

Towards inclusion? Developing teacher skills for communication with children who are deaf or hard of hearing in Uganda

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Abstract

The objective of this study was to explore how pre—service teacher trainees in Uganda are prepared in order to develop skills for communication with children who are deaf or hard of hearing. A qualitative approach was followed in the study. Data was collected through interviews, focus group discussions, field observations and document study. The main finding is that trainees have an opportunity to develop skills for communication with children who are deaf or hard of hearing from practical activities undertaken in the classroom and during teaching practice. However, these provisions are not sufficient to enable trainees develop skills for communication with that category of children. The findings imply that education authorities should enhance practical activities in the curriculum in a way that might enable teacher trainees to develop skills for communication with children who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Key Words: *Teacher training, Communication, Deaf, Hard of hearing, inclusion*

Introduction

Inclusion of children with special needs is now a dominant policy and practice worldwide. This form of education provision is being championed with a view to meeting the diverse educational needs of all children (UNESCO, 1994). In spite of that development, in some countries, successful inclusion of children with disabilities is still hindered by several factors such as resource limitations, negative attitudes and lack of interest from Governments. The fact that the inclusion ideology was initiated by International Agencies indicates that it was not necessarily an initiative of the national governments taking steps to address the needs of their populations, but rather a product of these Agencies that is used to influence nations to refocus their priorities and plans. This attempt to implement 'what works' and to standardize what is perceived to be appropriate development goals seldom takes into consideration differences and diversity in nations.

In Uganda, inclusion was adopted in consistence with the free universal primary school education (UPE) policy which was launched 1997. UPE is implemented in a way that government undertakes to provide free education for four children in each family, and priority is given to children with disabilities. As a result of that policy, children who are deaf or hard of hearing now constitute the largest number of children with disabilities who have been enrolled in inclusive classrooms (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2009). Following the introduction of UPE, a course aimed at enabling pre—service teacher trainees to develop knowledge and skills for supporting children with special needs was initiated in 1997. The course is now implemented as part of the general teacher education programme for pre—service teacher trainees.

Problem Statement

One of the parameters of inclusion is that children should be able to engage in communicative interaction with their peers (UNESCO, 1994). The increase in advocacy for communicative interaction in inclusion is partly based on the perspective that human development occurs through interaction (Vygotsky, 1978), and that it is a social

activity that is essential in order for human beings to manage day—to—day life (Siegel, 2008). Communicative interaction in inclusion is also perceived to enable children to learn from each other, to learn together with others, and is considered to be the most beneficial way for children to learn about their social expectations and identity (Herot, 2002; Antia, Stinson & Gaustad, 2002).

Studies conducted by Weisel, Most and Efron (2005) and Wauters and Knoors (2007) indicate that children who are deaf or hard of hearing may experience difficulties in communicative interaction with peers of a different hearing status. Cole and Flexer (2007) also report that hearing loss may impair a child's ability to engage in communicative interaction through spoken language. The above findings imply that there is a need for teachers to foster communicative interaction in inclusive classrooms which have children who are deaf or hard of hearing. In order to perform that role, however, teachers ought to be able to communicate with children in their classes.

The study reported in this article explored how pre—service teacher trainees in Uganda are prepared in order to develop their skills for communication with children who are deaf or hard of hearing in inclusive classrooms. The main focus of the study was to find out the accommodations (or provisions) that are made in the curriculum and how they are implemented in order to achieve the above goal. Understanding the accommodations made and how they are implemented may give insight to the extent in which teacher education for special needs education is preparing pre—service teacher trainees for implementing the global agenda of inclusion.

Research Design and Methods

A qualitative approach was followed in this study. In choosing this approach, I was inspired by the assertion that descriptive information from qualitative studies may lead to a better understanding of individuals with special needs, their families and those who work with them (Blantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach & Richardson, 2005). Four methods were used for data collection and these are; document study, individual interviews, field observations and focus group discussions. The decision to use document study was based on the intention to explore the accommodations that are made in the teacher education documents and how they are implemented to enable trainees to develop skills for communication with deaf and hard of hearing children. Individual interviews were selected basing on the assumption that this method of data collection provides an opportunity for a dialogue which may influence the interviewee to describe his/her ideas and feelings about a phenomenon in—depth. Field observations were selected basing on the view that informants sometimes bias the information they offer, or may not recall accurately the events of interest in the study (Gall, Gall and Borg, 2007). Focus group discussion method was selected basing on the view that the interaction that takes place during the discussion may stimulate individuals to express their feelings and perceptions about a phenomenon (Marshall and Rossman, 1994).

Informants

The study was carried out in two public teacher education colleges in Uganda. The colleges were purposefully selected on the basis that they are implementing the pre—service teacher education course for special needs education and inclusion. The informants were: Two teacher trainers for special needs education and inclusion, one teacher trainer for professional education studies and six first—year teacher trainees from one college. Teacher trainers for special needs education and inclusion were selected because they are responsible for preparing trainees in that course. They were, therefore, expected to provide their experiences about the problem under study. The teacher trainer for professional education studies was selected because she is responsible for supporting trainees to develop knowledge and skills about core aspects in teaching such as roles of a teacher, teaching methods, activities and classroom organization. Teacher trainees from the first year cohort were selected for the study because a large percentage of subject content and practical activities for special needs education and inclusion is expected to be presented in the first year of the two—year pre— service teacher education program.

Procedure for Data Collection

Prior to the main study, a pilot study was conducted in one college which had similar characteristics as the colleges in which the main study was conducted. The pilot study was useful in two ways: First, it highlighted weaknesses in the instruments and the procedure for data collection. Second, it made the author aware of the challenges that may arise in carrying out interviews, focus group discussions and field observations. Based on the experiences from the pilot study, some changes were made in the instruments and procedure.

18 documents were considered during the study. Among them are *“The Special Needs Education Training Manual”*, *“The Teacher Education Curriculum”*, *“The Professional Education Studies Syllabus”*, *“The Teaching Practice Assessment Guidelines”*, *“Guidelines for Child Study”*, *“ The Professional Education Studies Module One”*, and *“ The Professional Education Studies Module Two”*. 12 open ended individual interviews were conducted during the study. Eight of the interviews were conducted with teacher trainers for special needs education and four interviews were conducted with the teacher trainer for professional education studies. Five focus group discussions were held with a group of six teacher trainees. Two of the focus group discussions were conducted when the trainees where in first year of the teacher education program and three were conducted when they were in second year. Holding the focus group discussions in first year and then in second year also provided an opportunity for corroborating the information obtained from trainees. Seven field observation sessions were conducted. Three field observations were conducted in the classroom during the special needs education lessons and two were conducted during out—of— classroom activities.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process involved transcribing field notes with detail that is sufficient to give meaning, identifying significant statements/issues, categorising the statements and presenting them in *contact summary forms* adapted from Miles and Huberman (1984). The categorized statements/issues were then cut into pieces so

that it is easy to sift them from one place to another. This process enabled the author to cluster the significant statements/issues into themes in which the findings are presented.

Validity and Reliability

Five procedures were followed in an attempt to enhance validity and reliability in the study: First, the teacher trainers read the transcribed field notes with a view to confirm the information which they had presented. Second, follow-up interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with a view to check consistency of information provided by the informants. Third, data was collected using four research methods; document studies, interviews, focus group discussions and field observations. Use of a variety of methods provided an opportunity for corroborating information obtained from various data sources. Fourth, the study involved two categories of informants; teacher trainers and teacher trainees. Fifth, a colleague was requested to code one page of significant statements/issues in each of the data sets using the code list developed by the author. Comparing the two sets of coded statements/issues enabled the author to identify inconsistencies in the definition and use of some of the codes.

Limitations

The study has some limitations: First, although it was useful to collect data from several teacher trainers for special needs education, only two trainers could be selected to participate in the study, a number which is small. This implies that there was limited access to a variety of data that would permit a more rigorous analysis. Second, although the study plan was to observe how trainees are supported to develop practical skills during the teaching practice placement, this was not done due to logistical reasons. Third, this study considered data which was obtained from trainees who were enrolled in the first year of the teacher education programme and not trainees in second year. Perhaps the findings would have been different if data was collected from the two cohorts of trainees.

Results

The findings are presented in two themes; within-class provisions and extended out-of-class provisions.

Within-Class Provisions

The data shows that communication with children who are deaf is included in the subject content that is expected to be taught. This subject content is presented in a document entitled 'The Special Needs Education Training Manual'. The manual also presents subject content about various categories of disability other than hearing impairment. This indicates that the 33 hours allocated for the course on special needs education and inclusion are not sufficient to enable teacher trainers to teach the entire subject content presented. One implication of insufficient time is that subject content about communication with children who are deaf may not necessarily be taught during the course, or may be taught only superficially.

The data also shows that teacher trainees are taught sign language, a mode of communication that is expected to be used by/ with persons who are deaf. They are guided to learn this language through practical examples presented by the teacher trainer. One teacher trainer had this to say about how he prepares trainees to communicate with deaf children:

“The way I help these trainees in the college is by giving them some basics on sign language, and also encouraging them to use gestures when they get stuck.”

Another teacher trainer remarked:

“I try to teach also the sign language by showing them how it is used, although it went on deteriorating and mostly the hand alphabet.”

The teacher trainer further explained that he introduced basic sign language in order to enable teacher trainees who are in the first year to develop skills in that language. He said:

“The idea that I had was to introduce the basic sign language in order to enable the year one students, when they go out for school practice, at least to have an idea of how to share with those children [children who are deaf].”

The statements above, however, indicate that in spite of being taught sign language, trainees in these colleges may not become proficient in using that language. The word ‘basic’ as used by the teacher trainer suggests that the level of sign language that is taught is not detailed and, hence, may not enable trainees to develop sufficient skills in that language. In order to communicate with children who are deaf effectively, teacher trainees should be taught the detailed sign language and not only the basics of it.

The statement that the teacher trainer helps trainees by ‘giving them some basics’ also suggests that the teaching sign language is dominated by the teacher trainer. Sullivan and Glanz (2005) observe that meaningful knowledge and skills are best constructed through interaction and reflection around personal experience. If this view is agreed with, it implies that teaching approaches that are dominated by the teacher trainer may hinder interaction with trainees. The process of ‘giving’ some basic skills in sign language may not, therefore, enable trainees to develop skills in that language.

The data also indicates that teacher trainers may be dominating the teaching of sign language due to shortage of reference books for trainees. One teacher trainer reported that dictionaries that would be used to enhance the teaching of sign language are lacking. When asked about the challenges he is experiencing, the teacher trainer said:

“Just as I told you yesterday, materials are a problem. Text books, Reference books, especially sign language dictionaries are lacking.”

Unlike spoken languages, sign language is not a common language used among hearing people. Lack of reference materials may, therefore, hinder teacher trainers from supporting teacher trainees to develop skills in that language. Another finding is that sign language is the only visual—based mode of communication that is taught in these colleges. Persons who are deaf are diverse in terms of their hearing abilities and, hence, communication needs. One mode of communication may not, therefore, be applicable for all children who are

deaf. This implies that trainees should be supported to learn various modes of communication that may be used in communication with these children.

The data further shows that trainees in these colleges do not have an opportunity to practice sign language in communicative interactions with persons who are deaf. When asked whether they interact with deaf peers during the college term, one trainee said: *'Like us right now, we don't have any student who is deaf or hard of hearing'*. This statement from the trainee is consistent with a response from one teacher trainer who said:

"I only talk about sign language in the class when I am helping students who are going for school practice, but we don't practice it here in the college because we don't have students with hearing impairment."

Communicative interaction with individuals who use sign language may enhance one's skills in that language. This implies that lack of an opportunity to use sign language in real life interactions with persons who are deaf in the college may hinder trainees from developing skills in that language.

With regard to children who are hard of hearing, the data shows that subject content about communication with these children is not included in the 'Special Needs Education Training Manual'. This indicates that trainees do not get support that would enable them to develop skills for communication with this category of children.

Extended Out—of —Class Provision

The data shows that trainees are expected to undertake two six —weeks teaching practice placements. The main purpose of teaching practice is to enable trainees to get experience with children and to develop practical skills in teaching and supporting them. One teacher trainer said:

"When they are going for topics [in schools], we tell them to ask the teachers whether there are children with disabilities in the class so that when they make teaching schemes, they plan for them."

and that:

"I have to make sure that the child with disability is catered for in the scheming process by setting specific objectives. We put general objectives and then specific objectives whereby, the specific objectives are addressing the needs of learners with special needs in the class."

The statement from the teacher trainer indicates that trainees do not have an opportunity to interact with children when they visit schools to obtain information about children in the classes allocated to them. This is because the information is provided by the resident teachers and, hence, may be based on what these teachers perceive as the needs of the children. The fact that many ordinary school teachers in Uganda are not trained in special needs education implies that resident teachers may not have the competence to guide trainees on assessment of communication needs of children who are deaf or hard of hearing. This indicates that school practice placement may not necessarily enable trainees to develop skills for communication with children who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Another finding relates to the duration of teaching practice placement. Sign language has a unique linguistic structure that is different from oral languages. This implies that trainees should have sufficient time to learn this

language. Six weeks placement in schools is, therefore, not sufficient for trainees to develop skills in using sign language.

The data also shows that only a few trainees get an opportunity to be placed in classrooms which have children who are deaf or hard of hearing. When asked whether they had interaction with these children during the previous teaching practice, one trainee responded: *"In my class, I didn't have any"*, another said: *"Me, I taught a class where there was one who is mentally retarded."* One implication of not having an opportunity to be placed in classes which have children who are deaf or hard of hearing is that trainees may not experience communicative interaction with these children. This may hinder them from developing skills for communication with children who are deaf or hard of hearing.

During teaching practice, teacher trainers are expected to guide trainees to develop knowledge and skills for communication with children. The guidance is based on findings from an assessment of the trainee's teaching. One teacher trainer said:

"If the pupils with hearing impairment are in class, I look at the way the trainee positions himself when he is talking to the children, whether the trainee turns his back to write on the blackboard while talking and his/her audibility."

The above statement is consistent with guidelines presented in the document entitled "The Teaching Practice Assessment Form". In that document, it is stated that teacher trainers are required to evaluate *'How the teacher trainee communicates to the learners'*. The document does not, however, outline the communication skills which teacher trainers should look out for during the assessment. This suggests that teacher trainers do not obtain information that is sufficient to enable them support trainees to develop skills for communication with children who are deaf or hard of hearing.

The teaching practice placement is organised in such a manner that trainees are allocated classes in pairs or small groups. Placing trainees in pairs or small groups may enable them to support one another in confronting challenges, such as communication difficulties, that might arise in their classrooms. This claim is based on Nokes, Bullough, Egan, Birrell and Hansen (2008) observation that placing trainees in pairs or small groups enables them to benefit from tensions, dialogue and reflections that grow out of working with peers.

Discussion

The main finding from this study is that the colleges have some accommodations that might enable teacher trainees to develop skills for communication with children who are deaf or hard of hearing. Although the accommodations are being implemented in practice, there are challenges that may hinder trainees from developing skills in that aspect.

Trainees have an opportunity to develop skills for communication with children who are deaf or hard of hearing from the special needs education lessons. During the lessons, they are taught, among other aspects, general principles of communication with persons who have hearing difficulties. In addition, they undergo practical training in sign language, a mode of communication which is used by/with deaf persons. However, as noted by

Limaye (2004), persons who are deaf vary in terms of the level of their hearing loss and, hence, the communication needs. This implies that in order to communicate with children who are deaf, teacher trainees should have skills in a variety of communication behaviour that may be used by/with these children. Supporting trainees to develop skills in sign language alone is, therefore, not sufficient.

Another finding is that teacher trainers support trainees to develop skills in sign language by presenting practical examples of how that language is used. This approach to teaching sign language may be useful in that it might enable trainees to develop skills in that language. A study conducted by Korthagen, Loughran and Russell (2006) supports the use of examples and role models in teacher education. Their view is that learning about teaching is enhanced when the teaching and learning approaches advocated for in the programme are modelled by teacher educators in their own practice. But while this view may be agreed with, it is important to observe that the context in which teacher education is implemented in Uganda is not necessarily the same as the one referred to in Korthagen et al. (2006). This implies that in addition to the examples given, teacher trainers should address the challenges that may hinder trainees from developing the intended skills.

The study also reveals that teacher trainees practice only basic signs and not sign language that is necessary for communication with deaf persons. Communication is a complex process that requires a more coherent understanding and expressions of intelligible language. This implies that in order to communicate with, and to support children who are deaf to develop skills in sign language, trainees should be competent in using sign language. Teaching only basic signs may not, therefore, empower trainees to perform that role. This finding adds to the work of Oliver and Williams (2005) who observe that inadequate training is one major difficulty experienced by teachers in their attempt to support children with disabilities in their classrooms.

Although the reasons for teaching only basic signs may not be well known, the study indicates that two major constraints might be contributing to it. The first is that the time allocated for the course on special needs education and inclusion is inadequate. At the time of the study, the course was allocated only two hours each week (33hours in one academic year). Within this period, theory about education provisions for various categories of children with special needs as well as practical training in alternative modes of communication that may be necessary for these children is expected to be accomplished. The implication of insufficient time is that some aspects of the course might be taught only superficially or not taught at all. The second constraint relates to teaching resources. The study reveals that the colleges lack sign language dictionaries. Sign language is a unique language in that it is interpreted visually and has a linguistic structure that is different from oral languages. In order to support trainees to learn that language, therefore, teacher trainers should have access to a variety of teaching resources. This concern about inadequate resources adds to the work of Hollins and Guzman (2005). They conclude that some teacher education institutions do not have access to teaching materials necessary for preparing teachers for teaching diverse populations

The study also shows that trainees are not supported to develop skills necessary for communication with children who are hard of hearing. Subject content about communication with these children is not included in

the manual that is used as a guide for teacher training in special needs education and inclusion. Furthermore, there was no data to indicate that trainees had participated in practical activities that might enable them to develop skills for communication with this category of children. In order to develop skills for communication with children who are hard of hearing, trainees should be exposed to subject content and practical activities that might enable them to develop skills in that aspect.

During the teacher education programme, trainees take part in one main out—of—class skills oriented activity, that is, teaching practice placement. The main aim of this activity is stated as '*to enable trainees to develop skills in teaching and supporting children*'. This intended outcome indicates that if well implemented, teaching practice placement might enable trainees to develop skills for, among others, communication with children who are deaf or hard of hearing. Handline (2010) observes that field experiences from teaching practice may enable special needs education teacher trainees to learn from experienced teachers and to gain experience for working with learners who have special needs. The above aim does not, however, mention the goal of supporting trainees to develop skills for communication with children. This lack of an explicit statement about that aspect suggests that it is not considered to be a priority. This implies that teacher trainers are not obliged to support trainees to develop skills for communication with children who are deaf or hard of hearing in the training.

The study also reveals that during teaching practice, trainees are placed in pairs or small groups. This arrangement might enable trainees to support and to learn from one another. Nokes et al. (2008) observe that working in pairs or small groups provides an opportunity for trainees to benefit from tensions and dialogue that may arise as they work together to support children and to confront challenges in their teaching practice. If this view is agreed with, it implies that pairs or groups of trainees who are placed in inclusive classrooms where children who are deaf or hard of hearing are enrolled might support one another to develop skills for communication with these children.

One challenge that may hinder trainees in these colleges from experiencing interaction with children who are deaf or hard of hearing is that only a few of them get placed in inclusive classrooms which have these children. The reason for this is logistical in that due to insufficient funds available for teaching practice, the colleges are not able to place trainees in schools which are far from the college. The fact that very few schools within the vicinity of the colleges had enrolled children who are deaf or hard of hearing indicates that only a few trainees get an opportunity to experience communication with these children. This implies that although teaching practice is well intentioned to enable trainees to develop practical skills, only a few may develop skills for communication with children who are deaf or hard of hearing.

In Uganda, pre—service teacher trainees are enrolled after completing of a secondary school education. There is no requirement that they should have prior experience in teaching before enrolling for the teacher education program. This indicates that for most of these trainees, teaching practice placement is the first time to experience the dynamics of the classroom. In order to develop skills for communication with children who are deaf or hard of hearing, therefore, teacher trainees should have sufficient time to practice their teaching and

to interact with these children. This study, however, reveals that the teaching practice placement is allocated a period of six weeks only. This period is not sufficient for trainees to develop skills for communication with children who are deaf or hard of hearing. This observation is based on the view that as teacher experience with children who have special needs increases, their confidence to teach these children also increases (Avramidis and Norwich, 2002).

During teaching practice placement, teacher trainers are expected to assess trainees' teaching in order to establish aspects in which they [trainees] might need support. One of the aspects that teacher trainers are expected to consider in the assessment is '*How the teacher trainee communicates to the learners*'. Information that is obtained about this aspect is expected to be used as a basis for guiding trainees to develop skills for communication with children. The assessment form does not, however, present sufficient detail regarding skills which teacher trainers should consider when assessing communication between trainees and children who are deaf or hard of hearing. Only two aspects regarding communication with these children are presented in the assessment form, that is, '*audibility*' and '*how the trainee positions him/herself*'. Considering these two aspects only may not yield information that is sufficient for teacher trainers to support trainees to develop skills for communication with deaf or hard of hearing children. It is generally known that the amount of information perceived by a person with a hearing difficulty depends on the severity of the hearing loss, and that the hearing loss may influence his/her communication needs. This implies that trainees need support in several aspects of communication with these children and not just a few.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore how pre—service teacher trainees in Uganda are prepared in order to develop their skills for communication with children who are deaf or hard of hearing in inclusive classrooms. The study specifically considered the accommodations made in the curriculum and how they are implemented in order to achieve the above goal. The main finding is that there are some accommodations that might enable trainees to develop skills for communication with children who are deaf or hard of hearing in inclusive classrooms. The training manual has subject content that is expected to enable trainee to learn about communication with these children. Trainees also have an opportunity to put what they are taught into practice during teaching practice. However, the data also shows that the available provisions are not sufficient to enable trainees to develop adequate skills for communication with these children. Given the diversity of communication approaches that may be necessary in communication with children who are deaf or hard of hearing, the training should be designed in a way that can enable trainees to develop in-depth skills in these approaches.

Practical implications

The findings from this study point to the need for a review of policy and practice of pre —service teacher education for inclusion of children who are deaf or hard of hearing. First, the curriculum for preparing pre—service teacher trainees should be modified to include subject content and practical activities that are sufficient to enable trainees to develop skills that may be necessary for communication with these children. Secondly,

teacher trainers should be retrained with a focus on enabling them to develop competencies necessary for supporting pre—service teacher trainees to acquire skills for communication with children who are deaf or hard of hearing in an inclusion education setting. Thirdly, in order to effectively implement pre—service teacher education for special needs education and inclusion in Uganda, there is need for a policy that compels teacher education institutions to prioritise training in special needs education and inclusion during the allocation of resources. Such a policy, if operationalised, may be a step in the right direction with regard to implementing the global agenda of inclusion and education for all.

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