

Inclusion of differently abled students in teacher education programmes- Gambia College reverses the trend in conventional Teacher Education

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ABSTRACT

Training differently abled persons (visually impaired, hard of hearing and persons with physical impairment) as teachers for mainstream schools is not only seen as difficult but impossible for some. The fact that differently abled persons are more likely to be excluded from primary and secondary education is a reason why the training of such persons to teach in mainstream school would be seen as impossibility. In The Gambia, it is common to see differently abled persons sitting under the hot burning sun or in shopping areas asking for alms. The Gambia College in collaboration with the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education came up with an intervention to provide opportunities for differently abled person to train as teachers for the basic education sector. This conference paper intends to discuss, how Gambia College, an institution with little resources, could include differently abled persons in its teacher education programmes. The paper will examine the following: the numbers of differently abled students graduating from Grade 12, high school, importance and benefits of training them, integrating them into mainstream schools, challenges faced by both differently abled students and tutors. Short videos and pictures will be included in the paper and during the presentation.

INTRODUCTION

The Gambia is one of the smallest countries in main land Africa, with a population of about 2.1 million people and a youthful population of more than 40% all of whom are of school going age. As in all other countries the youth are potentially the engine that will drive the economy of the country in the coming decades.

Teacher education is one of the key institutions that try to address both the needs of the youngest into the world of work as well as to meet the demands of a society that constantly needs trained and qualified teachers. Teacher professional development begins with pre-service teacher education comprising both theory and practice. With a student population of 10,000 the Gambia College is the main teacher education institution training teachers for the Nursery, Primary, and Lower Secondary and sometimes for the Upper Secondary, as well as religious teachers (Islam and Christianity). The Gambia College provides curricula leading to the award of Diploma and Advanced Diploma in Education. Other institutions that offer Teacher education at a smaller scale are the Gambia Technical Training Institute which provides training for Technical teachers and the University of The Gambia which offers training leading to the award of Bachelors in Education for Senior Secondary teachers (Upper Secondary). .

The Gambia has a nine year basic education structure, comprising six years at the primary level (lower basic) three years at the lower secondary (upper basic level). This is followed by three years of upper secondary level (senior secondary).

Despite its size, she has one of the world's highest youth populations. According to the national Housing and population census of 2013, the population of persons aged 0-14 year's stands at 37.44% while that of persons aged 15-24 years stands at 20.47.

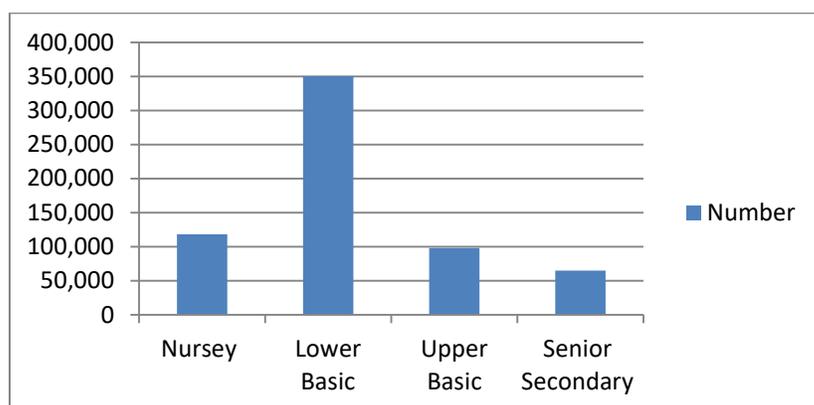


Fig. 2: Number of Children of school going age

Children of school going children age at the Nursery school level, number 117,987, while the lower basic level stands at 350, 323. The numbers for the Upper Basic Schools stands at 98,108 with 64,957 at the senior secondary¹.

Like in all other countries, the Gambia has its own share of persons with ‘disability’. According to the Population and Housing census, 2003, the prevalence rate, increased from 1.6% in 1998 to 2.8% in 2003 dropping to 1.2% in 2013². According to this survey, there exist major disabilities either as result of mental, sensory or physical impairment. The most commonly noticeable ones are the Visual impaired; the Hard of Hearing and the physically challenged persons.

There are specialized schools that have provisions for the training of Differently abled children.

Table 1: The Table below illustrates schools with such specialized services in The Gambia³

NO	Institution	Target	Level
1	GOVI Resource Centre Blind and visually impaired Pre-school,	Blind and visually impaired	Pre-school, Lower Basic and rehabilitated service
2	St John’s School for the Deaf	Hearing impaired	Pre-school & Basic Cycle and senior secondary
3	Methodist School for Learning Difficulties	Learning Difficulties	Pre-school, Lower Basic Cycle
4	GADHOH	Hearing Impaired	Pre-school, lower basic and Adult learning
5	Home for Children with Learning Difficulties	Learning Difficulties	Respite care
6	St Joseph’s Lower basic Hearing impaired	Hearing Impaired	Lower Basic (Unit system)
7	Second home	Children with learning difficulties	Respite care
8	Start Now	Visually impaired	Computer training

¹ Education year book 2018

²The national Population and Housing Census 2003

³ The revised Special needs and Inclusion police, Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education, 2016-2022

Focus on Differently abled person- Cultural Perspectives

The Gambia has deep cultural beliefs and traditions where giving out alms to poor or disadvantage people is seen as a way of protecting oneself from the evil eye or from enemies. Giving out alms is not a manifestation of goodwill to the receiver or out of empathy. It is purely a matter of servicing the interest, the needs and beliefs of the giver of charity. The less fortunate includes the differently abled persons. From traditional and cultural perspective, the differently abled persons in The Gambia are often seen and considered as the poorest. They are mostly a subject of pity, and dependence where ordinary people will take pity on them and give them alms. Their condition is aggravated by mythical, social and cultural beliefs about people in society who are differently abled. They can be very vulnerable due to superstition, abuse and the widespread prevailing negative attitudes in society, ignorance about disability issues and neglect. Accordingly the differently abled are excluded and condemned to a lifelong prison term of begging for their survival, misery and want. Conversely the differently able themselves have imbibed the negative stereotypes in the society to the extent that they give up even before they start. This mirror the inequalities in the society and a reflection of general social practices

Figures of Differently abled children in the school system

Differently abled children are enrolled in the education sector and make up 1.4% of the total number of children enrolled at all levels. This number might be quite small, yet it represents the numbers of the differently abled school going children. The question one would rightly ask is the fate of these children at the end of their term in school.

The table below shows the number of differently abled school going children in comparison to the overall school going population.

Table 2: shows the number of school going children including the differently abled from Nursery to senior secondary school⁴

Basic and Secondary school level	Total number of children	Total number of Differently abled children
Early Childhood Development (Pre -school)	117987	1333
Lower Basic	350323	4836
Upper basic	98108	1382
Senior secondary	64957	1040
Total	631375	8591

The table below illustrates the ages and disabilities of the differently abled school going children. The table shows that there are more children with visual impairment in schools than other children with impairments. In 2018, only 89 differently abled students completed grade 12, 49 girls and 40 boys. 68% of these had visual impairments

Table 3: Differently abled students and their disability types⁵

Educational Level	Ages	vision	Hearing	Speaking	physical	others	Total
Early Childhood Education (Pre-School)	4-7 years	286	191	367	254	235	1333
Lower Basic (Primary)	7-12	1713	1073	652	510	888	4836
Upper Basic (Lower secondary)	13-15	758	289	140	105	90	1382
Senior Secondary	15-18	639	174	56	73	98	1040

⁴ Education Year book 2018

⁵ Education Year book 2018

Inclusion of Special Needs Education in Gambia College teacher Education Programme

As part of its inclusion of Differently abled students, The Gambia College first introduced Special needs module/courses that all student teachers undergo. These courses cuts right across the whole spectrum of teacher training In addition the College offers training for itinerant teachers specialized in special needs education.

Up until 2015, the training of differently abled teachers to teach in regular schools was considered either a non starter or impossibility. In 2000 the Gambia College registered its first two differently abled student teachers with hearing impairment. The registration of these students was incidental; the students themselves knew that if they had revealed their impairment status, they would not have been registered. They therefore concealed this fact. From then on the Gambia College became more and more vigilant towards applicants with impairments and all their allied needs.

METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted at the Gambia using the current and past differently abled student teachers of the Gambia College, tutors and staff of the schools where the differently abled teachers are posted.

Research Design

The study was conducted using a cross-sectional research design. The research design is a mix method because it contains some aspects of both qualitative and quantitative attributes. This design was adopted because it is relatively not costly and takes little time to conduct. Moreover, the design can be used to assess many variables and risk factors, there is no loss to follow-up and it can be used to estimate the outcome or generate hypothesis of interest because the sample is usually taken from the whole population of the Gambia College registered differently abled student record.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The study included all differently abled under the watch of Gambia College, who are also available for the study while it excluded the differently abled trained from other.

Sample size and selection procedures

The sample size and selection procedures were based on the total number of admissions in the Gambia College from 2000 to 2020 academic year. The study covers a selected group of teachers, differently abled students, interpreters, and head teachers of schools visited as well as college tutors. From this scope, 4 non differently abled teachers from the special need schools were selected (2 male and 2 female), 4 students from each of the schools of which two are male and two female, 6 tutors of Gambia College, 10 visual impaired teachers from Gambia Organization of the visually Impaired (School of the visually impaired), and 8 Hard of hearing teachers from St. John School for the Deaf, 2 Hard of Hearing teachers from Gambia Association of the Deaf and Hard of hearing. Two support sign language interpreters (a male and female) and 2 head teachers, 2 visually impaired and one hard of hearing teacher in mainstream. A total of 41 respondents took part in the study. Both simple random sampling and batch sampling technique were applied for the study

The data collection method used was structured questionnaire. The tool was developed based on the associated factors of differently abled human beings. Other data collection tools that were used included camera, pencils, papers, erasers and notepads. In addition, a checklist was developed to collect variables of interest at the students enrolled at the college. Data processing and analysis were done with the using Microsoft excel version 2013, this tool, was used to analyze variable of interest in this research.

Ethical consideration

Permission was granted by the Special Education Unit under the Directorate of Basic and Secondary Education, Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education and Gambia College administration. In addition, verbal consent was sought from the differently abled before the questionnaires and video recording were administered. The respondents were assured that confidentiality would be maintained as the information they shared would not be disclosed to anyone except to inform policies.

RESULTS AND FINDING

Enrolment of Differently abled person into Teacher Education

Armed with this knowledge and awareness, Gambia College has had to rethink about recruitment and retention strategies of the differently abled students. On the strength of this and upon the insistence of the Gambia College, a broad Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed between The Gambia College and the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education. The main purpose of this MOU was to identify enabling ways in which this cohort of students will be supported. Consequently Gambia College took up the inclusion challenges and went above and beyond all expectations, (considering the meagre resources available).

The table below shows the number of differently abled student teachers enrolled in the teacher training programmes. This indicates the enrolment of 55 differently abled persons into teacher education. To date almost 32 have successfully completed their programme and are fully employed by the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education. Most importantly 25% of that same cohort that was recruited is teaching in mainstream schools. The rest are teaching in special need schools. The cohort of 2016-2019 will complete their training in August 2019 and will be employed by the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education. They will be posted to teach in mainstream schools.

Table 5: Enrolment of Differently abled student teachers

Year	# of Differently abled students			Programmes	
	Visual impairment	Hearing and Speaking	Physically challenged	PTC ⁶	HTC ⁷
2000-2003		2	1	2	1
2003-2006	2				2
2005-2008		1	1	1	1
2008-2011	1	1	1	2	1
2009-2012	1	1		1	1
2010-2013	6			6	
2012-2015	1			1	
2013-2106	1	1	1	3	
2014-2017		2		2	
2015-2018	8			2	6
2016-2019	17	2	1	15	5
2017-2020	1	2		2	1
	38	12	5	37	18
	55			55	

Enrolment at the Gambia college- School of Education begins in May of each year, like other applicants, differently abled applicants are allowed to apply for admission in the normal process. They are often supported during the application process. Those who miss the enrollment deadline are recommended by the Special Needs unit at the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education. Differently abled person (Visual and Hard of hearing) are supported in applying for the programme they want to.

How did Gambia College do it?

⁶ Primary Teachers' Certificate

⁷ Higher Teachers' Certificate

Including differently abled student in teacher education has no single recipe for its success. There are no quick fixes and 'no one size fits all. The training is largely individual based; each according to their needs, abilities and preferences. 'Depending on what is available and the situation, there are teaching strategies that have proven to be suitable for teaching a diverse group of learners which are flexible, emphasize learners choice, cooperation and independence.

Orientation of students

At orientation all students are reminded about their own individual abilities. They are also made aware of their differences, however subtle they may be. They are also reminded of the importance of collegiality/ camaraderie. This has often worked, as immediately classes begin the necessary support is given to those that need it. Differently abled learners are surrounded by persons ready to give them the support. From their dormitories to the classroom to the streets, they are given the necessary support.

Teaching

In the inclusion of differently abled students in teacher education, the following are used: Cooperative/ mixed ability learning, in which the differently abled students are put into small groups with other learners. To make them feel accepted the differently abled are spread out in different groups. They work together with their colleagues in the groups and are given the necessary support.

Partnering is also encouraged between differently abled students and non differently abled students. In class apart from the cooperative teaching group, each differently abled student especially those with visual and hearing impairments are paired with other students. Most of the time it happens naturally, or they would identify the student they want to be paired with and work together. Others times it is the non differently abled students who would volunteer to work and give them the necessary support

Team teaching is a method that has worked for them. This way they complement each other's strengths and weakness. It was amazing how synergy evolved out of this partnership

During teacher practicum, differently abled persons are posted to mainstream schools with their partners. They are each attached to a class yet they support each other.

Teaching and learning material-support to Differently abled

Despite the fact that teaching and learning resources are inadequate, differently abled students have few of these resources for support. There is often a collaborative effort in supporting them with teaching and learning materials. Gambia College does not have enough resources to support them. However with the support from the Special education unit of the Ministry, the Special schools, the Association of differently abled persons, philanthropists and friends, teaching and learning materials are provided for them

Students with visual impairment receive support from the special school with Braille machine and an embosser. The special needs unit provides tape recorders, batteries and cassettes for recording. At another level lap tops, desk top computers are supplied to them by friends and philanthropist. Thus students with visual impairment can use Braille machines, or computers for their work. They can record teaching and lessons with tape recorders or other forms of recorders. A small room with computers, scanners and a printer (support form Philanthropists) is at their disposal for them to work.

Students with hearing impairment, when it is mild are supplied with hearing aids. For the other, there is always a sign language interpreter who sits in the class. Where this is not available, their partners give them the necessary support.

For the physically challenged, in some areas there are ramps for wheel chair users, while for areas that are not easily accessible, again there is always someone to give the necessary support.

Major challenges;

Due to their low numbers, the tendency of differently abled students to be overlooked is a possibility especially in overcrowded classes. With some of the tutors and non differently abled students encountering differently abled students for the first, they often exhibit attitudes and behavior exhibited by the general public, attitude of sympathy, attitude of you ought to have stayed at home, you have no business to be here, you are taking too much of our time.

Thus the differently abled face challenges of feeling that they are not included. They sometimes feel left out in activities. Some of the major challenges they face include the fact that most of the books they use are in printed form so for the visually impaired it takes time to get the books photocopied or scanned. Generally all the respondent in the survey carried out. post training said that 'the learning materials used in the school system are not in legible format and some may not be available in soft copy. It takes a long time to have access to the materials'. In addition it takes them longer to access all the materials they need because the support service is inadequate or most of the time there is slow response maybe due to attitude or just simply 'they can wait' as is the norm in larger society. Examination is also a challenge especially for the visually impaired. One of the respondents said 'During exams we are always the last to start the exams, because the tutors will first attend to the other students before coming to support us'. 'Sometimes all the tutors are engaged and we have to wait a long time before one of them would attend to us'.

For the students with hearing impairment, one of the challenges they encounter is the inability to communicate with their tutors when the sign language interpreter is not present. Sometimes the tutors tend to forget that there are persons with hearing impairment and would speak so fast or would not face them when speaking.

Other major challenge these students face is financially. Most of these students come from very poor backgrounds and their families are unable to support. In fact they might not be the number one priority on their list. They sometimes find it difficult to meet their basic daily needs such as food and transportation.

Some of the tutors have never had the experience of having a differently abled person in their classes. As a result they are often shocked when they encounter a differently abled student in their class for the first time. According to one of the tutors, 'I had no idea how to support them.'? Some find it easier as they adapted quickly by reading literature on how to support them but for others it could be very difficult. Some believe that they needed proper training before having to interact with differently abled students in class as they would not know what to do. Some tutors lack the skills to work with a differently abled person and the willingness to learn about disability awareness and how to engage them in class. They sometimes go to the extent of patronizing them.

Benefits of training differently abled person as teachers

With all the challenges and the difficulties the differently abled students face during their training they all agreed that the training is beneficial to them and has helped them to be integrated into mainstream society, to be productive and to be recognized and appreciated by their families and society. One of the female respondents in the post training survey carried out said 'I have changed from being a dependent woman to a professionally independent woman because of the training I have had'.

Being trained as a teacher and posted to special schools or mainstream schools have helped them to be noticed in society and to take part in national development. They are contributing to societal development by teaching children from all different families. Both teachers and pupils from mainstream schools are getting used to interacting with differently abled trained teachers.

According to some heads of schools, having a differently abled teacher in school gives them a new perspective on impairment and has made them more aware and sensitive to their needs and aspirations.

CONCLUSION:

Training a differently abled student to become a professional teacher can be quite a challenge especially with limited resources. However, it has been realized that with little or no resources, a differently abled person can be included in teacher education. The survey carried out on the differently abled post training reveals that the differently abled teachers can be integrated into mainstream schools. However, the survey also reveals that to keep the momentum and the new trend in the inclusion of the differently abled in both mainstream and special schools require the following:

adequate teaching and learning materials, change of attitude and a short training course on Special needs education for teachers.

This study has showed that using other methods of training can work to achieve results. One can easily argue that Braille and tape recorders are outdated but using them has helped the differently abled students to learn on their own and to complete their training.

Using human support, support from the students, and support from colleagues is also another way of including differently abled students into training. Their partners feel happy and ready to support them. They feel happy to be with them and to even work in the same schools with them. If the training is to be appreciated it will be as a result of the peer support and peer partnership that the Gambia College used in supporting the differently abled. The fact that differently abled association and individuals are supporting the students with teaching and learning materials is also another factor that cannot be ignored in the training.

The education policy 2016-2030 states that:

‘ Special needs education is not only an issue for schools and teachers who look after children with disabilities, but also a whole system approach that touches the whole nation in its drive to include all inhabitants in every aspect of responsible civic life. ... In this regard, the adoption of complementary and mutually supportive approaches that are based on the principles of inclusiveness, integration and participation of children with special needs will be encouraged and school-friendly environments will be promoted’⁸.

In spite of the declarations of intentions of good will, the actions on the ground do not quite tally with the professions declared. Intentions alone have never moved mountains! It is the actions of men and women, small little people; like you and I, the rest of us are the things we need to do that.

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⁸ Education Policy 2016-2030

