

Untrained Teachers Diploma in Basic Education Program in Ghana: Teacher Trainees' and Lecturers' Perspectives

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Abstract

The study examined teacher trainees' (TT) and lecturers' perceptions of the Untrained Teachers Diploma in Basic Education (UTDBE) program in Ghana. Participants included a purposive sample of 58 TTs (30 males and 28 females) and 12 lecturers (10 males and 2 females) at one college of education in Ghana. An open-ended questionnaire served as the main data source. Data were analyzed inductively, using constant comparative analysis. Main findings were grouped under five categories: access, self-efficacy, cost, curricular/pedagogical issues, gender issues, and financial assistance. Policy makers and educational administrators would do well to address the financial constraints and gender disparities in the program. Teacher educators should adopt more participatory instructional practices in the UTDBE program.

Keywords: Teacher education, gender issues, self-efficacy, pedagogical issues, Ghana.

1.0 Introduction

The United Nations (UN) Millennium Development Goals Report 2013 states that more than half of the world's out-of-school children live in sub-Saharan Africa (UN, 2013). The report added that countries in the region would not meet MDG 2, achieving universal primary education, by 2015 if the current trend continues. Despite the moderate progress made on this MDG, sub-Saharan African countries, including Ghana are facing rising demands for primary education due to growing populations (UN, 2013). For example, the net enrollment rate (NER) for primary schools in Ghana for the 2013-2014 year was 89.3% (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2014a). The UNESCO Institute for Statistics ([UIS], 2004) defines NER as the ratio of enrolled children in official school age group (6-11 years for Ghana) to the total number of children in the official school age group. The provision of adequate number of trained teachers to fill vacancies in all primary schools is not only critical for the attainment of universal primary education, but also for sustainable poverty reduction (Palmer, 2005). Ghana has a perpetual shortage of teachers at the basic education level.

For example, the percentage of trained teachers in both public and private primary schools was 53.3% and 52.4% for the 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 academic years respectively. The percentages of trained teachers in junior secondary schools for the same period for public and private junior high schools were 68.9% and 68.5% respectively (MOE, 2014a). The declining percentage of trained teachers in the primary and junior high schools is worrisome, considering the evidence that the proportion of teachers with training is associated with high student performance (MOE, 2012a). For example, the two colleges of education in the Upper East Region had a combined quota of 500 vacancies for 3,000 applicants (Wedam, 2013).

The inability of the colleges of education to admit all qualified applicants is a major constraint to the country's effort to provide all basic schools with qualified teachers. Hence, the government's directive to colleges of education to increase admission by 40% was welcome by all stakeholders (Mingle, 2013). As at the 2002-2003 academic year, only 62.9% and 74.5% teachers in both public and private primary and junior secondary schools were trained (GES, 2003). That is, 37.1% and 25.5% of basic school teachers in public and private schools respectively were untrained. To reduce the percentage of untrained teachers in basic schools, the government established the Untrained Teachers Diploma in Basic Education (UTDBE) program (GES, 2003). The UTDBE program is intended to prepare a well-trained teaching force that is well motivated and willing to work under challenging conditions, especially in deprived areas. This is in line with government's effort to address the geographical disparities in teacher allocation (GES, 2011).

1.1 The Untrained Teachers Diploma in Basic Education Program

The Untrained Teachers Diploma in Basic Education (UTDBE) program is a distance learning in-service program, aimed at improving the quality of education at the basic school level in Ghana. It was instituted to promote the goals of Free and Compulsory Universal Basic Education, which was established in accordance with Article 38 of the 1992 Constitution (GOG, 1992). It was intended to provide quality basic education for all in Ghana by 2015, in line with Education for All (EFA) and the MDG 2 target of achieving universal primary education. The UTDBE program objectives are to: (a) Assist all serving untrained teachers to have access to professional teacher training, (b) Improve the quality of teaching and learning especially in the disadvantaged communities and (c) Increase the number of trained teachers by training the untrained teachers. The curriculum is made up of four content areas: core foundation courses, education and professional studies, practical activities, and general studies (GES, 2003). The program was designed and implemented through the Teacher Education Division of the GES with technical and financial support from the World Bank, the Department for International Development (DFID) of the United Kingdom, and other donor agencies and countries. The pilot phase of the program started in 2004 in the three northern regions (Northern, Upper East, and Upper West) and the Afram Plains. These were considered to be the most deprived areas of the country. In 2005, it was extended to the Brong-Ahafo and Ashanti regions. The Greater Accra and the Volta regions were the last to be covered.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

Research on TTs' and lecturers' perceptions of the UTDBE is scarce. Work in this area is limited to the evaluation of the UTDBE at the program level. In addition, one published study reported finding on traditional TTs' (not UTDBE) perceived competence and autonomy (Sofu & Kanton, 2013). Therefore, the purpose of the present study was to examine teacher trainees' and lecturers' perceptions of the Untrained Teachers Diploma in Basic Education program in Ghana. An insight to TTs' and lecturers' perspectives about the UTDBE would allow policy makers and educational administrators to identify prospects and challenges of the program. Furthermore, the understanding would allow stakeholders to make informed decisions for program improvement.

1.3 Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What do teacher trainees and lecturers perceive to be positive aspects of the Untrained Teachers Diploma in Basic Education program in Ghana?
2. What do teacher trainees and lecturers perceive to be negative aspects of the Untrained Teachers Diploma in Basic Education program in Ghana?
3. What suggestions would teacher trainees and lecturers provide for the improvement of the Untrained Teachers Diploma in Basic Education program in Ghana?

2.0 Method

2.1 Participants

Participants included a purposive sample of 58 TTs (30 males and 28 females) enrolled in an UTDBE (alternative) teacher education program at one college of education in the Northern Region of Ghana. The TTs were teaching (untrained or pupil teachers) in primary schools in their respective districts at the time of the study. The sample also included 12 lecturers (10 males and 2 females) at the same institution. Of the 58 TTs, 24.14% were in their first year while 22.41%, 18.97%, and 34.48% were in their second, third, and fourth years of training respectively. The institution was one of 38 colleges of education in the country that prepared teachers to teach at the basic education levels in the country. The colleges of education award teacher trainees the Diploma in Basic Education after successfully completing their courses of study.

2.2 Data Collection and Analysis

An open-ended questionnaire served as the main data source. Specifically, it asked participants: (a) what they liked the most about the Untrained Teachers Diploma in Basic Education (b) what they liked the least or did not like about the Untrained Teachers Diploma in Basic Education, and (c) what suggestions they had for improving the Untrained Teachers Diploma in Basic Education program. The first and second authors' institution approved the study prior to data collection. The trainees completed the questionnaires in their respective classrooms. The lecturers sent the questionnaires home and returned them two to three days later. In addition, all participants provided written consent before they completed the questionnaire. The authors analyzed the data inductively, using comparative analysis (Patton, 2002). They independently read and re-read the completed questionnaires to identify tentative categories. First, the authors analyzed all 70 responses to the first question—what participants liked the most about the UTDBE. Then, the second question followed by the third. The authors shared the tentative categories with each other, and reconciled any differences that they identified. One expert in basic (elementary) teacher education did the peer debriefing for the authors. At various stages of the analysis, the authors sent the tentative categories to the expert for comments. The expert returned the comments without recommendations for changes in the tentative categories.

3.0 Results

3.1 What Teacher Trainees and Lecturers Liked the Most about the UTDBE

The first research question examined what TTs' and lecturers perceived as the positive aspects of the UTDBE. Findings were grouped under two categories: access and self-efficacy.

3.1.1 Access

Many of the trainees indicated the program offered them the opportunity to train as teachers. As one trainee commented, "It [UTDBE] has enabled those of us in the deprived rural areas with no hope of ever furthering our education to get enrolled into an institution like this" (Female TT1). The UTDBE has been very important to the aspirations of the less privileged, especially those in the rural areas. This sentiment is shared by this trainee, "I like the program because it offers an opportunity for the less privileged especially those of us from the rural communities" (Male TT1). One lecturer agreed stating that, "The program [UTDBE] has given opportunity to people who would otherwise have rusted in the society to get a professional certificate" [Male, Lecturer1]. Not only did the program offer TTs the opportunity, but it gave them ". . . Renewed hope and vigor to achieve our educational and professional goals" (Male TT2). A unique feature of the program, according to one lecturer was that, "Pupil teachers [untrained teachers] in classrooms do not have to quit their classrooms or leave the pupils to attend classes" (Male Lecturer2). Most importantly, the UTDBE program had the potential to improve the standards of living for the trainees and their respective communities and regions. This was expressed succinctly by one trainee, "I like it [UTDBE] because it will transform my life from a pupil teacher into a professional teacher; reduce illiteracy and unemployment levels in the region and enhance quality of education" (Male TT3). Thus, access to professional training in turn would lead to improved standards of living through the provision of quality education, especially in the rural areas.

3.1.2 Self-efficacy

As untrained teachers, many of the trainees acknowledged that the program would equip them with the requisite teacher knowledge and skills. "It has helped me gain or acquire more knowledge and skills [as a teacher]" (Male TT4) declared one trainee.

Others claimed the program would equip them with “skills and methods of teaching” (Male TT5) and “understanding of certain things and topics I used not to understand” (Male TT6). Similarly, the lecturers expressed optimism about the program’s potential to make professional teachers out of the untrained trainees, as illustrated by this account, “It [UTDBE] will develop the instructional skills of the trainees” (Male Lecturer3). Some of the trainees did not only expect to acquire skills, but felt they had already gained enough from the program to make them feel confident to teach. Their assertion was supported by this statement, “It has increased the confidence and moral of the untrained teachers” (Male Lecturer4).

3.2 What Teacher Trainees and Lecturers Liked the Least about the UTDBE

The second research question examined what teacher trainees and lecturers perceived to be negative aspects or challenges of the UTDBE in Ghana. Aspects of the program participants liked the least were grouped under three categories: cost, curricular and pedagogical issues, and gender issues.

3.2.1 Cost

The TTs and lecturers in this study identified cost as one of the constraints to their participation in the UTDBE program. They bemoaned the exorbitant fees charged for the program, especially when “Government does not provide funding for the program” (Female TT2). Sample comments included, “The fees are too high” (Male TT2) and “The fees should be reduced . . .” (Female TT1). Due to the exorbitant fees, “. . . most students [trainees] drop out” (Male TT2) or “. . . report late for classes because they could not pay the fees on time” (Female TT3). The high fees were a source of great concern to the TTs, especially those who had dependents. Another factor that exacerbated the financial predicament of the TTs was that most of them lived in rural areas with high rates of poverty.

3.2.2 Curricular and Pedagogical Issues

Curricular and pedagogical issues were the second theme that emerged from participants’ responses to the second research question. Curricular issues pertained to course materials. Examples of curricular-related issues trainees indicated they did not like included the “Poor arrangement when it comes to distribution of course materials” (Male TT3). In addition, the trainees were not content with the number of chapters and/or topics in their required courses. They argued that, “The course outlines are overloaded. The topics are too many in most of the courses” (Male TT4). Some of the lecturers collaborated the trainees’ claims, and added that the bulkiness of the teaching modules were a result of lengthy dialogues. This was exemplified by the following comment, “Most of the modules are too bulky and contain too much dialogue and too little content” (Male Lecturer3). Pedagogical issues pertained to the instructional strategies employed by the lecturers. TTs did not like the practice whereby lecturers dictated notes to trainees. Male TT8 stated, “I don’t like tutors dictating notes to us in class.” Rather, they suggested that trainees be actively involved in the teaching-learning process as illustrated here, “More participatory methods should be increased” (Female TT4). Another TT agreed, stating that, “They [Lecturers] should sometimes encourage students to experiment with their own teaching methods” (Male TT9).

3.2.3 Gender Issues

The second category under the first research question related to gender issues, especially female trainees. As one lecturer recounted, “Most of the women tend to be overburdened with caring for their children and their husbands” (Male Lecturer1). Consequently, the affected female trainees were constrained financially as they had to fund their own training and that of their children (for those who were mothers). The situation was illustrated by the following comment, “Some of the women also bear the burden of paying their own fees and that of their children” (Male Lecturer3). Due to lack of support, some nursing female trainees had no option but to bring their babies to class during lectures. That had the potential to distract other trainees and their lecturers in class. One lecturer demonstrated his frustration about the situation in these words, “I don’t like the way the nursing mothers and their babies always disturb in class”(Male Lecturer2). The program did not cater to the infrastructural needs of nursing mothers as one trainee lamented, “Special attention is not given to nursing mothers in this program. Nursing mothers are not allowed to stay in the dormitory with those without children” (Female TT5). Furthermore, some men were not supportive of their wives pursuing the program. Consequently, “Some women [trainees] were forced to stop the program by their husbands” (Female Lecturer1).

3.3 Suggestions for Improving the UTDBE

The third research question asked what TTs and lecturers would suggest for the improvement of the UTDBE program. Participants’ suggestions were categorized into two issues: financial assistance and pedagogical issues.

3.3.1 Financial Assistance

TTs in this study commented on the exorbitant fees they had to pay for each session of the residential (face to face) component of the program. They called on the government to help them source some financial assistance to enable them stay enrolled in the program. The following comment exemplified TTs' views on financial assistance, "Government should give us loans to enable us complete the course" (Male TT10). Furthermore, TTs suggested that the "Fees should be reduced" (Female TT6) to make the program affordable. Many TTs explained that the UTDBE was a good program and that "... Government should continue to support it" (Male TT11). Participants added that payment of fees should be spread throughout the year to reduce the financial burden on them. They argued that considering the mode of payment on a yearly basis will "... allow trainees pay fees on yearly basis instead of the current system of paying every face to face session. This will reduce the financial pressure on us" (Male TT12). The TTs seem to suggest that institutions make payment plans available so that, "part payment can be accepted" (Female TT7).

3.3.2 Pedagogical Issues

This category is related to freedom of expression in the college classroom. TTs suggested they should be free to express their perspectives in class, as one of them stated "Lecturers should be tolerant to student's views in the class" (Male TT13). Encouraging trainees to express their views and experiment with their own strategies would make them active participants in their own learning. In addition, participants called for mutual respect between lecturers/administrators and trainees. As Male TT14 noted, "Students [trainees] should obey school rules and regulations and lecturers should also see and treat students as adults." The second aspect of pedagogical issues bothers on the call for reduced instructional periods. Participants suggested the reduction of instructional sessions, explaining that they had to endure, "Long instructional periods" (Female Lecturer2), and called for the instructional periods to be reduced. Lecture hours were rather long, ranging "... from 7:00 am -5:15pm, Monday to Saturday" (Male TT7).

4.0 Discussion and Conclusions

This study utilized qualitative research methodology to examine teacher trainees' and lecturers' perspectives about the UTDBE program in Ghana. Findings were grouped into six categories: access, self-efficacy, cost, curricular and pedagogical issues, gender issues, and financial assistance. The TTs and lecturers acknowledged the opportunity the UTDBE program provided untrained teachers to become professional teachers through distance education. They recognized that the UTDBE could contribute to quality education, which in turn, would lead to the improvement of living standards, especially in deprived communities. This is critical as, for example, only 52.4% of teachers in both public and private primary schools for the 2013-2014 academic year were trained (MOE, 2014a). This is consistent with the report that provision of qualified teachers has positive effect on student enrollment, drop-out rate (MOE, 2012b), and poverty reduction (Palmer, 2005). However, the TTs identified cost as a potential constraint to the achievement of these goals. Therefore, it is incumbent on all stakeholders to make arrangements that would allow UTDBE program trainees to source some financial assistance to fund their education. Another finding of the study was that TTs in this study expressed their dislike for the practice whereby lecture notes were dictated to them.

This finding is consistent with reports that classroom interactions in sub-Saharan Africa are predominantly teacher-oriented (Dei, 2004), contrary to participatory instructional strategies prescribed by the curricula for basic schools in Ghana. Ampiah (2008) reported a common practice in Ghanaian basic schools where teachers dictated notes to students or wrote notes on the chalkboard for students to copy. Teachers' early experiences influence what and how they teach (Pajares, 1992). That is, how teacher trainees are taught would influence how they, in turn, would teach their future lessons. In light of this, teacher educators would do well to employ active or participatory instructional strategies that would encourage student-teacher and student-student interactions and foster higher order thinking skills in teacher trainees.

For example, the Ghana 2013 National Education Assessment (NEA) report shows that only 33.5% and 23.3% of students P3 and P6 respectively attained correct responses to items in the reasoning domain in Mathematics, and 36% and 39.8% in English (MOE, 2014b). Therefore, colleges of education need to adequately prepare teacher trainees to use instructional strategies that would challenge their future students and focus on higher order thinking skills. Finally, female TTs in this study were the most disadvantaged in terms of financial burden, lack of childcare services on campus, and lack of support from their spouses.

As Nukunya (2003) noted, women take on additional responsibilities to care for their household without support from their husbands or other family members. Gender equality is essential to achieving MDGs such as universal education, poverty alleviation or access to healthcare (Heyzer, 2005). Thus, gender equality can create opportunities and increase capabilities for the citizenry. In fact, in the absence of gender equality policy measures; it is unlikely that developing countries like Ghana would achieve poverty reduction goals and millennium development targets (Ogato, 2013).

Furthermore, female teachers serve as role models to girls (Sutherland-Addy, 2008), and appropriate measures should be taken to enforce policy measures that seek to mitigate gender disparities in education, especially among teacher trainees. Most importantly, research indicates that the presence of trained female teachers positively impacts enrollment and learning outcomes in primary schools (MOE, 2012b). In conclusion, TTs and lecturers in this study recognized the positive impact of the UTDBE program on TTs' professional careers and standards of living in their respective communities. Despite the prospects of improving the quality of education and alleviating poverty rates, TTs acknowledged challenges they encountered while enrolled in the UTDBE program. Major challenges TTs faced in the program included cost, non-participatory pedagogical practices, and lack of institutional infrastructure to cater to female trainees' needs, especially nursing mothers. A major limitation of the present study is the small sample size. The small sample size was warranted due to the qualitative data collection technique employed. The categories identified in the current study could serve as the basis for developing a close-ended questionnaire for a large scale study of TTs in the UTDBE program nationwide. It would be useful for a follow-up study to examine the perceptions of community leaders, heads of the colleges of education, officials at the district and regional directorates of education.

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