

Provisions Teachers Make For Students with Special Educational Needs in Three Selected Inclusive Schools at Pokuase in the Greater ACCRA Region of Ghana: The Use of Peer Support

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Abstract: *The study focused on investigating teachers' promotion of peer support for students with special educational needs to enhance their participation in learning at Pokuase in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana. The study employed the descriptive survey design. Purposive and simple random sampling techniques were used to select the sample size of 112 respondents. Descriptive statistical method was used to analyse questionnaire data for the study. Data from the semi-structured interviews were analysed using thematic data analysis. Results from the study revealed that, teachers assigned students with learning difficulty to a peer for support during the teaching and learning process, students who needed support are seated in close proximity to peers during lessons, teachers engage students in cooperative learning. Also, peers are allowed to copy, review and explain lessons to students with special needs during teaching especially for students with poor finger dexterity and slow learners. However, the study recommended that teachers expand peer support to include assisting the physically impaired students get about their environment and allowing students with special educational needs serve as tutor to their peer as well. **Purpose of the study:** The study sought to investigate how teachers promote peer support for students with special educational needs during teaching and learning process.*

Keywords: Peer, Support, Provisions, Special Educational Needs

1. Introduction

Education has to be of the highest possible quality to help every child reach his or her potentials and that quality should be consistent across regions, different populations, urban and rural settings. Quality in education can only be achieved through the development of child-friendly inclusive learning environments, dedicated to a holistic approach to children's development. All learning environments and educational content, teaching and learning processes should reflect human rights principles. This means addressing children's multiple rights, using strategies that build links between the school, the family and community (UNICEF, 2011). Quality education for students with disabilities in inclusive schools can only be achieved if the learning environment, teaching and learning processes address the unique needs of these students. Hayford (2013), viewed quality education as one that encompasses the rights of the whole child, and all children to survival, protection, development and participation are at the centre. Its focus is on learning which strengthens the capacities of children to act progressively on their own behalf through the acquisition of relevant knowledge, useful skills and appropriate attitudes; and which creates for children and others, places for safety, security and healthy interaction. Extending the position of Hayford, in achieving quality education for all learners where learners are the focus of any learning situation, there is the need to put in place some provisions. Key among the provisions is peer support. This supports the social constructivism philosophy that students learn best when they interact with their peers.

Peer Support for Students with Special Educational Needs

The Saskatchewan Special Education Unit (2001) recognizes practices in support to students with disabilities as far as peer interactions are concerned. These include; social interaction through the use of circles of friends, peer buddies, peer tutors, cross age tutoring, and cooperative learning. In providing peer support to students with special educational needs, it is expected of teachers to inform students who are to provide support, of the rationale for their involvement in delivering support to their classmates, their teachers' expectations related to this role, and information about how their classmates communicate, interact with their environment, and learn most effectively. Peers are then shown basic strategies for supporting their classmates with disabilities by adapting class activities to facilitate their participation; supporting behaviour intervention plans when appropriate; providing frequent, positive feedback; modelling age-appropriate and contextually relevant communication skills (Kennedy & Burstein, 2004). The study discussed teachers' enhancement of peer support for students with special educational needs to include; cooperative learning, peer-mediated instruction (peer tutoring), class wide peer tutoring (CWPT), peer-delivered support and peer buddy.

Cooperative learning

Cooperative learning is an approach of teaching that many proponents of inclusion believe is an effective way of integrating students with disabilities into groups of non-disabled peers. In cooperative learning, students work together in heterogeneous small groups to solve problems or practice responses. The emphasis is on assisting each other in learning rather than on competition. Some educators have suggested that cooperative learning leads to better attitudes

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on the part of non-disabled students toward their peers with disabilities as well as to better attitudes of students with disabilities toward themselves (Pomplun, 1997).

It is believed that in a learning process students differ in capabilities. Students with low ability will learn from their fellow capable peers. Cooperative learning among students of different learning capabilities and learning needs, in an inclusive classroom, has proved to be effective in promoting academic achievement, positive attitude towards the subject, and improving social interaction among students (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2010; Vygotsky, 1978).

Cooperative group learning helps each student to carry out different tasks. The teacher puts students with different abilities and talents into a small group and assigns that group a specific task, with the requirement that the students work together to achieve this goal (Howden & Kopiec, 2002). The teacher needs to structure the task so that no member of the team can complete it on his or her own (Gillies, 2016). It is a good strategy of teaching students with special educational needs, particularly in the mixed ability groups. It is especially important in third world countries where classes are very large (Mitchell, 2008). In these groups, students with special needs should be paired with their fellow sighted students who will help them to organize their works, find correct pages and repeat teacher's instructions (UNESCO, 2001).

Cooperative learning groups foster both positive interdependence and responsibility. All the students share the same goal as well as knowledge, expertise, and resources, and together actively participate in searching for a solution. They grow to understand that their own involvement and their efforts provide solid support for their teammates and are essential for the success of the team (Gillies, 2016). Students use their social interactions within the group to verbalize and reformulate their ideas, confront each other with new ideas, and discuss and compare their ways of learning. As a result, they are able to clarify and better understand important concepts. In addition, students learn appropriate social behaviour and skills when they are put into a learning situation that requires them to work constructively with a group. They learn to listen to one another, help and provide constructive criticism to one another in a courteous manner, and encourage others to express themselves (Gillies, 2016).

Peer-mediated instruction (peer tutoring)

Harper and Maheady (2007) described peer-mediated instruction or peer tutoring, as the use of peer confederates in managing behaviour problems, or any other arrangement in which peers are deliberately recruited and trained to help teach academic or social skills to a classmate. This is quite different from cooperative learning, in which students simply work together to accomplish a task. In most examples of peer-mediated instruction, professionals have advocated having students with disabilities act as tutors as well as tutees. Peer-mediated approaches have long been utilized to improve the learning outcomes and social interactions of students with and without disabilities, especially students with high incidence disabilities. Peer-mediated approaches, which are also referred to as peer-

mediated interventions, utilize other students as the primary instructional interventionist. As students with disabilities increasingly are spending more of their school day in general education classes alongside their classmates without disabilities, peer-mediated strategies are being recognized as an especially promising vehicle for promoting full participation and success in school. Indeed, the involvement of peers without disabilities increasingly is a core element in many intervention packages used to support students with disabilities within inclusive classrooms.

Mastropieri, Scruggs, and Graetz (2005) compared the outcomes of secondary level students with disabilities associated with peer tutoring in inclusive science classes in contrast to similar students engaged in teacher-directed instruction. These results support the effectiveness of peer tutoring in a science inclusive classroom. Peer tutoring may be crucial in increasing student learning when students lack the literacy skills needed for independent learning from textbooks (Mastropieri, Scruggs, & Graetz, 2005; Spencer, Scruggs, & Mastropiere, 2003). When peer tutoring strategies are utilized, students with disabilities have outperformed peers on a post-test of content knowledge (Mastropieri, Scruggs, & Graetz, 2005). These results suggest that appropriately employed peer tutoring programmes can be used to increase comprehension and content area learning for students with disabilities.

Class wide peer tutoring (CWPT)

In this approach, peer tutoring is routinely done by all students in the general education classroom for particular subject matter, such as reading and math. CWPT is a form of intra-class, same-age, reciprocal peer tutoring. Unlike other forms of peer tutoring, CWPT is designed to operate only with the children in one particular classroom, not involving upper-grade or higher-skilled tutors from other classrooms. CWPT are designed to be reciprocal; that is, each student serves as both the tutor and the tutee during each CWPT session (Utley, Mortweet, & Greenwood, 2001). CWPT does not mean that the teacher provides no instruction. On the contrary, teachers must provide instruction in how to do peer tutoring and in the content of the tutoring sessions. Peers tutor each other to provide drill and practice of skills they already has (Greenwood, Arrega-Mayer, Utley, Gavin & Terry, 2001).

Data on the instructional effectiveness of CWPT show that students retain more of what they learn and make greater advances in social competence with CWPT compared to traditional teacher-led instruction (Ntoliou, Papatzikis, Pliogou, 2016). As a teaching strategy, CWPT has proven effective for improving students' test performance and improvement in accuracy (Lee, 2003).

Peer-delivered support

The support strategies just mentioned are modeled by a paraprofessional or special educator as students with and without severe disabilities work together. Initially, curricular and instructional adaptations are made by these adults, with some input and involvement from peer supports (Cushing, Clark, Carter, & Kennedy, 2003). While peers are providing support to their classmates, peers receive on-going monitoring, periodic feedback, and any necessary assistance

from paraprofessionals, special education teachers, and general education teachers. These educators continue to ensure that adaptations, assistance, and interactions are appropriate and educationally relevant. As peers evidence greater confidence in their new role and demonstrate their capacity to deliver appropriate support, active adult involvement is systematically faded. Students with severe disabilities do not lose access to individualised supports; they simply begin receiving those supports from someone else (Cushing, Clark, Carter, & Kennedy, 2003). Thus, peers assume a primary support role which may include paraphrasing lectures, clarifying instructions, asking comprehension questions, modifying class materials, offering choices, reviewing work, and supporting partial participation in activities.

Peer buddy

They are an inexpensive way to facilitate inclusion in the classroom and also to promote social inclusion of students with disabilities. Peer buddy supports can be used in a variety of ways: writing if the student has physical limitations; assisting with academic work (reviewing a lesson or detailing instructions if needed); assisting student with mobility (pushing wheelchair, sighted guide); using student's mode of communication (voice output device, sign language, symbol boards); help student keep attention directed toward the teacher; provide corrective feedback; be a positive role model; facilitate social interactions between student and peers (Carter, Cushing & Craig, 2009).

Peer support interventions have the propensity of increasing both access to the general education curriculum and facilitating social interactions in general education settings that might not otherwise occur in these contexts. These interventions involve one or more classmates without disabilities providing academic and social support to a student with disabilities. These classmates then take a direct role in accessing the general curriculum under the supervision of one or more adults. As with other peer-mediated strategies, peer support interventions comprise a structured approach to involving classmates directly in the delivery of educational and social supports (Maheady, Harper, & Mallette, 2001).

Peer support arrangements serve to restructure students' instructional environment by establishing teacher-sanctioned, interdependent interactions between students with and without disabilities. Such arrangements create additional communication opportunities by increasing the number of initiations directed to the student with severe disabilities, as well as increasing the likelihood that students' interaction attempts will be reinforced by their peers. Also, many students with severe disabilities have substantial difficulties in the areas of communication, language, and social interaction skills (Downing, 2006).

Peer support arrangements promote these skills by providing additional practice opportunities and peer modelling, whereby students receive peer feedback regarding the appropriateness of their social behaviour. As the real experts on both critical conversation skills and adolescent peer culture peers may be more effective than adults at shaping appropriate conversational behaviours. Finally, the initial

training provided to peers, coupled with on-going information and feedback from educators, ensures that students demonstrate confidence when interacting with and supporting their classmates with disabilities (Downing, 2006).

Carter, Cushing, Clark, and Kennedy (2005) demonstrated that middle and high school students with disabilities maintained high levels of engagement in instructional activities that were aligned with the general curriculum when working with one or two peer supports in core academic classrooms. These findings challenge the prevailing view that paraprofessionals are always necessary as direct, one-on-one support to students enrolled in inclusive classrooms.

Notwithstanding, educators, administrators, and parents sometimes raise concerns about the possible detrimental impact of peer support interventions on the academic performance of participating students without disabilities. Research suggests, however, that peers are not hampered academically by their support role and actually may improve their academic performance when assuming responsibility for assisting their classmates with disabilities (Shukla et al., 1998).

2. Methodology

The study used the mixed methods approach to establish how teachers promote peer support for students with special educational needs at Pokuase in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana. Mixed methods research is an approach of enquiry that combines both qualitative and quantitative methods in a study such that the strength of the study is greater than either quantitative or qualitative research when used alone (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2007).

The descriptive survey design was adopted for study. Descriptive survey research design set out to describe and to interpret what is over a period of time (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2003). The population for the study was 950 which comprised all teachers and students with/without special educational needs in the three selected inclusive pilot basic schools at Pokuase in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana.

The population is high because the schools involved in the study are cluster. A sample of 112 respondents was selected comprising all teachers and students with special educational needs from three pilot inclusive schools. In all, ninety-seven (97) teachers and fifteen (15) students with special educational needs from the three schools were involved. Five students with special educational needs were selected from each school. The purposive and simple random sampling techniques were used to select teachers and students for the study. Teachers were sampled strictly by purposive sampling technique where the researcher solicits from persons with specific characteristics to participate in a research study (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). The census sample was employed where all teachers from the three selected pilot schools were involved in the study. The census sample was used because every teacher had, at least, one or more students with special educational needs in his or her

class. Purposeful sampling was used because it economizes time and specific information can be obtained at a much reduced cost and time.

Instrumentation

In this study, questionnaire and interview were used for data collection. The questionnaire was used for teachers. The questionnaire had 30 close-ended items. The questionnaire contained two sections, the demographic and items based on the major themes in the research questions for the respondents. The items were built on a 4 likert scale points ranging from Strongly Agree (SA) =4; Agree (A) =3; Disagree (D) =2; and Strongly Disagree (D) =1. The respondents were to choose one options from which were closer to their own opinions. The questionnaire were constructed to cover the key themes raised in the research questions.

A semi-structured interview schedule was used to obtain data from students with special educational needs. The choice of this interview was to offer sufficient flexibility to approach different respondents differently while still covering the same areas of data collection. The researcher conducted the interview in a focus group of 5 participants from each school. The items were developed to cover enhancing peer support for students with special educational needs in the three selected schools. Interviews were used in the study because according to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007), interviews enable participants to discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live, and to express how they regard situations from their own point of view.

Procedure for data collection

The researcher sought permission from heads of the three selected schools in writing of which the head subsequently informed the teachers about the study in order to solicit their cooperation and assistance. After the permission was granted, the researcher arranged with the respondents the day of responding to the items. This is consistent with what Creswell (2005) says that it is important to respect the site where a research takes place.

The researcher went to the schools of study to administer the questionnaires and granted a focus group interview to the respondents personally to ensure maximum response. The researcher explained the purpose of the study, and re-assured the participants of the necessary confidentiality on the information to be gathered. The two instruments were administered on different days. Forty (40) minutes was allotted for responding to the questionnaires and forty-five (45) minutes for the interview. Answered questionnaires were retrieved on the same day. The interview was tape recorded and notes taken down to aid in the analysis.

3. Method of data analysis

Descriptive approach was used for analysing data from the questionnaire. This was influenced by the nature of the research questions. The statistical package for service solutions [SPSS] version 20 software was used in analysing data from the questionnaire. The data were initially analysed into frequency distribution and results were further converted into percentages for easy discussion. Descriptive statistics, in the form of percentages and frequencies, were employed to analyze the collected data. Frequency tables were constructed in line with the variables raised in the research questions to support the data analysis.

Interview data

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data collected from the interviews. The process of analyses began with the reading through the interview notes. Data was then transcribed and reviewed for accuracy. Minor adjustments to some specific language were made. Each transcription was coded by the interviewer. The participants were coded, **A**, **B**, and **C** respectively. This coding helped to maintain some level of confidentiality. The interview analysis was based on the fourth research question which sought to find out from students with special educational needs, how teachers enhance peer support for them in inclusive classrooms.

4. Discussion of Findings

How do teachers enhance peer support for students with special educational needs in inclusive classrooms?

S. No	Statement	SA	A	D	SD	TOTAL
1	Assign students with learning difficulty to a peer tutor for support	61 (63%)	27 (28%)	9 (9%)	0 (0%)	97 (100%)
2	I make sure students who need support sit in close proximity to peers during lessons	67 (69%)	30 (31%)	9 (9%)	0 (0%)	97 (100%)
3	I engage students in cooperative learning	61 (63%)	35 (36%)	1 (1%)	0 (0%)	97 (100%)
4	Peers are allowed to copy notes for students with writing difficulties	70 (72%)	25 (26%)	2 (2%)	0 (0%)	97 (100%)
5	Peers are allowed to read to students with reading difficulties	48 (50%)	36 (37%)	13 (13%)	0 (0%)	97 (100%)
6	Teachers allow peers to clarify instructions to students with special educational needs	53 (55%)	35 (36%)	9 (9%)	0 (0%)	97 (100%)
7	Students with special needs serve as tutors to peers without disability	53 (55%)	35 (36%)	9 (9%)	0 (0%)	97 (100%)

4.1 Results from the Interviews

Confirming the findings from teachers on how teachers promote peer support for students with special educational needs in inclusive classrooms, few of the students with special educational needs were interviewed in focus groups of five. The groups were labelled **A**, **B**, and **C** representing students from the three schools involved in the study. Participants **A** represented students from Pokuase A.M.E Zion School, Participants **B** stand for students from Pokuase

Methodist Basic School, and Participants **C** stand for students from Kutunse Basic School.

Responding to whether teachers' enhance peer support for students with special educational needs, the three groups of participants agreed that there existed provision on peer support. Talking about the kinds of peer support services teachers make, all the participants mentioned cooperative learning.

Participants **A** had this to say: *teachers assign us in groups to read passages during reading comprehension lessons.*

(Source: Verbatim expressions of participants' responses).

We are put into groups to learn together most often (Participants **B**).

(Source: Verbatim expressions of participants' responses).

Teachers provide us group work to do (Participant **C**).

(Source: Verbatim expressions of participants' responses).

Asking students if teachers assign students with special educational needs peer tutors to assist them, they had this to say:

Teachers only put us in groups to learn without anyone taking the lead in teaching or explaining concepts to us (Participants **A**).

(Source: Verbatim expressions of participants' responses).

Participants **B** made this statement:

Friends that are very good are sometimes made to assist those of us that have difficulty in understanding some concepts in class. We are seated close to students who offer us peer support.

(Source: Verbatim expressions of participants' responses).

Participants **C** agreed that teachers provide them with peer tutors in class. They had this to say:

During and after lessons students who are good are made to give us support in order to understand concepts that we find difficult. This is usually done to any other students who have difficulty in understanding a concept. Teachers pair us with intelligent students where we seated close to them.

(Source: Verbatim expressions of participants' responses).

Students were asked how does the provision of peer tutors aid in their learning and they had this to say;

Participants **A** remarked: *there is no peer appointed to take the lead in supporting those with learning difficulties during and after lessons therefore cannot talk much on the relevance of peer tutoring.*

(Source: Verbatim expressions of participants' responses).

We feel better working with peers because they do have time to explain concepts better to our understanding. We sometimes shy away asking for clarification from teachers just to avoid being rebuked with insults but in company with friends we understand better (Participant, **B**).

(Source: Verbatim expressions of participants' responses).

Our understanding of concept is enhanced when working with peers. They take time to explain things to us unlike teachers who rush so much that in case you ask a question for clarification they shut you down that you are delaying them. Our performance in the lower class was poor because there wasn't any peer assistance in class (Participants, **C**).

(Source: Verbatim expressions of participants' responses).

Concerning the monitoring of peer support students provide to students with special educational needs, participant **A** had this to say:

Teachers go round to see what we are doing in each group but on no occasion did the teacher advice on the support that were given us.

(Source: Verbatim expressions of participants' responses).

Participants, **B** remarked:

Teachers go round and see to it that everybody is participating in any activity assigned. Peer tutors are sometimes re-directed on the exact assistance they should provide to those of us with special educational needs.

(Source: Verbatim expressions of participants' responses).

Participants, **C** commented:

Lead peer tutors are asked to withdraw from some of the activities and give chance to those with special educational needs. Teachers re-direct activities sometimes when peer tutors deviate from the expected assistance they are to provide.

(Source: Verbatim expressions of participants' responses).

As part of the interview, students with special educational needs were asked if they were provided scribes and respondents from the three selected schools agreed that there is a provision by teachers to that effect. In citing instances on the provision of scribes, respondents from the three selected schools mention copying of notes.

Teachers encourage friends to help me get my notes written says a low vision student

(Participants **C**).

(Source: Verbatim expressions of participants' responses).

Peers are made to read and copy notes for us because of our conditions (Participants **A& B**).

(Source: Verbatim expressions of participants' responses).

It is evident from the results that teachers assigned students with learning difficulties to peers for support. This result is in line with that of Carter, Cushing, Clark, and Kennedy (2005) who asserted that middle and high school students with disabilities maintained high levels of engagement in instructional activities that were aligned with the general curriculum when working with one or two peer supports in core academic classrooms.

The study revealed that, majority of teachers make sure students who need support sit in close proximity with peers during lessons. This result confirms the literature of Kennedy & Burstein (2004) that students who agree to work together need to be moved within the classroom so that they can sit next to each other and remain in close proximity during instructional activities.

Teachers' responses revealed that they engage students in cooperative learning. This result corroborates with that of Lypsky and Gartner, (1997) that cooperative learning among students with different learning capabilities and needs in an inclusive classroom has proved to be effective in promoting academic achievement, positive attitude towards the subject, and improving social interaction among students.

The results showed that, teachers allowed peers to copy notes for students with writing difficulties. This means students who have difficulties in writing are assigned peers who assist in copying of notes. Again, teachers allow peers to read to students with reading difficulties. Finally, teachers allow peers to clarify instructions to students with special educational needs. This supports the assertion of Carter, Cushing and Craig (2009) that peer supports can be used in a variety of ways: writing if the student has physical limitations; assisting with academic work (reviewing a lesson or detailing instructions if needed).

Notwithstanding, the peer support provided is championed by students without special educational needs only. This therefore means much attention is not paid to the use of CWPT during teaching and learning.

5. Conclusion

Making the necessary provisions is a key to the successful inclusion of students with special educational needs. This can be achieved when teachers make provisions for the use of peer support during teaching and learning. The study therefore concludes though teachers make use of peer support system during teaching and learning, much attention is not paid to the case where students with special educational needs play tutor roles.

6. Recommendation

The study recommended that the peer support used by teachers should be expanded to include students with special educational needs playing tutor roles during teaching and learning process. This will enhance their full participation in teaching and learning.

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