Assessing Preservice Teachers' Challenges and Training Needs for Teaching Children with Special Educational Needs in Nigerian Regular Classes

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ABSTRACT

The quality of teachers is critical to the successful implementation of inclusive education. However, many teachers in Nigeria have reported low confidence in teaching children with special needs. Despite this, limited research has investigated the challenges and training needs of preservice teachers within the Nigerian context. This study explored the experiences of preservice teachers during their practicum, particularly on the challenges they encountered, and their training needs. The phenomenological qualitative approach was employed as a research design. Data were collected through focus group discussions. The sample size consisted of 40 purposively sampled preservice teachers from two colleges of education in Zamfara State. The findings from the study revealed that challenges encountered by preservice teachers in teaching students with special needs include inadequate training in inclusive practices, communication difficulties, poor infrastructure, and low inclusive self-efficacy. Participants also reported the need for practical teaching exposure, specialized communication, and better access to inclusive education resources. These point to the need to strengthen teacher education programmes for inclusive education. We recommend, among others, that the teacher training curriculum be revised to incorporate hands-on experiences for inclusive education.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, pre-service teachers, special needs, teacher education, training needs

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INTRODUCTION

Global policy priorities on education are centred on equity and fairness in accessing education. Several efforts made, particularly in developing and low-income countries appear not to have yielded the expected results. For example, children with disabilities are especially at a disadvantage in terms of school enrollment, educational attainment, and learning in developing countries (Wodon et al., 2018). In Cambodia, Colombia, Gambia, Maldives, and Uganda, only 56% of children with disabilities (CWDs) complete primary education, in contrast to 74% of their peers without disabilities (World Bank, Inclusion International, Leonard Cheshire, 2019), while the transition to secondary education poses a significant challenge for individuals with disabilities in Africa (UNESCO & Global Education Monitoring Report 2020). Furthermore, within the Nigerian context, children with impairments constitute over 50% of Nigeria's 10.5 million out-of-school children (The IREDE Foundation, 2021).

Despite Nigeria's policies in promoting the inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream classrooms, research indicates that the implementation of these policies has been hindered over the years. For instance, researchers have observed that students with special needs face discrimination at all educational levels (Nwosu et al., 2024; Nwosu & Ementa, 2018). There is widespread agreement that teacher professional development is crucial to the effective implementation of inclusive education (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2012; Nwosu et al., 2020; Nwosu et al., in press) since teacher quality has been found to be the most important within-school factor affecting student learning outcome (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2012).

One of the stages in the training of teachers in which attempts are made to bridge the gap between theory and practice is during the teaching practice exercise. This is a compulsory aspect of the teacher training programme that offers preservice teachers the opportunity to put in practice all the theories and contents they have been exposed to in their institutions. Given that this may be the first time many of them may be teaching students in a formal classroom setting, they may face a number of challenges especially with regards to students with special needs. Pre-service teachers are students undergoing formal training and education to become professional teachers who are yet to be certified as teachers and assume teaching positions in any recognizable educational institution. To consolidate their training, they are placed on a teaching practice exercise to provide them with practical experience. Researchers (Imsa-ard et al., 2021; Mapinda & Honori, 2022) have found that preservice teachers face several challenges including poor school infrastructure, strained relationship with host teachers, low confidence explaining lessons and providing feedback to students; and difficulty teaching mixed-ability classes. Consequently, Mbhiza et al. (2024) and Shumba et al. (2012) have stressed the need to offer mentorship to preservice teachers during their practicum. However, some researchers have noted that preservice teachers may not be getting adequate support they need during the teaching practice exercise (Maddamsetti, 2018; Mbhiza et al., 2024; Mlyakado & Mwandambo, 2023). This is likely to exacerbate the challenges of these students particularly in situations where they are supposed to handle students with special needs. Given that the Nigerian educational system recognizes inclusive education, teachers are expected to maximize the potential of all learners by modifying the curriculum and pedagogy to meet individual learning needs. Yet, there is dearth of research on the inclusive education challenges of preservice teachers especially those trained in colleges of education who are trained to teach in primary and lower secondary school levels of education. This level of education is critical for identification and remediation of learning challenges. Hence, it becomes imperative that challenges preservice teachers face during their teaching practice exercise and their training

needs are explored so that teacher curriculum could be improved on. The following two research questions were posed to guide this study:

1. What are pre-service teachers' challenges for teaching children with special educational needs in Nigerian regular classes?
2. What are pre-service teachers' training needs for teaching children with special educational needs in Nigerian regular classes?

METHODS

The phenomenological qualitative research design was employed in our study. We investigated the lived experiences and perceptions of preservice teachers about inclusive education and their readiness with particular focus on their teaching practice (TP) experiences and how they adjudge their abilities in inclusive education classroom. Preservice teachers are exposed to teaching students with special needs during their teaching practice exercises. Because inclusive schools are still at the experimental stage in Nigerian and special schools are few (UNESCO, 2021), many parents tend to enroll their children with special needs in nearby regular schools (Nwosu et al., 2024). This affords preservice teachers the opportunity to teach children with special needs during the teaching practice exercise. Beck (2021) sees phenomenological research approach as having the capacity to offer to readers and researchers a privileged view of the meaning of the experience of a particular phenomenon from the perspective of the participants. Our participants were 40 (Male = 4; Female = 36) preservice teachers from two colleges of education in Zamfara State, Nigeria purposively sampled. This sample size is considered adequate, given that sample sizes ranging from 15 – 20 participants have been adopted by researchers in qualitative studies, and they have hit data saturation points within this range (Hossain et al., 2024). Twenty preservice teachers were sampled from the Federal College of Education while the other twenty were sampled from the State College of Education. These were pre-service teachers who have completed their teaching practice and gave their consent for participation in the study. Within each college of education, the students were randomly selected into six focused group discussions (FGDs). Four groups consisted of 7 students whereas two other groups consisted of 6 students. The study sites were in Zamfara State which is a Northwest Nigerian state with its capital city located in Gusau.

A FGD was used in collecting the qualitative data which bothered on exploring the perception of pre-service teachers on inclusive education and their readiness to include students with special education needs in their classes during their TP. They were randomly sampled into 6 FGDs. The FGDs guide was validated by two experts in Educational Measurement and Evaluation. The question items included: What challenges did you face during your teaching practice exercise while including students with special needs in your class? Do you think you training was adequate for teaching these students in your classes? If not, what training do you need to improve your ability to teach them?

The processes in data collection, included seeking the consent of the respondents, and explaining the purpose of the study to the respondents. Only pre-service teachers who gave their consent were included in the study. Thereafter, the FGD sessions started with conversations that aimed at relaxing the respondents and create opportunity for discussion. The conversations were used to inform the participants about the aim of the discussion. The discussions took place at the participants' school environment and lasted for about 50 minutes. The discussions were digitally recorded.

The data was analyzed using thematic content analysis. The recorded interview was transcribed verbatim. The inductive analysis was employed in our study. Inductive analysis focuses on deriving concepts, themes, or a model through interpretations made from the raw data by a researcher (Thomas, 2006). Manuscripts were read many times and coded to identify

emerging concepts that addressed the research questions. There was no restriction on the number of emerging themes and sub-themes until they are exhausted. Before the coding of the data, the researchers immersed themselves in the data to get familiar with the data, understand the data, pre-code the data by underlining a participant's significant quotes that strikes their attention. After identifying major emerging concepts, specifics were grouped into sub-themes, and these were drawn together to form themes. From the manuscripts, verbatim expressions such as ""*No, we were not taught practically, only theory*" was coded "no practical exposure"; and "*"We didn't learn anything about inclusive education…"* was coded "no relevant course". These were later classified under the theme of "Inadequate Inclusive Training and Preparation". Codes and themes were reflected upon by the researchers for depth and appropriateness. Where there was no disagreement the codes and themes were adopted whereas changes were made where the researchers agreed that there was a need for adjustment in the codes and themes.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Challenges Student Teachers Faced in Teaching Students with Disabilities during TP

Regarding the challenges student teachers in colleges of education face in teaching students with disabilities, six broad themes emerged from the discussions. These include inadequate inclusive training and preparation, inclusive communication challenges, inclusive instructional challenges and time constraints, inadequate inclusive infrastructures and facilities, lack of inclusive self-efficacy beliefs and emotional unpreparedness, and classroom management challenges and peer-related challenges. These themes are presented thus:

Inadequate Inclusive Training and Preparation

These consists of challenges related to their inclusive education training in school that prepares them to handle children with disabilities in schools. Through the discussion, a good number of student teachers reported that their training was insufficient to enable them to teach in classes that comprise both students with disabilities and those without disabilities. One of the challenges related to over-reliance on theoretical exposition of inclusive education pedagogies without practical exposure. One of the students noted: "*No, we were not taught practically, only theory*" (A1, Group 1). And another student from group 5 stated that: "*Because we are only taught the theory, no enough practical*" (C1, Group 5). These shows that most of their training centred on just theories without practical skills that could help them implement these strategies during their teaching practice exercise. In confirmation to this a respondent noted that they did not go to special schools to learner before the teaching practice exercise: *"We didn't learn anything about inclusive education. So I'm not prepared" (*R7, Group 3). It flows from the idea that they ought to have seen how specialized teachers teach students with disabilities before going to an inclusive classroom environment. More so, some respondents noted that contributing to their unpreparedness is that their curriculum was inadequate indicating that they may need more skill-based courses: "*The curriculum is not enough".* (C4, G5). Flowing from this, many of the students were unfamiliar with inclusive teaching methods: "*We didn't have any course that teaches us how to teach students with special needs*" (R6, G3).

Inclusive Communication Challenges

Responses from the participants showed that they encountered communication barriers as they teach children with disabilities especially among students with speech and hearing impairments in the school. These consists of barriers in the use of sign language, difficulty in engaging with non-verbal students and the lack of assistive communication devices. One respondent noted that they are not trained to communicate with students with disabilities: *"The challenge I faced is communication barrier, how to interact with them in a way that they will understand what I'm saying."* (C5, Group 5). Another respondent noted their inability to use sign language is a challenge to addressing the unique needs of students with disabilities: *"I*

don't know how to use sign language, so I found it hard to communicate." (C4, Group 4).

Inclusive Instructional Challenges and Time Constraints

Further challenges reported by participants included instructional challenges and time constraints. They noted that they found it difficult simplifying the contents to students with disabilities. This could have stemmed from the fact that most children with disabilities require tasks broken down step-by-step for them. In cases where there is the problem of abstract thinking, student teachers may battle with concretizing the concepts thereby finding it difficult to engage student with disabilities in their classrooms. For example, a respondent noted: "*The challenge I faced is how to teach them and make them understand what I'm teaching."* (C3, Group 5). For them to learn, they need extra time particularly children with intellectual disabilities. This group of students have lower learning rates and demand that tasks are not only broken down by adequate time is expended for them. This could have resulted to several challenges the participants reported. In groups 4 and 5, respondents emphasized how time could constrain effective delivery of instructions to students with disabilities: *"Some of them don't understand fast, so I have to keep repeating and the time is not enough."* (C5, Group 4). *"I also had problem with time because they need more time to understand what I'm teaching."* (C6, Group 4). *"You will be trying to carry everybody along; it will consume your time."* (C7, Group 5).

Inadequate Inclusive Infrastructures and Facilities

Respondents also reported that inadequate inclusive infrastructure and facilities impeded their teaching students with disabilities during their teaching practice exercise. This consisted of the unavailability of assistive materials, limited access to tools like Braille, hearing or visual aids. This was worsened by the lack of skills for improvisation. The teaching and learning of students with disabilities are usually enhanced by inclusive facilities that helps to ease the challenges they face. Most of these aids help to remedy some lost abilities in such a way that students with disabilities can be productively engaged in their learning. However, the responses from the respondents showed that they face enormous challenges because they lack the requisite materials that can facilitate inclusion. For example, a respondent noted: *"The school does not provide materials for them, and I don't know how to improvise for special needs students."* (C7, Group 4), and another stated: *"We don't have enough instructional materials."* (C3, Group 5).

Lack of Inclusive Self-Efficacy Beliefs and Emotional Unpreparedness

Even in regular classes, neophyte teachers face emotional tensions that dampen their ability to perform in classes. However, teaching in an inclusive classroom may be more demanding especially when one has not been properly tutored on how to handle diverse learners. Respondents in our study reported the feeling of a lack of inclusive self-efficacy beliefs. This led them to doubt their abilities to teach in an inclusive classroom. For example, a respondent expressed doubt on the ability to teach students with disabilities because they were not properly taught on how to teach them: *"If I'm called to come and teach students with special needs, I'll not be able to do it effectively because I don't know how to teach them."* (R10, Group 3). Another student reported being afraid because they lack the strategies to communicate with them: *"I was scared because I didn't know how to relate or communicate with them."* (C7, Group 4), while another noted that they were not trained to teach students with disabilities: *"I'll not be able to do it because I was not trained for that*." (R9, Group 3). It appears that the self-doubt and perceived unpreparedness among the student teachers arise because of inadequacy in their curriculum and preparedness.

Classroom Management Challenges and Peer-Related Challenges

Another theme that emerged from the discussion is the issue of classroom management and peer-related challenges. Student teachers associated the disruptive behaviour with the students' disabilities. They assumed that because they have disabilities that many of them exhibit the behaviours that make it difficult to manage the classes. For example, one of the respondents

stated: *"Some of them are too stubborn. If you say, 'Don't do this,' they will do it."* (B7, Group 6) whereas another noted that they needed training on managing the behaviours of the students in classes: *"We need training on how to manage the class with different types of students."* (C6, Group 5). Another dimension of the classroom problem is the poor relationship between students with disabilities and those without disabilities. A respondent noted that those without disabilities tend to mock those with disabilities while in the class, and that this constituted a challenge for them: *"The challenge I faced is that the normal students are laughing at them when you are teaching."* (C2, Group 5).

Inclusive Education Training Needs of Student Teachers for Effective Teaching of Students with Disabilities

Our respondents reported a number of professional training needs that will facilitate the teaching of students with disabilities. During the focus group discussion, the themes that emerged are need for practical experiences and exposure; need for specialized skills, and provision of inclusive education resource and support. Proper examination of the reported needs revealed that our participants needed improved inclusive training and the provision of inclusive facilities in schools to help them teach students with disabilities effectively.

Need for Practical Experiences and Exposure

Regarding practical experiences and exposure on inclusive education teaching and learning, a student noted: *"We need more practical exposure and fieldwork on how to teach students with disabilities."* (R8, Group 3). This implies that they needed the integration of inclusive education fieldwork into their curriculum.

Regarding Specialized Training in Inclusive Education

Furthermore, regarding specialized training in inclusive education, our respondents reported that they needed training on effective communication with students with disabilities including sign language: *"I think we need training on how to communicate with them, especially those with hearing problems."* (C1, Group 4). Similarly, other students reported that sign language is imperative in the teaching of students with speech and hearing problems: *"We need special training in sign language and how to identify their needs."* (R8, Group 3). *"We should be taught sign language ….. "* (C5, Group 4). Another aspect of specialized training that the students mentioned included training on assistive devices: "*We should be taught … how to use assistive devices."* (C5, Group 4). This indicated even among regular teachers, there is need that they are equipped with certain levels of abilities in the specialized areas in special needs education.

Provision of Inclusive Education Resource and Support

Another area of need as reported by our respondents is the provision of inclusive education resources and support. They need to be provided with devices that can facilitate teaching of students with disabilities especially as they lack the skills to improvise the materials: *"The school does not provide materials for them, and I don't know how to improvise for special needs students."* (C7, Group 4). This is critical to effective teaching and learning of students with disabilities given that concepts must be concretize for ease of learning. Similarly, another student was able to be specific about the devices they needed in teaching students with disabilities: *"Provide assistive devices and tools like braille, hearing aids, and visual aids for the students."(R*10, Group 3).

Besides, the respondents called on the government and school authorities to provide the need facilities in colleges of education so that they will have hands-on training on teaching in an inclusive education classroom: *"Government should provide equipment and facilities for inclusive education in the colleges."* (C1, Group 4). Another respondent noted that the teacher education curriculum should be revised to include requisite aspects of inclusive teaching and learning: *"Curriculum should be revised to include more inclusive education content."* (C6, Group 4).

DISCUSSION

The findings from this study revealed the major challenges faced by pre-service teachers in teaching students with special educational needs (SENs) during their teaching practice. While pre-service teachers demonstrate a willingness to embrace inclusive education, they face significant challenges due to gaps in practical training, limited exposure to assistive technologies, difficulties in curriculum adaptation, communication challenges, inadequate inclusive infrastructures and facilities, lack of inclusive self-efficacy beliefs and emotional unpreparedness, and classroom management challenges and peer-related challenges.

Pre-service teachers almost universally complain about the absence of tailored, practical training designed to prepare them for teaching in inclusive classrooms in their initial teacher education (ITE) programmes. For instance, Rosenberg et al. (2024) found that beginning teachers was reporting barriers to effective practice and the integration of students with disabilities due to insufficient education in disabilities inclusions elements which were mostly elective. Participants voiced a need for more training that was "realistic and practical" to prepare for classrooms in which they could confidently teach inclusively.

Another critical issue is inadequate exposure assistive technologies (AT) and their application for students with special educational needs (SEN) is one essential area that a teacher must deal with. Design of learning experiences, however, remains a challenge for many pre-service teachers. A study by Opoku et al. (2023) brought to light issues like perceived ease of use of the devices and self-perception of computer skills to influence the decision of AT use by pre-service teachers. The authors recommended the need of most teacher training programs to deal comprehensively with teaching resources and AT devices for rehabilitation of disabled children.

Meeting the varying needs of learners through curriculum modification is still a prominent challenge within pedagogy. Adapting curricula to meet the diverse needs of learners remains a significant hurdle. Research revealed that pre-service teachers struggled with curriculum differentiation and lacked knowledge on producing and using resources suitable for inclusive classrooms. The study recommended revising teacher education curricula to include methodologies that equip teachers with the necessary skills for inclusive education.

The results of the study demonstrated that pre-service teachers' needs of inclusive education for SENs included the need for practical experiences and exposure; need for specialized skills, and provision of inclusive education resource and support. These identified needs are critical for equipping pre-service teachers to meet the demands of inclusive education effectively. Addressing these areas will enhance teacher confidence, improve learning outcomes for students with SENs, and foster more inclusive educational environments. These findings are consistent with the goals of UNESCO's inclusive education agenda, which emphasizes capacity building through practical training, continuous professional development, and the provision of accessible learning materials (UNESCO, 2022). There is growing international consensus that teacher education must be restructured to reflect the realities of inclusive classrooms (Florian & Spratt, 2013). This agrees with the findings of Rosenberg et al. (2024) which emphasized that classroom-based, hands-on experiences significantly improve teacher preparedness for inclusive settings.

Conclusion

This study investigated the challenges faced by preservice teachers in inclusive classes, and training needs for teaching children with special educational needs in regular classes. This study highlights the serious and immediate need to improve the training and preparation of pre-service teachers in inclusive education as the findings of this study reveal that many pre-service

teachers are having knowledge gaps, instructional, communication and emotional readiness challenges in supporting children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in mainstream classrooms. Student teachers' reported challenges and training needs indicate that they may not have the capacity to include students with special needs in their classes. Based on the findings of this study, it is concluded that there is the need for systemic reforms in teacher training programmes. Addressing these concerns through enhanced curriculum design, practical experience, and continuous professional development can be bridge the gap and empower teachers to foster better inclusive learning environments. This study, therefore, advocate for long term change to enable all students get the education they deserve irrespective of their ability, condition, age, location among others.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. The inadequate knowledge and preparation of pre-service teachers suggest an urgent need to revamp teacher education curricula. Colleges of education in Nigeria should endeavour to emphasize practical skills, exposure to inclusive teaching methods, and hands-on experience in classrooms with diverse learners.
2. The inadequate supply of inclusive infrastructure and facilities highlights the necessity for government and institutional investment in creating learning spaces that accommodate children with special educational needs (SEN). Schools should be equipped with assistive technologies, adaptive learning tools, and accessible classroom designs.
3. Given the identified communication and instructional challenges teacher training institutions should focus on effective communication techniques, differentiated instruction and collaborative teaching models to ensure SEN students receive individualized support tailored to their learning needs.

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Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest is declared.

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