Identification of Special Educational Needs for Early Childhood Inclusive Education in Ghana

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Abstract

Early Childhood Education is a key element for the growth and development of every country. This paper, provides a summary of reviewing the impact of early childhood special educational assessment on children to be 'at risk' of developing special educational needs. It was identified mainly that early identification of at risk factors for disabilities was ignored and there is minimal or no collaboration in the assessment procedures for learners. This has an adverse effect on the cognitive attainment and social or behavioural development on the child. The paper also discusses the identification of special educational needs; models/theories of teaching the early child; collaborators' perspectives; and future developments. The article closes with a call for improved training for practitioners working in early year's settings.

Keywords: Identification, Special Educational needs, Early-childhood, Education, At-Risk

1. Introduction

The Ministry of Education (MOE) sees education as a fundamental right. This position is strengthened in the 1992 fourth republican constitution of Ghana which facilitates government's commitment to achieving Universal Primary Education as envisaged under the Education for all (EFA)and packaged in the Millennium Development Goals (MDG'S). The Ministry of Education has therefore developed a framework, Education Strategic Plan (ESP) by which Ghana will meet its commitment to achieve set targets and objectives.

In May 2003, the Ministry of Education and Sport in Ghana issued its Education Strategy Plan (ESP) for 2003- 2015. The ESP serves as the frame work by which Ghana will meet the commitments of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in Education. Before 2003, preschool education for children aged 4-6 years was not part of the formal educational system in Ghana. It was included eventually as a result of the recommendations made by the President's Committee on Review of Education Reforms (October, 2002), where the importance of early childhood development and its far reaching effects were clearly outlined.

Early Childhood Education according to Benner (2013) is the instruction of children under the mandatory school age four and five kindergarten to eight years, which ensure cognitive stimulation and socialization. Schools have to value children and create activities that are meaningful for the children as it enriches their development for life. These ideas have turned into the underlying concept in Ghana of modern early childhood education as stated in the Education Act 2008, Act 788 which states that, the system of education at the Basic stage shall be organized in three progressive levels of which the two year kindergarten education is an aspect of first level. Kindergarten learning is based on relationships and it is highly dependent on the learning environment. Kindergarten teaching helps children learning mainly, through interactive activities and play. The learning areas of kindergarten education involve the following; environmental studies, language and literacy, numbers & numeracy (mathematics), creative art and psychosocial skills. These learning areas are meant to improve the child's social skills acquaint him/her with basic concepts and survival skills. Kindergarten teaching therefore involves small groups and one-on-one instructions (Castro, 1984;kilgo& Gargiulo, 2013). The focus of early childhood and care development (ECCD) education in Ghana has been on the cognitive development, environmental as well as the health and nutrition aspect of the child among others. The new approach to early childhood care and development (ECCD) is to formulate comprehensive policies and programmes for children, which the district assemblies and heads of institutions shall ensure that design of schools are user-friendly for children with special needs.

Institutions that deliver education to children with special needs shall improve upon the existing infrastructure and provide for additional facilities where necessary. According to Walvoord, (2010)the child as an individual will be diagnosed and assessed by a body of professionals (interdisciplinary approach) to arrive at an individualised educational program (IEP) to cater for the holistic needs of the child.

Cohen & Spenciner (2007) request a comprehensive form of diagnosis and assessment procedures targeted to meet diversity. Witt (1998) mentions that a parent or guardian shall take advantage of the inclusive educational facilities to send the child with special needs to the appropriate education facility, or subject to availability of resources, make a request for the provision of the appropriate educational facility. The education service in collaboration with the health service and ministry responsible for social welfare shall undertake the screening of children on admission, and the regular medical examination of children. To fulfil the above statement, the ministry of health (MOH) organises health visit to schools once a while. Meanwhile, the education

strategic plan of Ghana (ESP 2010-2020) spells out the strategies of the government for the education sector over the next decade. The plan is built up infour predecessors and upon earlier visionary strategies such as the FCUBE. In doing so, its aim is to ensure that education makes a positive contribution to our one national development plan and to achieving the international development goals (ESP.2012).After more than five decades of existence and educational reforms, substantial challenge exist, this constitutes critical questions confronting education in Ghana today. Not all, refusal by some school heads to admit special needs children into special schools below age six; and non-existence of a policy to address the identification and placement of special education of early childhood education.

2.0 Theorists/Principles
Gray and Macblain (2012), describes certain theories and principles for learning as follows:

2.1 Sigmund Freud (1856-1939)
Freud believed that the way parents dealt with their child's basic sexual and aggressive desires would determine how the child's personality developed. Freud also thought that all babies were born with instinctive selfish urges which he labelled the "Id". As a child experienced that not all his or her whims were met, he or she developed a more realistic appreciation of what is realistic and possible, which Freud called the "Ego". Over time, Freud believed, babies learn values or morals, which he called the "Super-Ego". The Super Ego, he thought then worked with the Ego to control the selfish urges of the Id. In determining the basic need of the early child according to Freud was a necessity to accomplish, in order to allow the child achieve to his fullest.

2.2 Erik Erikson (1902-1994)
Erikson believed that personality develops in a series of stages. In each stage, Erikson believed children experience conflicts that affect development. He believed these conflicts are based on either developing a psychological quality, or failing to develop that quality. During these times, the potential for success and development is high, but so is the potential for failure. Below are Erikson's Psychosocial Stages that occur during childhood;
   i. Social, emotional development which is the first of Erikson's Psychosocial Stages is Trust vs. Mistrust. An infant develops trust when he experiences his needs being met in a consistent, nurturing relationship with a primary caregiver he/she form attachments.
   ii. Erikson's second Psychosocial Stage, Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt, says that toddlers strive to be autonomous. We can help them to get there by supporting them when they struggle, and being there for them, but not always doing for them. Toddlers also need to be able to make simple choices that allow them to decide things for themselves and build self-esteem and confidence.
   iii. In his third Psychological Stage, Erikson says that pre-schoolers begin to assert their power and control over the world through directing play and other social interaction, allowing them to feel capable and able to lead others.
   iv. Erikson's fourth Psychological Stage occurs between ages 5 and 11. At this age, children develop self-confidence by interacting with their peers and through encouragement and praise by parents and teachers.
   v. The fifth Psychological Stage, Identity vs. Confusion, suggests that encouraging adolescents to explore their independence, strengthens their sense of self and their ability to be self-sufficient and gives them the feeling of being in control of their own world.
As mentioned by Erikson, the early childhood level of education serves as the platform for the rest of the educational journey of all learners and when this was done well, it was a sign of a brighter future.

2.3 Jean Piaget (1896-1990)
Piaget believed that early cognitive development occurs through a process where actions prompt thought processes, which influence the actions the next time around. He talked about Schemas which describe both the mental and physical actions involved in interpreting and understanding the world. New information acquired through an experience is used to modify, add to, or change previously existing schemas. This makes cognitive development followa fixed process of four stages that are the same for all children, though they may arrive at each stage sooner or later than their peers. For the purpose of this presentation, we will mention the first two which befits the pre-schooler.
   i. His first stage is Sensory-Motor (0-2 years); in this stage, the child is learning about the world around him through his senses. This is the stage; Piaget said infants learn about object permanence, that a person or object still exists, even if the infant cannot see it.
   ii. The second stage is the Pre-Operational Stage (2-7 years); in this stage, the child sees his world as if it revolved around, and for, him. Piaget tells us that children learn differently than adults because

they do not yet have the experiences and interactions needed to interpret information but rather constantly gather information though their senses. They learn about their world by watching, grasping, saying and listening.

This means that, the environment and the available resources must be rich and child friendly to facilitate easy learning.

2.4 Urie Bronfenbrenner (1917-2005)

Urie Bronfenbrenner developed the Ecological Systems theory to explain how a child's environment influences his/her development. In his model, there is a hierarchy of influence levels. He puts the child, who comes with his own temperament and conditions, in the middle, or Micro-System. The nuclear family, or Meso-System, has the greatest influence on a child's emotional development since hopefully; his first attachment is to his mother or other primary caregiver. The community a child lives in and the school(s) he attends, the Exo-System also has a substantial amount of influence on his social emotional development; in particular, the early childhood program he attends, and the relationships he establishes with his teacher or provider. Bronfenbrenner's Macros-System, or society, which includes culture, government and public policies, comes next. The final system, called the Chrono System includes transitions such as moving, changing schools, divorce and other life changes that can affect a child's social emotional development. Bronfenbrenner, also stresses that the environment in which the child found him/herself is a contributing factor to the development.

2.5 B.F.Skinner (1904 – 1990)

B.F. Skinner as stated byMcLeod, (2015)coined the term operant conditioning to mean roughly changing of behaviour by the use of reinforcement which is given after the desired response. Skinner identified three types of responses or operant that can follow behaviour.Skinner coined the term operant conditioning and believed children's behaviour and learning can be shaped by providing rewards and appropriate punishment.

2.6 Alfred Bandura (1925 –2015)

Bandura believed that children can learn new information and behaviours by watching, or observing, other people. This is referred to as the social learning theory.According to McLeod (2011), models are individuals that are observed and that in society; children are surrounded by many influential models, such as parents within the family, characters on children's TV, friends within their peer group and teachers at school. The author continues to explain that, these models provide examples of behavior to observe and imitate, e.g. masculine and feminine, pro and anti-social etc. Children therefore have to pay attention to some of these people (models) and encode their behavior especially when that behaviour was ideal. At a later time they may imitate (i.e. copy) the behavior they have observed. The underlining factor then is that, children must be watched and guided to choose between appropriate attitudes from models to lead exemplary lives.

2.7 Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934)

Vygotsky believe in the socio-cultural theory-that children learn actively and through hands-on experiences, and that parents and caregivers and peers have a role in a child's development. Children, he said, learn best when new information is scaffold for them. He called the area of cognitive development, from where a child starts out to where he could get to with scaffolding, the Zone of Proximal Development. According to Davidova & Kokina (2002: 15), Vygotsky is one of such theoreticians, who make the pedagogical researcher think of the wholeness approach, invariable and changeable processes, as well as dominating and subordinated parts of a system.

2.8 John Bowlby (1907-1990)

John Bowbly is thought to be the first to introduce the attachment theory. He believed that early relationships with caregivers play a major role in child development, and continue to influence social relationships throughout life. McLeod, S. A. (2007) stipulate that if an infant's parent or caregiver is consistently dependable, the child will develop an attachment, or bond, with his or her parent or caregiver, and will feel secure enough to explore the world around him.Bowlby's evolutionary theory of attachment suggests that children come into the world biologically pre-programmed to form attachments with others, because this will help them to live independently and survive.

2.9 Summary

Every child has an inner self which is usually biological (genetic/trait); which grow through stages in the processes of experiencing conflict and exposure for development. Alongside this affirmative action requires prompts which create the opportunity for mental and physical growth. In addition, it is envisaged that, the environment in which one finds himself plays an important role for ones future thereby critically examining the

environmental factors being it internal or external as a major contributory factor. There is therefore the need for hands on activities, guided practice and reinforcement in addition to adequate resources and better relationships drivinghome the state of independency for the child.

3.0 Benefits of early childhood education

Early childhood education consists of activities and/or experiences that are intended to effect developmental changes in children prior to their entry into elementary school. Its programs include any type of educational program that serves children in the preschool years and is designed to improve later school performance; it produces significant gains in children's learning and development. High quality early childhood education therefore assists many at-risk children in avoiding poor outcomes, such as dropping out of school. Although the benefits seem to cross all economic and social lines, the most significant gains are almost always noted among children from families with the lowest income levels and the least amount of formal education.

4.0 The Way Forward

The identification of special education needs in the early years of children will inform the various stakeholders of the extent of disabilities or learning difficulties.

For infants and young children with disabilities, early detection, identification and access to early intervention services is necessary to provide support and training to parents and families in the early stages of their child's life. Parents and caregivers can play a crucial role in stimulating the early development of their child's potential and prevent the onset of severe secondary disabling conditions which can affect both physical and intellectual ability. Without early intervention, many disabled children will have a more limited capacity to benefit from education, if or when they have access to their local community school (UNESCO, 2009; Gargiulo & Kilgo, 2005).

4.1 Early identification

Families of young disabled children can play a critical role in the early development of their children but for this to happen they need to receive support, understanding and useful information on how they can help their children (Dash, 2006). This information needs to be available from birth or as soon as the disability becomes evident. The type of support needed is both professional and personal.The health and educational needs of children play an important role, particularly in the beginning developmental stage of life; therefore, early intervention programme is equally important to support organizations of people with disabilities and other training centres.

Children qualify for inclusion in an Early Intervention program either because they are on the state's list of automatically eligible conditions or after being assessed by a specialist. In most jurisdictions, because it is a genetic condition, it automatically qualifies the child for services. Programs are designed to provide support for the child's strengths and therapy to improve the child's weaknesses. In some areas, services are offered at your home, while other localities may require going to a centre. A comprehensive early intervention program addresses five areas of development, with specific services customized to meet each child's particular need:

√ Cognitive development: how a child thinks/learns, √ Physical development, including vision and hearing: usually involves physical therapy, √ Language, speech, and communication, √ Social-emotional development, and √ Adaptive/self-help skills development (UNESCO, 2009).

The early years of childhood represent a crucial window of opportunity for investments in skills or capabilities that can place children on the path to well-being in adulthood. Many recent studies in the last decade have focused on the importance of early human capital investments in academic and social skills for promoting long-term educational and economic success (Reynolds, Rolnick and Temple, 2014).Early identification and intervention of children with special educational needs is absolutely key: the earlier a problem is identified, the better the outcomes of intervention. Because learning is a cumulative process, difficulties found earlier on if not attended to, can have a cascading effect on the rest of a child's life. As stipulated by Reynolds, Rolnick and Temple (2014), early identification and intervention usually refer to finding emotional, intellectual, behavioural and mental health concerns at the earliest age they appear.These problems can emerge early in childhood and become progressively worse if not treated. Hence, identifying the above problems early can pave the way for children to get the support they need to experience successful futures both in and out of school. Knowing the early warning signs that put young children at risk for learning disabilities and understanding normal developmental milestones helps with early diagnosis and intervention. As of date, early intervention is considered to be the most important factor influencing long-term outcome in these children. Along with paediatricians and parents, it is the teachers and other educators, who can and must play a role in early identification.

4.2 Collaboration/ Interdisciplinary Approach

Children with disabilities are enrolled in inclusive early childhood programs in which supports and services from professionals from varying fields, such as, early childhood educators, special educators, physical therapists, occupational therapists, and others become essential (Bruder, 2010; Mc. William, 2010). These professionals receive specified training that provides them with expertise in supporting development across multiple domains including, cognitive, motor, communication, and adaptive skills (Hyson and Tomlinson, 2014). Collaborative teaming practices in early intervention and early childhood special education consist of three models: multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary (Bruder, 2010). He explained "multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary teams as teams that are known for having clear hierarchies of power and providing isolated assessment, planning, and intervention processes for each profession and also provide the best framework for implementing interventions across developmental domains for young children with disabilities (Hong & Reynolds-Keefer 2013).

Ghana Education service and other collaborators will in turn ensure the proper placement of these children in the appropriate special school and inclusive schools.

4.3 Assessment and Placement

Professionals, who make decisions about student assessment on a regular basis, have the arena of early childhood assessment that can be difficult to navigate (Yell, 2006). It is not enough to simply assess earlier content using the same approaches as those used in older grades, or to take decisions about tools and purposes that were made with older students in mind and extend them to younger children. Instead, professional standards and guidelines for early childhood assessment must begin with attention to the important reality that young children are continuously and rapidly developing, both academically and across a wide range of other domains. The context that informs assessment decisions for early learners is qualitatively different from the context for older students.Across the nation; school districts are selecting from among standardized measures, designed group-administered measures, and open-ended subjectively scored tests to make decisions about school or teacher accountability and student placement. These tests are part of accountability systems that have been designed differently in each state in an attempt to ensure that student learning has occurred of which Ghana is no exemption. In many cases, test results and accompanying consequences are neither clearly understood by parents nor policy makers. Often in an effort to design an accountability system, the developmental level of the child seems lost. What arethe assessment systems used for and what should well-designed assessment systems consider?

An assessment system should include a variety of instruments for various categories or purposes; clarifying the main purpose of the assessment, determining what should be measured, establishing procedures for data collection, and selecting data sources, m (child work, standardized tests, teacher report, and parent report) are all components in an assessment process. Safeguards, however, should be in place to protect against harmful or questionable assessment-based decisions with the consequences or use of the results spelled out to the parents. According to Robbins, (2011), assessment of individual children is currently used

- To determine progression on meaningful developmental achievements,
- To place or promote,
- To detect special needs, learning, and teaching problems,
- To assist with curriculum and instruction decisions,
- To help a child assess his or her own progress,
- To boost learning,
- To evaluate programs,
- To monitor trends, and
- For "high-stakes" accountability.

Assessments should benefit children by improving the quality of educational programs or in providing direct services to children. It should link to the specific purpose and must be valid, fair, and reliable for that purpose. When designing assessment policies, policy makers should consider that reliability and validity increase with children's age, and that the method of data collection and content through any data collection method selected should be age appropriate (suit the pre-schooler). It is critical to consider language development as well as special learning needs when determining both appropriate methods and in interpreting the meaning of assessment results.Multiple sources of evidence is key to presenting a clear picture of the child's learning needs. This means collecting information from the child's portfolio of work as well as from reports of parents and teachers (Banta, Jones & Black, 2009) These assessments should still be balanced with informal methods such as direct observations which may include looking at samples of work and drawings, asking other adults about the child, and asking questions of the child either orally or in writing is crucial.

4.4 Individualised Educational Programme

Though the federation of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), (Public Law 94-142) mentioned that an Individualised Educational Plan (I E P) ranges through 3-21, an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) is much broader and used for children from infancy through age 2. An IFSP is a document or written plan whichrefers to the process of determining what services a young child with developmental delays or disabilities need. It involves the family more, and may include professionals from several disciplines in planning for the child. An IFSP is based on an in-depth assessment of the child's needs and the concerns of the family. It contains information on the child's present level of development in all areas, outcomes for the child and family; and services the child and family will receive to help them achieve the outcomes (Yell, 2006).

An Individualized Education Program (IEP) is an important legal document which spells out the child's learning needs, the services the school will provide and how progress will be measured. Several people, including parents (multidisciplinary team) are involved in creating the document. The process is a way to sort out the child's strengths and weaknesses (Nettleton and John, 2015).Working on the IEP help figure out ways to help children succeed in school. Creating an effective IEP often takes time, effort and patience. A federal law called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that public schools create an IEP for every child receiving special education services. Kids from age 3 through high school graduation or a maximum age of 22 (whichever comes first) may be eligible for an IEP.

The IEP is meant to address each child's unique learning issues and it includesa specific educational goal that is legally bonded. Each school should therefore, provide everything it promises in the IEP including a statement of the child's present level of performance (PLOP). This is how a child is doing in a school:
1. Your child's annual educational goals.
2. Special education supports and services that the school will provide to help your child reach goals.
3. Modifications and accommodations the school will provide to help your child make progress.
4. Accommodations your child will be allowed when taking standardized tests.
5. How and when the school will measure your child's progress toward annual goals.
6. Transition planning that prepares teens for life after high school.

4.5 Availability of Resources

Inclusive schools must recognize and respond to the diverse needs of their children, accommodating both different styles and rates of learning and ensuring quality education to all through appropriate curricula, organizational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use and partnerships with their communities. There should be a continuum of support and services to match the continuum of special needs encountered in every school (UNESCO, 1994). Addressing the diverse learning needs of all children and students under a universal approach and within a learner friendly environment, fortifies the quest of appropriate and resources available (Robbins, 2011).The development of the learning material for children to work with helps the teacher to facilitate learning, without dominating the classroom or intimidating the children.

4.6 Teaching methodologies and learning styles

Hornby (2014), mentions that children vary considerably in the ease with which they learn to read. Some learn with fairly little instructional guidance, whereas others find it to be a nearly impossible undertaking given the instruction traditionally offered in schools. A substantial body of research that has accumulated over the last two decades indicate that most early learning difficulties can be prevented through the implementation of appropriately targeted and intensified instructional interventions.When teachers are trained to acquire the appropriate teaching techniques and skills, appropriate methodologies and pedagogical skills will be used to enhance the development of individual educational needs in the early years (Barton and Smith, 2015). The child acquires the skill of learning in self-directed way, hence teacher instructional strategies, or teaching methods meet the diverse needs of the children. Developing a good instructional strategy depends on a number of factors such as the developmental level of children, goals, intent and objectives of the teacher, content, and environment including time, physical setting and resources. A single method cannot meet all of our goals nor can a single method accommodate all learning styles at once.

5. Conclusion

There is the need to develop trust in the educational system and make it a powerful tool in preventing children at risk from slipping into preventive disabilities; otherwise, there is an adverse effect.Once the issue of early childhood education is catered for, it is envisaged that adequate involvement of the bodies that play major roles in the education of children at all levels will translate into better understanding of children's physical, mental and psycho-social development needs in the early years. Kindergarten education has proved to be full of play and interactions having an effect on the existing infrastructure to be improved. As this is catered for, the child's personality gets developed to the fullest as all his senses are maintained considering their temperaments rewards

and appropriate punishments. The following areas should be the guiding principle of early childhood education: early identification, team collaboration, assessment procedures, individualised educational plans, resources and appropriate teaching methods.

PERFORMANCE INDICATORS
➢ Number of partners and collaborators reached through dissemination.
➢ Number of stakeholders reached for resource mobilization.
➢ Number of activities created and budgeted.
➢ Number of mechanisms established for efficient mobilization of resources.
➢ Number of data collected from EMIS for capacity building.
➢ Number of DEOCs, Head teachers, Teachers, and Attendants trained.
➢ Number of PTA's/SMC's sensitized.

COLLABORATORS
✓ Ministry of Education
✓ UNICEF
✓ USAID
✓ Ministry of Women and Children Affairs
✓ Ministry of Social Welfare

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