child's conditions will mark the beginning of the assessment process and continues until the child's condition does no longer exist. Assessment is very crucial in special education services and therefore there is the need for every teacher to know how to identify and assess children with special educational needs and disabilities to facilitate effective implementation of inclusive education ideology in Ghana.

Implications and recommendations

It is prudent for tutors of the Colleges of Education in Ghana to clearly explain procedures that enable pre-service tutors to identify and assess children with special educational needs and disabilities to prepare them adequately for effective inclusive education. When teachers have adequate knowledge in assessment procedures, they will be able to ensure novelty in assessment practices to foster participation of all learners in the inclusive classroom.

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