

Preservice Teachers' Perspectives on the implementation of Inclusive Education

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ABSTRACT

The study sought to explore preservice teachers' perspective on the implementation of inclusive education in the university of Education, Winneba, specifically, the department of Special Education. The study employed a phenomenological design. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data for the study. The population of the study comprised preservice teachers in their final year. The purposive sampling technique was used to select the participants. The sample size of the study was 21 preservice teachers within the department of Special Education. Majority of the respondents perceived that, the implementation of inclusive education is a movement away from segregation, it is a tool for effective inclusive teaching. The study recommends that, Policy makers such as the Ministry of Education should make available copies of the inclusive education Policy book to preservice teachers. This would enable preservice teachers to have indebt knowledge on the policy and as well as its practice. It is also recommended that, the University of Education, Winneba should organize and schedule frequent workshop trainings on inclusive education professional development for preservice teachers.

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INTRODUCTION

Children cannot be excluded from the general education system due to a disability, according to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006). According to the Convention, states must "ensure an inclusive education system at all levels" (United Nations, 2006). An operationalized definition or generally accepted concept of inclusive education could serve as a guideline for that, making it imperative that preservice teachers' perspectives are addressed during teacher training (Asiyai, 2015). There isn't, however, a widely accepted operationalized definition or concept of it and as a result, preservice teachers must rely on their own, as-yet-undiscovered, beliefs about inclusive education. Inclusion in education is on the rise, and Walker and Gleaves (2016) found that it's important to understand how teachers are trained for inclusive practices "before they enter the workforce, as well as the types of professional development they receive throughout their career". According to a study conducted by Specht et al. (2016) in Canada across the faculties of education in various provinces, it is crucial to comprehend how teacher education programs prepare preservice teachers for inclusive teaching, "given the importance of attitudes, knowledge, skills and confidence for the success of practicing teachers". Forlin (2010) noted that a review of teacher training practices and programs is a significant priority in teacher education research to ensure that preservice teachers are prepared to practice inclusive teaching due to the expanding needs of the inclusive classroom. This study used the Sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995) to analyze the perspectives of 12

preservice teachers from one Ontario teacher education program in order to gain a thorough understanding of their preparation for inclusion. In order to better understand individuals' experiences, obstacles and opportunities within their specific socio-cultural contexts, this theory pays attention to their narratives about a given phenomenon.

Even though inclusive education is important, preparing preservice teachers for it can be difficult. The lack of exposure to inclusive education in teacher preparation programs is a significant obstacle. Many preservice teachers lack the necessary training to work with students who have disabilities, which can leave them feeling unconfident and unqualified to use inclusive practices. Several best practices can be adopted to guarantee that preservice teachers are sufficiently prepared to implement inclusive practices in the classroom. Integrating inclusive education into teacher education standards and curricula is among the best practices (Hameed et al., 2019). This strategy makes certain that preservice teachers are adequately prepared and exposed to the knowledge of inclusive education.

Previous research has repeatedly demonstrated that although the majority of preservice teachers have good opinions regarding inclusive education, a considerable proportion of them believe they are not sufficiently prepared to participate in inclusive practices, especially Individual Program Plan (IPP) process (Massouti, 2021). In order to guarantee that children with disabilities have their educational needs satisfied in a mainstream classroom, the IPP process is a vital part of successful inclusion. This lack of preparedness highlights the significance of improving preservice teacher education to provide them with the know-how and abilities to assist children with a range of learning needs in inclusive environments.

Contextually, there is no study that has been conducted to problematize this course.

This study emphasizes how important it is to improve preservice teacher preparation, especially in terms of equipping teachers to work well with students who have exceptionalities. It emphasizes how essential it is to make sure preservice teachers have the tools they need to meet the variety of needs of students in inclusive classrooms. Teachers can endeavor to create more inclusive learning environments that meet the needs of all students, regardless of their skills or backgrounds, by concentrating on this area of teacher education. In order to better educate preservice teachers for the opportunities and challenges given by inclusive education environments, this study serves as a call to action for educational institutions to assess and adapt their teacher education programs.

Research Question

What are Preservice teachers' perspectives on the implementation of Inclusive Education at the University of Education, Winneba?

Delimitation of the study

The study was delimited to preservice teachers in the department of Special Education at the University of Education, Winneba. This is because, the courses in the department's curriculum are inclusive education based and it was further delimited to the final year students who are ready to be licensed as professional teachers.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study is to investigate Preservice teachers' perspectives on the implementation of Inclusive Education in the University of Education

Literature review

1. Theoretical framework

This study adapted the Ecological Systems Theory (1979). This theory, put forth by Urie Bronfenbrenner, emphasizes the interdependence of people and their environment. The perspectives of teachers on inclusive education are examined within the framework of various systems, including the school, community, and cultural norms, which have an impact on their practices and beliefs. His theory holds that

development is a continuous process that reflects a person's understanding of their environment and how they interact with it. This definition departs from the conventional understanding of development, which emphasizes inherited traits and personal traits. When describing ecology theory, Bronfenbrenner makes the analogy between the environment and Russian dolls, where different structures are nested inside of one another (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

2. Perspectives of Inclusive Education

It is well known that inclusion in education is a difficult concept to define and put into practice, as evidenced by the following studies: Farrell and Ainscow (2002), Mitchell (2005), Erten and Savage (2012), Smyth et al. (2022). Inclusion, in the words of Norwich (2011), refers to schools' ability to meet the needs of all students. Students with disabilities have equal access to all academic and extracurricular activities at an inclusive school. The term "integration" was initially used to describe the mainstream placement of those children because historically, the shift towards inclusion primarily began as a challenge to the barriers experienced by disabled children who were excluded from the mainstream (Hodkinson 2010). The terms integration and inclusion can still be used interchangeably in different contexts even though it is now widely acknowledged that they are not synonymous (Hameed et al., 2019). Similar to this, the currently dominant models or conceptualizations of SEN/D offer a wide range of potential causes for these disorders (Reindal 2008). In a nutshell, the social model of disability sees it as being caused by an environment that does not meet the needs of a disabled person, as opposed to the medical model, which sees disability as being caused by factors that lie within the individual (Llewellyn and Hogan 2000). It has been demonstrated that a number of teacher-related factors affect how inclusion is implemented in the classroom. Avramidis and Norwich (2002) found in their review that younger teachers and those with more experience in the classroom are more likely to be supportive of inclusion. Similar findings were made by Parasuram (2006), who suggests that younger, more seasoned teachers are more likely to adapt their methods and materials to suit all kinds of learners. According to environmental factors, the most reliable predictor of successful inclusion was found to be financial and personnel support for regular classroom teachers (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002).

In-depth research on the perspectives of 12 pre-service teachers enrolled in an Ontario teacher education program about their readiness for inclusive teaching was conducted by Massouti (2021). The study collected data through semi-structured interviews and document analysis of inclusive education policies, utilizing Sensemaking theory as the theoretical framework. The study's conclusions demonstrated that preservice teachers thought of inclusion as a cooperative policy practice that required having access to the right tools, having a positive outlook, and treating all students with respect. These components were thought to be essential for developing a welcoming classroom atmosphere. The study also emphasized how critical a review of the curriculum structure of the teacher education program under investigation is crucial. In particular, it's important to reconsider how course prerequisites and designs can enhance future educators' understanding of and ability to use inclusive teaching strategies. One way to better prepare preservice teachers for the diverse classrooms they will encounter is to incorporate more inclusive teaching strategies and concepts into the curriculum (Mitchell, 2017). Completing the program's field-based experience component under the guidance of associate teachers who prioritize inclusion was another important discovery. The placement of preservice teachers in K–12 classrooms with diverse student populations was found to be crucial in improving their comprehension and appreciation of inclusive practices.

METHODS

This chapter focus on the research methods employed in this study. It covers the research approach, design, population, sample size, sampling procedure, Ethics, Data analysis trustworthiness.

Research approach

The study employed a qualitative research approach to gain vivid knowledge of preservice teachers' perspectives on the implementation of inclusive education. The qualitative approach was used because it enters the lives of the participants, allows the researcher to interact directly with them and elicit more information and understanding of research question. Qualitative approach is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (Mertens, 2019).

Research Design

The study used a phenomenological design to explain and define how this would facilitate data collection, with a focus on understanding preservice teachers' perspectives on inclusive education. Creswell (2014) contended that, the researcher describes the lived experiences of the individuals about a situation as described by the participants.

Population

The population of this study was, 27 preservice teachers in the department of Special Education in the University of Education, Winneba. Zikmund et. al (2013) defined population as a pool from which a researcher chooses a sample, which is a representative of the larger group.

Sample size

The sample of the study was 21 preservice teachers. These were the participants that were available and accessible during the interview. A sample size refers to the smaller or equal portion of the population selected for the study (Mensah, 2023)

Sampling technique

The study employed a purposive sampling technique. Creswell (2012) defined purposive sampling as the intentional selection of participants, who understand the central problem.

Instrumentation

The study employed a semi-structured interview guide for the data collection. The semi-structured interviews allowed for further probing on the basis of information provided by the respondents or the participants.

Data analysis

Data was driven by the research question, the scholarly literature, the theoretical framework adopted, as well as the reviewed the inclusive education policy. Miles and Crisp (2014) posits that, data analysis on participants responses includes two stages. During the first stage, multiple readings for each focused group were conducted to identify codes that reflect the purpose of the study. These codes include: (a) inclusion as a collaborative practice, (b) Beliefs and Values towards inclusive education. During the second stage, a cross-case analysis technique was employed to identify similarities and differences in the codes created across all participants' data. These two levels of analysis were helpful to generate themes that were pertinent to this study and assist in the interpretation of the data.

Trustworthiness

Following the researchers' preparation of the interview questions, the validity of the data collection tool and the questions were finalized after consulting with two subject-matter experts. To test the interview questions, two pilot interviews were conducted. The study did not include any pilot interviews. After the interview questions were chosen, they were all asked to the participants in the same order, with explanations provided to help the participant understand and respond to the question while being careful not to guide when necessary. In the research, the students were asked four questions.

Trustworthiness can be established to address the credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability of the study's findings (Gay, Mills and Airaian 2006). Although validity and reliability cannot be addressed in the same way in a naturalistic work, the positivist frequently doubt the validity of the qualitative research (Shenton 2004). According to Mahlo (2011), trustworthiness is a way to guarantee rigor in qualitative research without sacrificing relevance.

Ethical consideration

In line with international best practices in education and research, the intentions of the researchers for the study were revealed to the participants and their informed consents were sought. Verbally, the participants were assured of anonymity of their identities and confidentiality of the data that would be collected from them. Participants were also promised to assign them anonymous names during the report writing. All respondents to be interviewed agreed before the commencement of the study. Data was safely stored and locked with a password on a personal computer. Becker et al. (2012) stipulated that researchers should ensure that participants are protected from any physical or psychological harm that may arise from research procedures.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Introduction

This segment presents the data, analysis and discussions of key findings on the perspectives of preservice teachers towards the practice of inclusion education. Through the research question and interview guide, the participants were asked about their perspectives on the implementation of inclusive education, and their responses garnered two main themes. These themes are:

- a. Movement from segregation
- b. The tools for effective inclusive teaching

Movement from segregation

This theme began to take shape as a result of preservice teachers' perspectives on the idea of inclusive education. A clear pattern regarding the participants' opinions on the implementation of inclusive education was revealed by the data analysis. All of their opinions were unified by the urgent need for a "movement away from segregation." The participants conveyed a strong conviction regarding the significance of dissecting the conventional educational approach, which frequently divided students according to their aptitudes or disabilities. They underlined the importance of including all students in regular classroom environments, irrespective of their backgrounds or learning requirements. This viewpoint represents a change toward an inclusive educational model in which diversity is valued and accommodated in the classroom.

These viewpoints helped to clarify the claim that the policy of inclusive education marks a significant break from the segregationist norm. In their conviction that the success of inclusive education depends on a transformation where all special schools are transformed into inclusive settings, preservice teachers found common ground. People with various abilities and disabilities can coexist in the same classroom in such inclusive settings, promoting inclusive learning.

The fundamental idea that came out of their conversations was that inclusive education goes beyond the conventional lines that have traditionally divided students based on their abilities or disabilities. Instead, it encourages the inclusion of students with various learning needs in a single learning environment. With the help of this strategy, all students will be able to actively engage in academic activities, regardless of their abilities or disabilities.

The significance of this change was emphasized by preservice teachers, who emphasized that it is a critical step toward promoting diversity, equity, and social inclusion in the educational system. They understood that inclusive education benefits all students, enhancing their educational experiences while also

benefiting students with disabilities by giving them opportunities for full participation. Inclusive education promotes peer support, teamwork, and a deeper understanding of diversity by bringing together students with different abilities. The preservice teachers also emphasized the importance of thorough teacher preparation and ongoing professional development for implementing inclusive education successfully. They agreed that teachers are crucial in fostering an inclusive learning environment and modifying instructional methods to cater to the various needs of their students.

Below is a verbatim expression from a participant:

"It is my believe that, inclusive education is a very good policy but for it to be successful, the government should either shut down all special schools or turn the special schools into an inclusive setting where everyone would have the opportunity to learn equally without any discrimination. To say a bye to segregation" (PT 5)

The idea of inclusion serves as a cornerstone for developing effective inclusive teaching practices in the field of preservice teacher education. Preservice teachers fervently support the idea that inclusion's success depends on its collaborative component. They contend that in order to successfully implement inclusive teaching strategies, teachers must collaborate in similar educational environments that are free from any form of segregation. This viewpoint is consistent with Hodkinson's (2010) claim that the term "integration" originally referred to the placement of disabled children in regular educational settings. The struggle for inclusion was historically sparked by the difficulties faced by disabled children who were routinely excluded from mainstream classrooms. The words "integration" and "inclusion" were once used synonymously, but as noted by Hameed et al. (2019), their meanings have changed, and they are now understood to represent different concepts within the field of education. The development of these terms demonstrates how education is changing, as well as how inclusive learning environments are becoming more and more understood. Because they understand that successful inclusive teaching is a team effort rather than the sole responsibility of one educator, preservice teachers emphasize the collaborative aspect of inclusion. When educators from different fields and backgrounds collaborate to address the varied needs of all students in a common learning environment, this is known as inclusion. Teachers in general education, special education, speech therapists, occupational therapists, counselors, and other experts may work together in this project. Co-teaching, in which two or more teachers collaborate to plan and deliver instruction to all students, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, is one example of how collaboration can take place in inclusive settings. To make sure that students receive the necessary support both at school and at home, it may also involve ongoing communication and cooperation with parents and caregivers. Preservice teachers think that a collaborative approach to inclusion benefits all students, not just those with disabilities, and enhances learning in general. It encourages the exchange of knowledge, the use of creative teaching techniques, and a comprehensive comprehension of the needs of students.

Preservice teachers' viewpoints on inclusive education highlight this policy's ability to transform education. It imagines a time when inclusive environments will take the place of special schools, creating a welcoming learning environment that encourages equality for all students, regardless of their abilities or disabilities. A more inclusive and equitable educational system that benefits both students without disabilities and the general student body will be made possible thanks to this change

The tools for effective inclusive teaching

Preservice teachers emphasize the significant role that inclusive education plays as a key component of effective inclusive teaching within this thematic perspective. Their insights delve into the traits and behaviors that instructors must display in an inclusive classroom to make learning a positive and encouraging experience for all students, regardless of their backgrounds or skill levels. Preservice teachers stress the importance of using inclusive education as a guiding principle in order to embrace diversity and meet the individual needs of each student. It is regarded as a multifaceted strategy that goes beyond merely including disabled students in regular classes. Instead, it represents a dedication to encouraging a sense of community,

valuing diversity, and giving everyone access to the same opportunities. The significance of teachers participating actively in the inclusive classroom has been highlighted by preservice teachers as one important aspect. It is implied by active involvement that educators are actively looking for ways to modify their instruction to better meet the diverse needs of their students. Every student has the opportunity to succeed in a classroom with active teachers who are responsive and dynamic.

Another essential trait that preservice teachers identify as necessary for inclusive educators is observation. Teachers who are observant pay close attention to their students' social and emotional development in addition to their academic performance. Teachers can tailor their support and instruction to each student's needs by closely observing them to spot potential problems or signs of progress. This observation also includes identifying each student's unique assets and potential growth areas.

The foundation of successful inclusive teaching is clear communication. Preservice teachers emphasize that effective communication with students, students' families, and other professionals involved in the educational process is essential for inclusive educators. Communication that is clear makes it easier to ensure that everyone is on the same page in terms of expectations, objectives, and tactics. Additionally, it fosters open lines of communication for resolving issues and promoting collaboration by fostering an atmosphere where students feel heard and understood. Being active, perceptive, and clear in communication, according to preservice teachers, are not only advantageous but also essential for creating fruitful learning environments in diverse classrooms. These procedures are thought to serve as the cornerstone for developing an inclusive classroom environment where all students are encouraged to realize their full potential.

The viewpoint of preservice teachers emphasizes how important inclusive education is as a tool for successful inclusive teaching. They emphasize the need for teachers in inclusive classrooms to display a variety of characteristics, such as being engaged in the learning process, paying attention to their students' needs and development, and being a clear and effective communicator. By exhibiting these traits, educators can pave the way for effective inclusive teaching and build inclusive classrooms that encourage student empowerment, growth, and understanding.

A verbatim expression from some respondents:

"As a believer of inclusive education, I view Inclusive Education as a tool for inclusive practices and a teacher should be good in communication and presentation which would enable all learners to be active learners in order to participate in classroom learning." (PT 4)

Preservice teachers passionately support the idea that inclusive education can be a powerful tool for improving efficient teaching and learning in educational settings. They contend that by utilizing students' varied cultures and experiences to create inclusive and welcoming classrooms, schools play a crucial role in determining the accessibility and significance of education for all students. This viewpoint is completely consistent with the findings of Avramidis and Norwich's (2002) thorough review of the literature on inclusive education. According to their findings, both newer teachers and those with a lot of classroom experience tend to be more in favor of inclusion as a teaching strategy.

The relationship between age and support for inclusion highlights how the teaching profession is changing in perspective. Younger educators frequently come into the profession more receptive to creative and inclusive pedagogical methods. They are more likely to value diversity and modify their lesson plans and instructional strategies to meet the individual needs of each student. On the other hand, seasoned educators who may have seen changes in educational paradigms over time also support inclusive education. Their cumulative knowledge has given them a deeper appreciation for the importance of inclusive practices and the advantages they provide for students. Preservice teachers draw comparisons with Parasuram's (2006) research, which discovered that younger, less experienced teachers have a greater propensity to adapt their

lesson plans and resources to suit a variety of learners. This adaptability highlights how crucial it is to develop a new generation of educators who are ready to promote inclusive teaching methods.

The importance of environmental factors in the successful implementation of inclusive education is also acknowledged by preservice teachers. As the most accurate indicators of successful inclusion, Avramidis and Norwich (2002) identified financial and personnel support for regular classroom teachers. In order for teachers to successfully meet the diverse needs of their students in inclusive settings, it is crucial that they have access to sufficient resources, such as funding for additional staff, specialized training, and accessible materials. With the help of these resources, teachers can design inclusive classrooms that give each student the assistance and accommodations they need to succeed academically and socially.

CONCLUSION

By taking into account the responses, insights, and feedback received, this study has the potential to have a big influence on how teacher education programs are developed. Future educators will be more equipped to handle the challenges of inclusive classrooms if the findings are included into these programs, which will raise the standard of inclusive education as a whole.

Additionally, the respondents' experiences and insights are extremely helpful in identifying cutting-edge strategies for encouraging inclusion and assisting diverse learners. For educators and policymakers looking to improve inclusive practices in educational settings, these insights can be a great resource.

The larger body of research on inclusive education has been enhanced by examining the perspectives of preservice teachers. The understanding of inclusive practices has been deepened and nuanced by the participants' responses, which have also yielded insightful information that can guide future research directions. This emphasizes how essential it is to take preservice teachers' viewpoints into account when shaping the discourse and carrying out inclusive education programs.

According to this current study, the organizational structure of the teacher education program should be re-organised in order to better meet the demands and expectations of inclusive teaching. It would be beneficial to provide preservice teachers with some inclusion-focused workshops about assessment and inclusive teaching from experienced and knowledgeable diversity professionals. Therefore, the university should reconsider the program's priorities to make sure that preservice teachers in the future will acquire knowledge they can rely on and apply to their future careers as teachers.

It was a challenge to interview preservice teachers or get their opinions because of their limited availability, which was mostly caused by their academic responsibilities. Their rigorous academic schedule frequently left them with little time for the research interviews.

Furthermore, the researchers faced additional difficulties due to financial limitations. Due to a lack of resources, it became more and more difficult to schedule and conduct interviews with preservice teachers who were dispersed throughout various locations. The logistics of the research process were complicated by the costs of travel, lodging, and other factors. Notwithstanding these difficulties, the researchers were able to overcome them by using creative approaches.

Recommendation

This study strongly recommends that, Policy makers such as the Ministry of Education should make available copies of the inclusive education Policy book to preservice teachers. This would enable preservice teachers to have indebt knowledge on the policy and as well as its practice. It is also recommended that, the University of Education, Winneba should organize and schedule frequent workshop trainings on inclusive education professional development for preservice teachers.

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