

Inclusive Early Childhood Education and the Development of Children with Learning Disabilities in Ghana: Cultural-Historical Analysis

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Abstract : Historically, reforms in early childhood education in Ghana have focused narrowly on structural and pedagogical aspects with little attention paid to the broader sociocultural framework within which schooling and child development systems interact. This preliminary study investigates inclusive early childhood education within rapidly changing Ghanaian socio-cultural context, and its consequences for the development of children with learning disabilities. The study addresses an important topic, which is largely under-researched outside of Europe, North America, and Australasia. While inclusive education has been widely accepted globally at the level of policy, its implementation is uneven, as is shown in numerous studies across an array of countries and education systems. Despite this burgeoning area of research internationally, there have been far fewer studies conducted in African settings and fewer still that use cultural-historical activity theory as an investigative approach. More so, specific literature on the subject in the Ghanaian context is non-existent and, as such, coming to a deeper understanding of the sociocultural practices that shape, and possibly impede, inclusive early childhood education in an African country, Ghana, is a worthwhile research endeavour. Using cultural-historical activity theory as a methodological framework, this study employed classroom observations, and in-depth interviews and focus group discussions of preschool teachers in three kindergarten centres in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana to qualitatively explore inclusive early childhood education and the development of children with learning disabilities. The findings showed that literature from Ghana rarely discusses child informed consent as an on-going process that must be articulated throughout the research process from data collection to analysis, reporting and dissemination. Further, the study showed that the introduction and implementation of inclusive education framework - with its concomitant revisions in the curriculum, policies, and school rules, as well as enhanced community and parent involvement - into existing schooling practices, generated contradictions in inclusive teachers' approaches to teaching and learning, and classroom management. Generally, contradictions in the understanding and acceptability of approaches to teaching and learning occur when a new way of doing things is incorporated into existing practices. These contradictions are thought to be a source of change and development. Thus, they guide teachers to unlearn outmoded practices, relearn or learn new approaches that are beneficial to the development of all children. Nonetheless, the findings of the current study showed that preschool teachers' belief systems and perceptions of disabilities mediated the outcomes of such contradictions. Also, that was evidenced in the way they engaged children with learning disabilities compared to their typically developing counterparts, showing disregard for what was prescribed by new policies and school rules. The findings have implications for research with young children and the development outcomes of children with learning disabilities in inclusive early childhood education settings.

Keywords : CHAT, classroom management, cultural-historical activity theory, Ghana, inclusive early childhood education, schooling practices, young children with learning disabilities

Conference Title : ICCED 2019 : International Conference on Childhood Education and Development

Conference Location : Amsterdam, Netherlands

Conference Dates : December 02-03, 2019