

Mentee Teachers' Attitudes towards Learners with Special Needs at Oda Wesley Methodist Primary A and B in the Eastern Region, Ghana

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Abstract: The purpose of the study was to investigate mentee teachers' attitudes towards pupils with special needs at Oda Wesley Methodist primary A and B. The case study design was employed for the study. The sample size was 10 mentee teachers which comprised of 4 females and 6 males. Interviews and observation guide were used to collect data. The purposive sampling technique was used to select the sample size. Data from interviews and observation were analyzed thematically. Results from the study revealed that 80% of mentee teachers showed positive attitudes while 20% showed negative attitudes towards learners with special needs in terms of how they perceive their academic success. Also, the mentee teachers used small group discussion, nature walk and individual attention as major instructional methods of teaching the learners. It was recommended that the resource teacher in the school should support the mentee teachers as well as the regular teachers in the classroom and also organized regular in-service training on the methods of teaching learners in an inclusive setting.

Keywords: Mentee teachers, inclusive setting, positive attitude, negative attitude, resource teacher.

1. INTRODUCTION

The success or failure of inclusion programs depends on teaching strategies and attitudes. (Greene, 2017). Teachers attitudes are very crucial when it comes to education of learners with disabilities or special educational needs in the regular schools. Scholars have argued that acceptance to include learners with special needs in a general class depends on teachers' attitude towards special need students (Fakolade, Adeniyi and Tella, 2009; Florian, 2012; Dukmak, 2013) Binder and Niederle (2007) defined attitude as one's positive or negative judgment about a concrete subject. This shows that attitude towards learners with special needs among teachers could be described as learners' positive or negative predisposition or perception. Some teachers have expressed concern about their ability to handle children with special needs, while others exhibited negative attitudes towards students with disabilities in some inclusive classrooms. 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. Forlin (2001), cites teachers reported high levels of stress because they are held accountable for the educational outcomes of students with disabilities. The teachers also worried that spending more time addressing the needs of students with disabilities would result in them having less time to focus on students without disabilities. "The highest levels of stress appear to come from teacher 's personal commitment to maintaining effective teaching for all students in their classes" (Forlin, 2001 p. 242). Teachers expressed positive attitude towards inclusion of learners' disabilities Hasting and Oarford (2003) revealed that, student teachers possessed more negative attitudes towards students with behaviour and/or emotional problems than towards students with cognitive disabilities.

Another study by Greene (2017) on teachers' attitudes toward inclusive classrooms. The results indicated that teachers had positive attitudes toward inclusionary teaching practices; however, the teachers also conveyed negative attitudes toward the philosophical aspects of inclusionary teaching practices, and these attitudes differed significantly per level of education and teacher training. The results of this study were used to develop a teacher training curriculum to improve co-

teaching strategies, classroom management tips, emergency procedures, and information about learning disabilities. This study contributes toward positive social change as these attitudes impact the teaching practices and student learning.

Hayford (1999) in a study conducted on undergraduate teachers' attitudes towards inclusion of learners with special needs found that, many undergraduate teachers would be willing to receive and maintain special children in their classes. However, the study further revealed that, in spite of their willingness to teach special needs children in their classrooms, they thought they were professionally incompetent to handle children with special needs in regular classes. The success of inclusion depends on the knowledge, instructional skills, strategies, management and in particular on the attitudes and beliefs of general education teachers toward the integration of students with disabilities in general education classrooms (Cook, 2001; Friend & Bursick, 2006; Tanyi, 2016; Thaver & Lim, 2014).

Recent research has identified some instructional strategies to help teachers manage student diversity and uniqueness in inclusive classrooms. These strategies include differentiated instruction, universal design for learning, and response to intervention. This successful inclusive teaching method involves teachers' differentiation of content, process, product, learning environment, and the use of ongoing assessment and flexible grouping of students to meet their individual needs (Tomlinson, 2000). Chapman (2017) revealed that, teaching academic subjects in an outdoor setting does have a positive effect on student engagement, attention, and behavior. Also, Unin and Bearing (2015). Stated that brainstorming contributes to the increase in students' motivation, confidence, and participation as reflected by the positive students' behaviour during classroom observations.

The purpose of the study was to investigate mentee teachers' attitudes towards pupils with special needs at Oda Wesley primary A and B.

Research questions

The following research questions were raised to guide the study.

1. How do mentee teachers perceive learners with special needs at Oda Wesley primary A and B?
2. What instructional strategies do mentee teachers used to teach learners with special needs in the classrooms.

2. METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study employed case study research design to investigate the attitudes of mentees teachers towards learners with special needs at Oda Wesley Methodist primary A and B. The population of the study involved all the 320 learners including the 14 mentee teachers. The learners comprise of 37 special needs learners and 306 "normal" learners. 10 out of the 14 mentee teachers were purposively sampled for the study. This consist of 4 females and 6 males, the 10 mentees were purposively sampled based on the willingness to participate in the study.

Semi structured interview and structured observation were employed to elicit data from the participants for the study. O'Leary (2005), indicated that semi-structured interviews are neither fully fixed nor fully free and are perhaps best seen as flexible in gathering qualitative data. The researchers used semi-structured interview approach because it offers interviewee the opportunity to express their views, feelings and experiences freely and the interviewer the freedom to divert the questions in the schedule to seek clarifications (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). A structured observation according to Bryman (2005), entails the direct observation of individuals in field settings and the recording and encoding of observations according to a previously formulated schedule. The researcher developed an observation checklist as a guide in recording relevant facts, actions and behaviours of participants concerning the research problem

Procedure for Data collection

Informed consent was obtained from the authorities of the school prior to the commencement of the study. This was facilitated by an introductory letter formally submitted to the head teacher of the school indicating the purpose of the study. A familiarization visit was done to the school to book appointments with school authorities and teachers. The appointments were made such that it was possible to meet teachers that were involved in the study. In addition to the letter, the researcher explained the purpose of the study to the participants and informed them that the finding of the study was purely an academic work. And further explain why their school was chosen and detailed how much time would be spent at the school. They were duly informed that their participation was voluntary and were free to abstain or even withdraw from the study, if they felt so.

The interview was conducted within the school premises using a semi-structured interview guide. The main procedure for conducting the interviews was through the use of tape recorders and each interview lasted between 7 to 10 minutes. With this, the teachers were assured the necessary confidentiality throughout and permissions were sought to use a tape-recorder.

In the case of the observation component, the researchers observed the mentees teachers of each class during their lessons delivery and their interactions with the pupils during break time. An observation checklist was used to collect the data. It contained items organized in a Likert scale with “positive attitude”, “Negative attitude” and “Not certain” “think-pair-share” “individual attention” “group work” “discussion” “others”. The items included how mentees teachers perceived learners with special needs and the strategies used to manage these learners in the classroom.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the semi-structured interview data was guided by key themes that emerged from the data collected. The process started with transcribing all interview data and highlighting words, sentences, and thoughts that served as units for more detailed coding. The analysis primarily involved an interactive process of reading, reflecting, and coding the transcripts, and then drawing out major themes and patterns of views from it. With the observation component, the researchers met to analyze the data together. An inter-observer agreement was determined by calculating the percentage of agreement between the researchers'. The researchers compared their findings to determine whether the observation instrument used generated an accurate picture of mentees teachers' attitudes towards learners with special needs in Oda Wesley primary A and B

Ethical considerations

It is unethical to enter into any organization or social group to collect data without permission from the “gate keepers” of the organization (Creswell, 2005). The study focused on ethical issues which included the following: access, informed consent, privacy, confidentiality and anonymity. Each of these was explained in detailed to respondents before starting. The researchers assured the participants of confidentiality of information they provided that all the information gathered was going to be kept secretly.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the data revealed themes that emerged from the interview with the mentee teachers on how they perceived learners with special needs. From the analysis, some of the mentee teachers showed positive attitudes and negative attitudes in terms of how they perceive the learners' academic success. The following comments by some of the mentee teachers attest to the fact of positive attitudes towers the learners.

One mentee teacher remarked that:

Yes, she benefits from the class because, anytime a teacher comes to the class, she sits there listen to what the teacher and take part in whatever work the teacher will give to them. In terms of motivation, yes because, I normally advise her that nothing is late yet so she should always join her colleagues in everything that they do in the school and in the class. I sometimes gave her money, shoulder tapping, clapping etc. (Verbatim response from mentee “A”)

Another mentee teacher stated this:

In my stay with them and some analysis I made, with little assistance and support the pupils can do better. For example, I have a pupil with behavioural problem but despite his condition, he tops the class and one with low vision if not because of her sight problem she would have been the second best in the class. (Verbatim response from mentee teacher “B”)

The third mentee teacher remarked that:

Yes, the one with writing difficulty, with little support I think he can progress to the next level of his education but the one with communication problem he can progress. Yes, they take part in the class exercises and I motivate them by asking their colleagues to clap for them whenever they answer a question correctly and gave them gift like pens and pencils. (Verbatim response from mentee teacher “C”)

Purpose of the study was to investigate mentee teachers' attitudes towards pupils with special needs at Oda Wesley primary A and B. About eight out of ten mentees interviewed representing eighty percent of the mentee teachers showed positive attitudes towards learners with special needs. The finding of the study was in agreement with other studies. A study by Parhoon, Movallall, Hassanzadeh and Moravej (2014) the results indicated that teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of students with hearing impairment in general education classrooms were positive another study by Edusei, Mprah, Owusu and Dahamani (2015). Revealed that although attitude of teacher trainees 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.

Again, the findings of the study also revealed that some of the mentee teachers perceived the learners with special needs negatively and believed that it will be difficult for them progress in their academic leader. Two mentee teachers stated this:

Looking at these learners with disabilities, there is going to be problem for them in the regular class because whatever you want to do, you need to get the bases correct but these learners are lacking it, this make them not to progress to the next level. The girl lam talking about doesn't take part in the class activities. She has only one book but doesn't take part in any exercise, notes and always complained. (Verbatim response from mentee teacher "H")

No no no they don't participate effectively in the class activities, hmmm they are just part of the class because when you mark their exercises you could see that things are not going on well with them. So so I mean they are just part of the class and doing a little they can to help themselves and being in the regular class is not helping them and it will take a long time for them to catch up with their colleagues (Verbatim response from mentee teacher "J")

Again, out of ten mentees interviewed, two representing twenty percent showed negative attitude towards learners with special needs. This was consistent with a study by Narasimha (2016) The results of that study revealed that teachers had less favorable attitude towards inclusion of children with learning disabilities in regular schools. Female teachers had favorable attitude towards helping children with learning disabilities on overall scores of PSTALD scale compared to male counterparts. Even though the current study did not consider male and female mentee teachers' attitudes towards learners with special needs. It also agrees with Iyeoma and Toyosi (2017) Findings showed that attitude towards special needs students among secondary school teachers in the study area were negatively skewed.

On research question two, the findings of the study showed that, mentee teachers used small group discussion, individual attention, think-pair-share, nature walk and brainstorming.

Concerning small group discussion, all mentee teachers interviewed revealed that they used it as one of their instructional strategies. They explain that the groups are formed by considering mixed abilities and gender. These were the comments made by some of the mentee teachers:

With the strategies yes I put them into small groups of five. I did that by instructing them to number from one to five and form the groups base on their numbers and when a group is having all the good students, I then regroup them to have mixed ability groups (Verbatim response from mentee teacher "C")

small group discussion, the groups are six to ten in numbers. After putting them in groups I then let the visual impaired learner join the first group which is closer to the board. (Verbatim response from mentee teacher "E")

The mentee teachers were also revealed that they used individual attention as instructional strategy. These were their remarks.

With the individual teaching, I used the individual teaching either in the course of the teaching or during break time. (Verbatim response from mentee teacher "D")

With teaching approaches, I used individual teaching. This is done in the course of the teaching or during break time. (Verbatim response from mentee teacher "E")

On the nature walk. This were the comments of some of the mentee teachers:

With the nature walk we put the learners into two groups. I take one group and my partner also move with the other group, we walk around the environment and find out from the learners what they have seen on the environment. (Verbatim response from mentee teacher "G")

Another strategy is think –pair-share. This method helps them to understand because their friends explain to them. I also used nature walk as a method and brainstorming (Verbatim response from mentee teacher "H")

The instructional strategies revealed by this study was consistent with other studies. For example, with small group discussion, Ball revealed that heterogeneous student groupings increase the accommodative capacity of regular classrooms to respond to individual differences in learning abilities and psychosocial development among students and involving students with special needs in "mixed ability" groups can contribute to their motivation, meaningful involvement in the life of the classroom, learning outcomes, and personal growth.

Concerning nature walk, Chapman (2017) revealed that, teaching academic subjects in an outdoor setting does have a positive effect on student engagement, attention, and behavior. Several teachers also enjoyed being able to teach a lesson outdoors during this study. Further stated that, having a developed outdoor classroom, a school forest, and protocol for taking students outside will benefit students in special education. Also many of the teachers that participated in this study will also continue to teach outdoors. Not only are students more engaged and pay better attention, it gives them a positive experience that they can relate to at school.

On individual attention, Tarihi (2017) revealed that the findings obtained from qualitative data, teachers stated that vast majority of the students with ADHD had an increased level of both attentions span and educational performance when compared to pre and post training. One of the mentee teachers mentioned brainstorming also almost all the mentees mentioned think-pair-share as a method during the interview session but in my one-week observation, what I realized was that though the mentee who mentioned the brainstorming tries to use it as a method but was not properly done and served as disadvantage to the learners who have problem with communication. His approach concerning brainstorming is inconsistent with the findings of Unin and Bearing (2015). The findings showed that brainstorming activities using word lists, word mapping, and also pictures are commonly utilized in the speaking tasks. It was observed that brainstorming contributes to the increase in students' motivation, confidence, and participation as reflected by the positive students' behaviour during classroom observations. With the think-pair-share, though they mentioned it in the interview but did not used it during my observation in the classroom.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

It was concluded that 80% of mentee teachers showed positive attitudes while 20% showed negative attitudes towards learners with special needs in terms of how they perceive their academic success. Also, the mentee teachers used small group discussion, nature walk and individual attention as major instructional methods of teaching the learners. Based on the findings, it was recommended that the resource teacher in the school should support the mentee teachers as well as the regular teachers in the classroom and also organized regular in-service training on the methods of teaching learners in an inclusive setting.

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