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Exploring Pedagogical Skills in Inclusive Classrooms in Sierra Leone

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Abstract

Purpose: The study explored teachers' pedagogical skills in inclusive secondary classrooms in Sierra Leone. It was conducted against the backdrop that a gap exists regarding teachers' competence in this area. There is a dearth in research regarding teaching strategies especially for learners with special educational needs in the regular education schools. Accordingly, the main objectives of the study were to determine the extent different teaching methods impacted learning of students with special needs; to determine whether teachers have the adequate pedagogical skills to meet the learning needs of this cohort.

Methodology: The study was a purely qualitative descriptive survey design and the research tool was an interview guide.

Findings: Findings revealed that successful inclusive education requires teachers to have the requisite pedagogical competencies to teach in an inclusive educational environment.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: Based on the findings derived, it is recommended that regular education teachers adopt models of teaching that aligns with the diversity needs of an inclusive classroom. In addition, teacher training institutions integrate inclusive education as a core component in all teacher training programs.

Keywords: Pedagogical Skills, Mainstream Inclusive Classroom, Special Education Needs

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INTRODUCTION

The study examined teachers' pedagogical skills required to meet the learning needs of learners with disabilities in inclusive secondary schools. These schools educate children with disabilities in general education classes alongside their non-disabled counterparts (Hallahan & Kauffman, 2011). This raises the issue of Inclusive Education that implies equal opportunities for all students and children to access education in mainstream schools without any form of discrimination. It goes without saying that teachers contribute a lot to the education of children through instructional strategies or teaching methods. Thus, the success of inclusive education depends on their services and support in accommodating all students including those with disability and special educational needs in the regular classroom (Leifler, 2020). Against this backdrop, teachers need to have pedagogical skills and appropriate competencies to teach efficiently and effectively.

Inclusive education in Sierra Leone is aligned with the national vision of achieving equal access to quality education for the young and children regardless of differences in educational needs and also to help them become productive and valued member of society (MBSSE, 2021). As a result, the government has committed to meet international development targets in education through facilitating access to education for all children in mainstream schools especially those with disabilities and those classified as having special educational needs. Therefore, teachers are required to understand, accept and implement inclusive education policies

The inclusive education policy seeks to promote the development of potential and capabilities of children with disabilities. In addition, it seeks to build the capacity system by building human resources, develop resource provisions and support services, through reinforcing the existing structures within the education system (MBSSE, 2021). However, it should be noted that the human and other resource potential to promote an inclusive educational environment are under-resourced. Lamin (2020) argued that despite the innovative and pro-vulnerable policy initiatives, challenges such as teachers competence in teaching methods still exist in mainstream inclusive classrooms that need to be addressed.

Research Problem

In spite of various global documents and national policy initiatives such as the Convention on the Rights Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the Salamanca Statement of 1994 and the 2011 and recently revised 2022 Persons with Disabilities Act (PDA) of Sierra Leone, persons with disabilities still continue to face challenges in accessing education especially children (Leifler, 2020; McKay, 2016; Yadav et al., 2015). This is due partly to deficiency in pedagogy skills especially those related to teaching methods. Against this backdrop, the government has initiated the National Policy on Radical Inclusion in line with the Medium -Term National Development Plan to enhance the quality of education and learning outcomes for all Sierra Leonean children by assessing teachers' pedagogical skills and competencies including implementation of inclusion.

Research Questions

The study addressed the following questions:

1. To what extent does teachers' pedagogical skills impact the education of learners with special education needs in mainstream secondary classrooms in Sierra Leone?

2. Do teachers have the adequate pedagogical skills to meet the education needs of learners with special education needs in mainstream secondary classrooms in Sierra Leone?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Inclusive Education

Duke et al. (2016) asserted that the regular classroom can provide optimal quality education for children with disabilities and teachers are required to possess the requisite skills, attitude and values to meet the learning needs of all children in their classrooms (Armstrong et al., 2019). Thus, teachers are to be adept regarding knowledge relating to the education of learners with special education needs.

Inclusive education is a reform that involves transforming schools and other centers of learning to cater to all students, including students with physical disabilities, learning difficulties and special educational needs (Ainscow et al., 2019). It is central to achieving high-quality education for all children thereby creating more inclusive societies that promote social inclusion, access to education resources and quality education (Armstrong et al., 2019). It reflects teaching all students (with and without disability) together in a regular school-class setting, where they all get instruction that corresponds to their capacity and interests without discrimination (Dreyer, 2017).

In line with Armstrong, Warnock (2008) reaffirmed that inclusive education means that children with special educational needs have a right to education and are to be accorded access to mainstream schools of their choice. A critical element related to learners with special educational needs is inclusive pedagogy. Duke et al. (2016) described it as an approach or procedure to teaching and learning that enjoins teachers to respond to individual differences between learners but avoids the marginalization or discrimination that could occur when some students are treated differently. The authors are of the view that the principle of inclusion involves educators being prepared to meet students' needs. For Duke's assertion to become reality, Berhanu (2011) echoed that some central conditions are required such as support for students, learner's evaluation on an equal basis, effective school principal, and a trained staff.

Göransson and Nilholm (2014), argued that there are contrary views regarding Inclusive Education. According to the authors, inclusion is not only about placing children with disabilities in mainstream classrooms but also a process that consider factors such as vision, placement, adapted curriculum, adapted assessment, adapted teaching, acceptance, access, support, resources, and leadership (Armstrong et al.; 2019). Opponents maintained that it reinforces exclusion of some groups of people from economic and social opportunities and places emphasis only on issues relating to children with disabilities and not on those with other learning needs (Hodkinson, 2015).

Teacher Pedagogical Knowledge/Skills required in Inclusive Classrooms

The regular education classroom could provide optimal quality education for children with special educational needs wherein regular education teachers have the requisite skills, knowledge, attitudes and values needed to ensure learning. Over the years, the issue of competence in pedagogy relating to special needs education had been considered a prerequisite in education, in other words, having special knowledge alongside and the ability to apply or implement it

(Danielson, 2007). Thus, it can be inferred that teacher competency in relation to pedagogy, is essential for successful implementation of Inclusive Education (Cate et al., 2018).

The various challenges related to implementing inclusive education requires determining who should be in-charge of education and teaching in inclusive schools (Leifler, 2020). Cate et al. (2018) averred that the teachers are the most significant factor regarding how learners acquire knowledge and their competence is essential in accommodating learners with disabilities. In addition, the authors are of the view that successful implementation of inclusive practice largely depends on teachers. Correspondingly, Mitchell (2020), concorded that teachers' being the engine of the education vehicle, constitute the core of good quality education and intellectual growth are required to have a high level of pedagogical skills.

McKay (2016) argued that the success of inclusive education depends on schools having the appropriate human resources which includes integration of teachers with the requisite pedagogical training in special needs education. The author also posited that it is crucial to provide ongoing support and professional development for regular education teachers working in classrooms with a diverse group of students. To achieve it, the Canadian Hearing Society advocated training in sign language for teachers working with students with hearing impairment (Canadian Hearing Society, 2017).

Miller (2019) advanced the need for pedagogical trainings in regular schools to enhance the implementation of inclusive pedagogy. The author maintained that instituting a vibrant pre-service and in-service teacher training program by stake holders and duty bearers is a precondition for its success (Zwane & Malale, 2018). The authors are line with Miller's view that providing pre-service training opportunities are essential to develop skills and bolster confidence. In addition, it requires more information, seminars, and workshops relating to the education of children with special needs (Miller, 2019). As a result, the government has committed to enhance the quality of education and learning outcomes for all learners (MEST, 2018) through regular teacher assessment and trainings.

METHODOLOGY

The research employed a qualitative descriptive survey design with a research population consisting of teachers in inclusive schools randomly selected from the case schools. Thus, the sample was made up of 10 teachers of learners with disabilities (i.e., 5 teachers per school). The research tool was an interview guide which covered demographic and competency-related items. Data sources were both primary and secondary. Primary data collection was done through interviews and secondary sources comprised a wide range of desk review of pertinent literature. Ethical considerations were an integral part of the study. Informed consent was sought from respondents and participation was voluntary. Respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Identities of participants were not disclosed.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Pedagogical Knowledge

Application of Multiple Teaching Strategies

Every teacher agreed that it requires pedagogical knowledge especial teaching strategies to better prepare them to meet the learning needs of students with special needs. It is clear that applying different teaching methods could provide accommodation for varied students' instructional needs. Other methods teaching methods reported by a participant: *Well, ... I am trying to use different teaching methods, that can make them understand. I make my lesson into storytelling; I use learner-centered method where learners are trying to give their points, their opinions about the topic. They are more involved in the lesson; I am like a facilitator since I let them do things, I help them understand the lesson's main ideas. Finally, I can also use games, role-playing.*

Another echoed "*I try to use field visits when learners are tired. And it helps because students get an opportunity to touch, see and understand, participate in the activity. For example, when I teach physical and health education, I plan a field visit to the stadium. For history lessons where we study the topic of [Sierra Leone] colonial history, we make the trip to visit the museum, parliament etc., and we ask for some information, then we continue our lessons in the classroom. Through that method, they learn*".

Another asserted: "*I use different teaching methods and techniques in my classroom. I feel comfortable changing methods, when I am teaching. I give extra time to provide help where it is needed, or I can revise the main terms. I use extra time to explain to students with disabilities. I give formative assessment to get feedback and understanding of the previous lesson. I also give them group work.*"

One participant with a contrary view commented that it is challenging to do group work activities especially for those with hearing impairment. According to the participant, group work is inappropriate "*I can use group work, but hearing impaired could not discuss the exercises or share their ideas with others. Some students could not discuss with deaf students*".

It goes without saying that what matters in an inclusive educational environment is for the teacher to ensure that the educational needs of every learner are met. Against this backdrop, some seek to apply different teaching methods that engage all learners, although challenges arise during cooperative learning activities.

Findings also revealed that through pedagogical knowledge, teachers can develop instructional goals that ensure learning outcomes based on the levels of the students and what the curriculum requires. One respondent quoted:

First of all, I develop teaching goal which must be good, this goal has five elements which includes: (a) the process I will use to deliver the content, b) audience/target of the instructional goals c) the behavior d) the content and e) the degree of performance. As part of my set of instructions I provide large prints for those with low vision to help them achieve my set goals at a level similar to those without disability.

In addition, another participant responded:

When I am planning my lessons, I always try to cater for their individual differences. I have them in mind before planning the way I to teach. Setting indicators for each difference means that I look at every side and know how to help everyone and set the standards of their achievement depending on their abilities.

On the contrary, one reported “*when I plan a lesson is for all students. Not one is intended to be left out. I try to make my lesson inclusive for all students not just for one group. Based on the students' understanding in the previous lesson, I plan my instructional goal for the next lesson.*”

Discussion

The study explored teachers’ pedagogical skills especially teaching methods for students with special educational needs in inclusive classrooms. Findings revealed that teachers are aware of their competencies in meeting the education needs of this cohort. There is awareness on their part that they need to develop more instructional skills to meet the learning needs of students with disabilities/special educational needs alongside their non –disabled counterparts. In general, there are some competencies in relation to teaching methods, setting instructional goals and outcomes. However, these competencies are rated primarily at an average (basic) level. The study indicated further that teachers’ fall short in delivering instruction due to the exclusion of learners with visual and leaning impairment.

To ensure learning outcomes for students with disabilities would require teachers to have a deeper and more flexible understanding of inclusive education and teaching in general (Charlotte et al., 2021). Studies have indicated that suitable adaptation of instruction for them is dependent on teachers’ pedagogical competencies and an adapted learning environment (Cate et al., 2018). Khoaane (2012) is of the view that teachers who lack pedagogical training in special needs education are unable to meet their learning needs. Based on the foregoing discourse, it can be deduced that implementing inclusive education requires teachers to have the requisite pedagogical skills to address different learning needs.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

From the foregoing discourse, it is crystal clear that successful inclusive education delivery depends on teachers’ pedagogical skills. Therefore, successful implementation of inclusive education requires some modification and adaptations to teaching. Against this backdrop, teachers in inclusive schools are required to have the requisite pedagogical competencies to ensure the learning needs of students with special needs in an inclusive educational environment. Thus, it is clear from the findings that a gap exists regarding teachers’ pedagogical skills especially teaching methods.

Recommendations

Based on the findings derived, the following recommendations to address teachers pedagogical deficiencies in inclusive classrooms are proffered:

- Regular education teachers to adopt models of teaching that aligns with the diversity needs of an inclusive classroom giving the divergence in the area of disabilities. Disability is not monolithic, as a result, it requires different approaches that involves modification and adaptation of the teaching and learning process to ensure that everyone is 'included'.
- Transform technical institutions to technical universities with a major focus on teacher training that provides an opportunity to alter the teacher training curriculum to integrate inclusive education practices as a core component or module in all teacher training programs.
- In conclusion, funds invested to promote and implement inclusive education. Institute active monitoring and evaluation mechanism geared towards achieving the set goals of inclusion in line with both domestic and international targets and milestones.

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