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RESEARCH ARTICLE

PEDAGOGICAL PARITY OR SUBTLE EXCLUSION? TUTOR-STUDENT DYNAMICS IN SELECTED COLLEGES OF EDUCATION, GHANA

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Abstract

Inclusive education in Ghanaian colleges has largely emphasized physical accessibility and formal equality, while the nuances of pedagogical practice remain insufficiently examined. This study explores how tutors' attitudes and practices influence the experiences of student-teachers with orthopaedic impairments. Using semi-structured interviews and focus-group discussions with 15 participants from three colleges, the findings indicate that overt discrimination is rare; however, subtle institutional inflexibilities—such as rigid attendance policies, inaccessible dining arrangements, and unadapted classroom routines—perpetuate forms of pedagogical exclusion. Accommodation practices are often inconsistent, relying more on individual tutor goodwill than on formal institutional frameworks. Guided by Critical Disability Pedagogy, the study argues that genuine inclusion requires equitable (systemic, empathetic, and accessible) approaches rather than a narrow focus on equal treatment. The paper concludes by recommending policy reforms and targeted professional development to support sustainable pedagogical inclusion.

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Introduction:-

Inclusive education seeks to ensure that all learners, regardless of impairment, can participate meaningfully in academic and social life. In Ghana, colleges of education have made notable progress toward physical accessibility following their elevation to degree-awarding status in 2019. However, structural access alone does not guarantee pedagogical inclusion. Subtle barriers—such as rigid classroom routines, strict attendance policies, and unaccommodated dining arrangements—can create exclusionary experiences for students with disabilities. Globally, research suggests that inclusion depends not merely on presence but on the quality of interactions between educators and students (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). In Ghana, however, empirical studies on tutor-student dynamics within inclusive tertiary settings remain limited. This study addresses this gap by examining the experiences of student-teachers with orthopaedic impairments, highlighting how pedagogical exclusion persists despite the appearance of equality.

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Theoretical Framework:-

This study is guided by Critical Disability Pedagogy (CDP), which critiques traditional approaches to inclusion that emphasize equality or compliance alone. CDP foregrounds the intersection of power, pedagogy, and embodiment, illustrating how systemic practices can marginalize students even within ostensibly inclusive environments (Goodley, 2014). This perspective enables an analysis of tutor practices not simply as individual behavior, but as embedded within broader institutional norms and expectations.

Methodology:-**Research Design:-**

A qualitative phenomenological design was employed to explore the lived experiences of students with orthopaedic impairments.

Participants:-

Fifteen student-teachers (9 males and 6 females) with orthopaedic impairments were purposively selected from three Colleges of Education in Ghana's Eastern and Ashanti Regions. The small sample reflects the limited enrolment of students with orthopaedic impairments, as many qualified students are discouraged from applying due to the perceived physically demanding and inaccessible nature of college life.

Data Collection:-

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and two focus-group discussions. These two data collection strategies were used to examine tutor attitudes, classroom practices, accommodation experiences, and the emotional impacts of pedagogical interactions.

Data Analysis:-

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework. This process enabled the identification of key patterns related to subtle exclusion, tutor flexibility, and students' coping strategies.

Ethical Considerations:-

Institutional approval was obtained prior to the study, and informed consent was secured from all participants. Pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality and protect participants' identities.

Findings:-**Overt Equality versus Subtle Inflexibility:-**

Participants noted that overt discrimination was rare, as tutors generally adhered to principles of equal treatment. However, subtle inflexibilities often undermined genuine inclusion.

"Our lecturer says everyone is treated the same, but when I miss a lab because I cannot climb stairs, I get penalized. No one adjusts the schedule." — Samuel, Level 300

Rigid policies on attendance, classroom location, and access to dining facilities amplified the challenges associated with physical impairments, revealing a gap between formal equality and functional inclusion.

Dependency on Tutor Goodwill:-

Accommodations were often informal and depended on tutors' personal empathy rather than institutional policy. While some tutors demonstrated flexibility in submission deadlines or classroom arrangements, such practices were inconsistent.

"Some lecturers are understanding, but others just say, 'We treat everyone equally.' They don't realize that equal isn't always fair." — Akua, Level 200

Pedagogical and Emotional Consequences:-

The absence of structured accommodations contributed to stress, social withdrawal, and reduced participation. Students reported feeling pressured to conform to inflexible norms, thereby compromising both their learning experiences and self-esteem.

"I sometimes skip activities because I can't meet the physical requirements. It makes me feel invisible, even though I'm in class." — Kwame, Level 400

Structural Barriers Masked as Neutral Policies:-

Policies intended to promote fairness, such as uniform attendance enforcement, inadvertently perpetuated exclusion. Participants emphasized the need for institutionalized flexibility and proactive accommodation, rather than reliance on individual tutor discretion.

Discussion:-

The findings challenge the assumption that “equal treatment” alone is sufficient for achieving meaningful inclusion. Drawing on Critical Disability Pedagogy, this study underscores that equitable education must account for students’ embodied experiences as well as the influence of institutional power structures (Goodley, 2014). The results demonstrate that subtle forms of exclusion—although often unintended—can produce barriers comparable in impact to overt discrimination. These findings highlight the need for systemic approaches to inclusive pedagogy. Effective inclusion requires clearly defined accommodation protocols, accessible and flexible classroom practices, and sustained professional development for tutors in disability awareness. Such measures move beyond reliance on individual goodwill and instead embed accessibility within the core structures of teaching and learning.

Policy and Practice Implications:-

1. **Institutionalized Accommodations:** Colleges should develop and implement formal policies that clearly define classroom, assessment, and activity accommodations for students with disabilities.
2. **Tutor Training:** Regular professional development should be provided to equip tutors with skills in inclusive pedagogy, empathy-driven teaching, and critical disability awareness.
3. **Flexible Academic Policies:** Attendance, deadlines, and participation requirements should incorporate reasonable adjustments to accommodate the needs of students with orthopaedic impairments.
4. **Infrastructure Alignment:** Physical and learning environments—including classrooms, dining facilities, and laboratories—should be aligned with Universal Design principles to minimize barriers and reduce reliance on informal support.
5. **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Institutions should establish mechanisms to monitor the consistency and effectiveness of accommodations, as well as tutor adherence to inclusive practices.
6. **Student Support Services:** Dedicated support units should be strengthened or established to provide coordinated services, including academic assistance, counseling, and advocacy for students with disabilities.
7. **Policy Awareness and Communication:** Clear communication of institutional policies on inclusion and accommodations should be ensured so that both staff and students are aware of available support and their respective responsibilities.

Conclusion:-

Inclusive education in Ghanaian colleges requires more than physical access or rhetorical commitments to equality. Subtle forms of pedagogical exclusion, arising from rigid institutional policies and inconsistent tutor responsiveness, continue to undermine the academic engagement and psychosocial well-being of students with orthopaedic impairments. Drawing on Critical Disability Pedagogy, this study underscores the need for structural, empathetic, and equity-oriented interventions. Achieving genuine inclusion requires that institutions embed accessibility and flexibility within their core practices, ensuring that all students can participate fully and meaningfully in academic life.

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