



## EDUCATING PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES: A POLICY OR REALITY? THE GHANAIAN EXPERIENCE

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### Abstract:

Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) are in every community in Ghana. They are often marginalized in many spheres of life including education, families and access to public places, due to the misconceptions held about their capabilities. Even though policies and documents on the education of PWDs exist, certain considerations such as access, participation, and recognition which are fundamental, are often overlooked. This paper critically examines the nuances of the above factors by identifying some problems PWDs encounter in their quest for education. Data for this study were solicited from policy documents and fieldwork. Content analysis of policies and documents on the education of PWDs in Ghana and their experiences in Educational Institutions were discussed. Interviews and focused group discussions on the experiences of PWDs were the instruments for the study. Participants were sampled based on a simple random technique. Thirteen (13) respondents including 10 students and 3 teachers participated in the study. The study revealed that despite the various policies on the education of PWDs, they are not reflective of the situation in the schools and institutions. Some PWDs are being discriminated against and not given much recognition in their schools. Also, the environment in their institutions is not disability friendly. The paper suggests a standardized implementation plan and much advocacy on the policies for the education of PWDs. Finally, more teachers should be given the training to acquire the requisite skills needed for supporting PWDs' education.

**Keywords:** disability, education, policies, experience

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## 1. Introduction

The United Nations Conventions on the Rights of Persons with Disability (UNCRPD) article 1, describes Persons with disabilities (PWDs) as “*those who have long term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairment which interacting with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.*” (UNCRPD, 2006; 4). Having this understanding, a look at the case of PWDs in Ghana points that they can be found in every community. Opinions as to the prevalence of these disabilities are varied, different traditional explanations are given for the various causes of disabilities. Some attribute the causes to situations such as activities of witchcraft, sorcery, punishments from the divinities, retribution for evil deeds, taboos, omissions of rites and ancestral curses.<sup>ii</sup> Others also attribute the causes of disability to lesser gods or deities. (Avoke, 2002; Agbenyega, 2005). However, it has been established over the years that there are a number of causes of disability that can be grouped into pre-natal, perinatal and post-natal factors (Gyimah, Dankwa and Larbi, 2015; 85-90). Causes of disability ranges from chromosomal abnormalities, Rhesus factor, metabolic disorders, attempted abortion, alcoholism, and malnutrition, physical assault of pregnant mothers, prolonged labour, maternal, domestic, actual accidents, age of expectant mother, and wrong medical prescriptions.

PWDs have been marginalized in many spheres of their lives due to misconceptions held about them. Stories have been told about how PWDs have been “seen off” either in the thick forest, grooves, on mountains, near rivers, streams or ponds and on hills or the shrine after rituals have been performed. This was done because of traditional beliefs and cultural preconceptions traditional societies held about PWDs as individuals not worthy of living. Those who were privileged to escape death and kept by their parents were also not provided with formal education. Some of them, however, underwent traditional education. They were trained to acquire skills for livelihood such as becoming cobblers, weavers, as well as potters. The effects of traditional belief systems which worked against PWDs have been decreased due to increased urbanization and Western Influence (Avoke, 2002; 771).

## 2. Brief History on Education of Disability in Ghana

Formal education in Ghana is a right for all citizens which includes persons with disability (PWDs). Historically, the initiative for the provision of education for persons with disability in Ghana has been recent and was started by individuals, missionaries and churches in the form of the setting up of special schools. In 1934 for instance, Mr and Mrs Frederick D., Harker, who were then tutors at the Presbyterian Training College now, Presbyterian College of Education, provided education to two visually impaired cousins at Akropong - Akuapim, with the aim of providing them with literacy, numeracy

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<sup>ii</sup> See Gordon Ahorator, ‘Traditional Beliefs and Attitudes towards disability among the people of North Tongu’ unpublished dissertation submitted to the department for the study of religions. University of Ghana, 2000.52 - 60.

and daily living skills.<sup>iii</sup> This initiative was formalised and named Akropong School for the Blind in 1945 by the colonial administration. Since then, many special schools have been established in various parts of Ghana till date. They include Wa school for the blind in 1958, the twin city school for the mentally retarded in 1976, Nchaban school for the deaf in 1971, Cape Coast school for 1970 and shalom special school in Nkuranza in 1998. (Ocloo et al., 2002:9)

The schools for persons with a disability had laudable objectives which were to educate PWDs in order to live a regular life to enable them to live as regular as possible. Thus, their education was meant to socialise and integrate them into the regular world. The schools tried to inculcate in them both cognitive and vocational skills to enhance their independent livelihood and sustenance (Ocloo et al. 2002:6). In the early 70s efforts were made to establish few inclusive schools in Ghana. One of such schools was the Wenchi Methodist Secondary School. Today, there are about nine inclusive senior high schools and over 100 basic schools practicing inclusive education in Ghana (Special Education Division Annual Report 2018).

Besides, successive governments since independence and international conventions have formulated policies and initiated documents that make provisions on education. The policies trace their roots to the accelerated development plan of 1951 which brought a rapid increase and enrolment of people at all levels to be educated. In this policy, there were a lot of provisions that laid the foundations for subsequent educational policies. The 1961 education act also made basic education free and compulsory for all children of school-going age. The 1987 educational reforms also aimed at increasing access to education by making it free and compulsory for all. Article 25 1.2 of the 1992 constitution of Ghana further required that basic education became compulsory for all Ghanaians of school-going age including persons with disabilities by the year 2005. This laudable idea had challenges since most children who formed the minority had not gotten access to education of which persons with disability formed the largest proportion of out of school population (Inclusive Education Policy, 2015).

Other policies and interventions such as the education strategic plan (2010-20) the Disability Act (2006) and Education Act (2008), makes it clear that individuals with a disability should have equitable and accessible education as citizens of Ghana who have the right to be educated.

Also, The United Nations Convention on The Right of The Child (1990), Education for All, The Standard Rules on The Equalization of Opportunities of Persons with Disabilities (1993), The Salamanca Statements and Framework for Action (1994), support that persons with a disability must have equitable and accessible education. Other policies which affirm inclusive education for all includes the sustainable development goals (2015 to 2030), the Dakar framework for action (2000), the UN convention on the rights of persons with disability (2006) and the sustainable development goal (SDG) goal 4.

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<sup>iii</sup> Interview with a resource person at Akropong, Akuapem.

Furthermore, the UNCRPD Articles 9, 24, 29 and 30 make provisions on accessibility, education and participation respectively. Education Act, 2008, Act 778 bothers on inclusive education, 1992 constitution Article 29 - Free compulsory education, to ensure effective socio-economic development through the provision of quality education for all children of school-going age including persons with disability. Accordingly, some measures have been and continue to be taken to expand education at all levels.

### 3. Current Policy on Education in Ghana

Currently, there is a paradigm shift to inclusive education. The concept of inclusion is based on social equity. It involves individuals irrespective of one's socio-economic status, language, sexual orientation, gender, ethnicity and disability. This suggests that in inclusive education both persons with disability and those without disabilities are to learn together in schools, colleges and universities. Inclusive education involves making changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies to enable all children including persons with disability to be educated (UNESCO, 1994). The inclusive education policy traces inclusion as one of the widest education systems that aim to create a learning environment that is responsive to all learners<sup>iv</sup>. The policy recognises learner diversity. It is based on the value system which holds that all persons who attend an educational institution are entitled to equitable access to quality teaching and learning which incorporates the basic values that promote participation, friendship and interaction<sup>v</sup>. The policy further recognises the learning needs of learners and requires all stakeholders in education to address their needs within a learner-friendly environment.<sup>vi</sup> Objective one of the inclusive education policy aims at improving and adapting education and related systems and structures to ensure the inclusion of all learners particularly those with special education needs<sup>vii</sup>. Strategy 3 and 4 of policy objective 1 submits that physical infrastructural designs of existing schools are modified to enhance opportunities for learners with special needs. And also ensure that all new schools' infrastructural design and construction are accessible to all learners with special education needs and built on the principle of universal design (Inclusive Education Policy, 2015, pg. 4 and 5). Notwithstanding, PWDs in their quest to be educated undergo a lot of challenges in their educational process. With the introduction of the inclusive education policy in 2015, questions arise such as; to what extent are persons with disability fairly treated in the various institutions they find themselves in? How accessible is the physical environment? To what extent do they have access to school

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<sup>iv</sup> Refer to page 4 of the inclusive education policy.

<sup>v</sup> See education Act, 2008. Act 778, Section 5, p 5.

<sup>vi</sup> Inclusive education policy by the Government of Ghana- Ministry of Education, supported by the UNICEF, STAR Ghana and Ghana Blind Union 1.

<sup>vii</sup> Persons with disabilities in the educational system are referred to as individuals with special needs because they deviate from what society perceives as average.

facilities such as the school library? How do they access information? What are the attitudes of teachers and non-disabled students towards persons with disabilities?

The objectives of the paper are to examine the challenges PWDs undergo in their quest for education in respect of accessibility, participation and recognition in relation to the existing policies and documents on the education of persons with disability.

#### **4. Materials and Methods**

The materials used for the study were policies and documents on the education of persons with a disability such as the inclusive education policy of 2015, Education Act 2008, Disability Act 2006 and UNCRDP, as well as secondary sources and data gathered from a field study. Content analysis of documents on PWDs was done and interviews were conducted on PWDs in three institutions; of which two are senior high schools (one inclusive and the other a special school) and one college of education which is also inclusive. Qualitative methodology was adopted for the study to explore the challenges Persons with Disability encounter in their institutions in their quest for education. (Creswell, 2014:4). The study employed the case study method. Simple random sampling was used to select respondents from three institutions because it gave respondents equal opportunities to be selected. Ten students comprising six males and four females were interviewed.

The students were visually impaired, and hearing impaired. Three resource persons were also interviewed. One focus group discussion with the assistance of an interpreter was held for both visually and the hearing-impaired students. This gave the respondents an opportunity to interact with the researcher at the same time and also to express their views as they interacted and exchanged ideas on the various challenges they encounter in their institutions. Permission was sought from respondents to record some of the interviews which were later coded in themes for analysis. All interviews were conducted in English since it was the preferred language.

The researcher interacted with persons with disabilities and visited a number of institutions to ascertain the real state of their education and the challenges they were going through. The interaction was extended to six inclusive teachers and supporting staff to elicit their views on the education of persons with disabilities and their challenges in inclusive schools, especially regarding access, recognition and participation of persons with disability in the teaching and learning process.

#### **5. Results**

##### **5.1 Experiences of PWDs in Their Institutions of Study**

The challenges PWDs encounter in their institutions were discussed in three areas of interest; accessibility, participation and recognition. For the purpose of this research, accessibility was divided into two main components which are accessible to the physical environment and information.

### **5.1.1 Accessibility**

#### **a. Access to Physical Environment**

On the issues on access to the physical environment, respondents indicated that they found it difficult to move around the compound due to a number of open and wide drains, the poor road network in the school and the absence of ramps and hand rails. They submitted that the classroom blocks and dormitories are not disability friendly. They struggle to get access to public places such as the chapel, library and even the resource center. The landscape is rocky and others said they did not receive any orientation and mobility training upon admission. Their only means of movement is to rely on their friends. Some have fallen in open drains on a number of occasions when not assisted, leading to injuries.

#### **b. Access to Information**

With issues relating to access to information, respondents, both visual and hearing-impaired students are not able to read literature or books in the library because they are not in the alternative format such as braille, large print, audio and soft copies. The hearing impaired further indicated that they are not able to use books in the library because the signage is different from what they read from the books. Besides, there is no interpreter in the library to support them. Again, other challenges with regard to access to information related to how difficult it is for them to read notices from the notice board. Hearing-impaired have challenges with information relating to voice.

The ICT laboratory in all the schools and colleges visited is not also accessible to persons with disability or individuals with special needs because the visually impaired do not have access to speech software such as jaws. Although the hearing could use the ICT laboratory, they were a bit challenged because they did not have a sign language interpreter to support them.

### **5.1.2 Participation**

Most of the respondents indicated that they are allowed to participate in co-curricular activities. Some of them are entertainment prefects, assistant girls' prefects. They also participate in Inter-house competitions in both athletics and games. One of the respondents submitted that she participated in a 100-meter athletics event but ended up missing her track. others also engaged in activities such as debates and quizzes.

However, some do not participate due to low self-esteem. Others are discouraged by derogatory statements made about them by both staffs and sighted peers. Their low level of participation was attributed to the inaccessible nature of venues for some of the co-curricular activities.

### **5.1.3 Recognition**

Almost all the respondents submitted that they are not generally recognised. They are mostly discriminated against by their peers. Their sighted friends think their impairments are contagious and so are not friendly towards them and some even make fun of them. At times their friends demand rewards both in-kind and cash before they

offer services to them. In class, they are placed in a corner and are not able to relate well with other sighted students. This they felt so sad about and makes them feel dehumanized. They are again not allowed to contribute in class especially those with hearing impairment. They are mostly labelled and addressed by their disability instead of their actual names.

Refer to the following tables indicating the access rates in percentages and explanations on the experiences (positive and negative) visual and hearing-impaired students face in their institutions.

**Table 1: Accessibility**

<b>a. Access to Physical Facilities</b>	
<b>Access Rate</b>	<b>Explanations</b>
90%	We're not happy with the nature of the environment
90%	Fell in open drains when not assisted
60%	Resource center not user friendly
70%	Difficulty to access key facilities such as a library, auditorium, washrooms and dormitories due to lack of ramps,

<b>b. Access to Information</b>	
<b>Access Rate</b>	<b>Explanations</b>
90%	Could not use materials in the library.
90%	Visually impaired students could not use materials in the library because they are not in braille.
60%	Hearing-impaired students have difficulty in reading from the library and notice boards.

**Table 2: Participation**

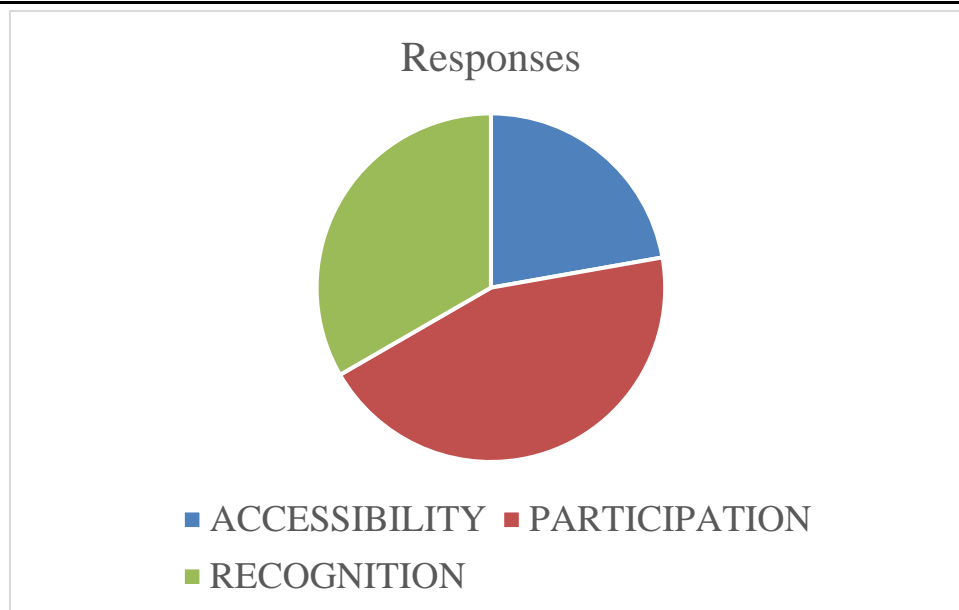
<b>Access Rate</b>	<b>Explanations</b>
90%	Respondents are allowed to participate in sports, prefectorial positions, school choir and co-curricular activities.
20%	Respondents who are mostly visually impaired are not able to participate due to their impairment.

**Table 3: Recognition**

<b>Access Rate</b>	<b>Explanations</b>
90%	Respondents are not given the necessary recognition.
90%	Virtually impaired complained that their sighted friends discriminate against them, they are not comfortable with sitting arrangements in class and dormitories (they are confined in a corner).
60%	They are called by their disabilities instead of their names.
70%	

**Table 4: Pictorial Representation**

<b>Areas</b>	<b>Accessibility</b>	<b>Participation</b>	<b>Recognition</b>
<b>Responses</b>	10%	70%	20%



**Figure 4:** Pictorial Representation

## 6. Discussions

This section discusses the issues on the education of PWDs in the various policies and documents consulted and used to ascertain the extent to which the provisions in the policies reflect on the experiences of PWDs in their institutions. Issues on accessibility, participation and recognition were discussed.

According to the Education Act, 2008 Act 778 article 3. 1 and 2 on inclusive education states that the district assemblies and heads of institutions shall ensure that designs for schools are user friendly for children with special needs. It further indicates that institutions that provide education to children with special needs shall improve upon the existing infrastructure and provide for additional facilities where necessary. This position is reaffirmed in objective one of inclusive education policy which requires that the physical infrastructure of existing schools is modified to enhance opportunities for learners with special education needs. The framework of the same policy makes provision in standard one on accessibility, it guides planners to design buildings that will accommodate all learners including those with disabilities<sup>viii</sup>. The issue of accessibility is further strengthened by article 9 of the UN convention on the rights of persons with disability. Among other things, the article enjoins that state parties should take appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disability have access on an equal basis with all others to the physical environment. This shall include the identification and elimination of all obstacles and barriers to buildings, roads, transportations and other indoor and outdoor facilities including schools, housing, medical facilities and the workplace environment (UN convention article 9).

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<sup>viii</sup> See standards and guidelines for practice of inclusive education in Ghana, (2015) by the Government of Ghana- Ministry of Education, supported by United Nations Children fund (UNICEF).



Experiences from the field clearly indicate a contrary situation. For example, there are open drains, bad roads, and inaccessible buildings including classrooms, dormitories and libraries. These according to respondents, affect their entire life on campus. While others rely on their friends for movement, some take their fate into their own hands by moving alone which normally results in falling into open drains and bumping into objects leading to injuries, (see table on accessibility). This implies that if a conscious effort is not made, there will be fear among students in terms of movements. Students will continue to be injured while others may always rely on their seeing friends all the time before they could move.

On access to information, information on UNCRPD's article 21 urges the state to take appropriate measures to ensure that PWDs can exercise their right to freedom of expression and opinion including the right to speak, receive and impart information and ideas on an equal basis with others through all forms of communication. It adds that accessible formats such as braille, sign language interpretation should be done without any extra cost for persons with disabilities. Objective 2 strategy 3 of inclusive education policy calls for ensuring that teaching and learning material is made accessible to all learners and that it reflects and respects the diversity of human society in its coverage. Response from this research clearly indicates that a lot more needs to be done in order to have a level playing field for PWDs in this area. While their able colleagues could go to the library at any given time to read, gather information and research to boost their knowledge and understanding on a wide range of subjects, their visual and hearing-impaired counterparts to a large extent do not have this opportunity as indicated in the responses. Obviously, there will be a huge gap between these two groups of people but it is expected that at the end of the term or year, they are to write the same examination. It is clear that if the situation is not addressed or improved their academic performance will surely be affected, not because they do not want to learn but rather, the supporting facilities are not available. This contravenes the trust of the disability act which calls for a just and inclusive society.

Article 30 of UNCRPD states that of Participation PWDs in all spheres of life is very crucial and critical in the school setting, participation will include taking part in the learning process class discussions contributions and presentations as well as co-curriculum activities such as sports culture, music and many others. It was clear from this research that respondents largely participate in some of these activities. Some have even held prefectorial positions in their schools. Currently, the position of senior boys' prefect at Okuapeman SHS is held by a visually impaired student. Also, students from the Akropong School for the blind participate in the annual inter-school cultural competition and the Independence Day March Past Parade. This is very encouraging and refreshing since this experience will motivate both the disabled and non-disabled that positions are given on merit and competencies. The situation meets article 30 of the UNCRPD on participation. Which states that State Parties should recognize the right of persons with disabilities to take part on an equal basis with others in cultural life, and shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities:

- a) Enjoy access to cultural materials in accessible formats;

- b) Enjoy access to television programmes, films, theatre and other cultural activities, in accessible formats;
- c) Enjoy access to places for cultural performances or services, such as theatres, museums, cinemas, libraries and tourism services, and, as far as possible, enjoy access to monuments and sites of national cultural importance.

State Parties shall take appropriate measures to enable persons with disabilities to have the opportunity to develop and utilize their creative, artistic and intellectual potential, not only for their own benefit but also for the enrichment of society.

This also promotes the self-confidence of PWDs and gives them a sense of belonging. It further motivates the non-disabled community to change their perceptions on disability which in most cases is about inability and charity giving.

## **7. Recognition**

According to UNCRPD, Persons with disabilities shall be entitled, on an equal basis with others, to recognition and support of their specific cultural and linguistic identity, including sign languages and deaf culture (UNCRPD, Article 23). Contrary to the stipulation in this convention, respondents were generally unhappy about the low level of recognition they receive. While some believed that disability was contagious, a section had the view that PWDs did not have anything to offer.

When they needed some services, their colleagues with no disabilities will respond to the services with a demand for rewards either in cash or in kind. Some even call them by their disabilities, a clear contravention of Article 37 of the national disability act which states that a person shall not call a person with disability derogatory names because of the disability of the person. Article 1 of the UN also seeks to promote, protect and ensure full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities and promote respect for their inherent dignity. The lack of recognition for the inherent dignity of PWDs could result in low self-esteem and low self-concept. It may, therefore, consolidate the perceptions and beliefs that persons with disability do have not much to contribute to societal development. It is to correct this situation that the (Standards and Guidelines for Inclusive Policy, 2015).

## **8. Conclusions**

From the discussions, this work concludes that there is a clear difference between theory and practice (policy and reality). Issues on access to the physical environment, information and recognition as well as the full participation of PWDs remain barriers to the attainment of their education. As a result, learners do not have a full benefit from the realization of an inclusive curriculum. There is, therefore, the need for a conscious and collaborative effort to bridge the narrative between theory and practice.

## 8.1 Recommendation

In the light of the issues raised in this paper, the following recommendations are put forward to guide the education of persons with disabilities.

- 1) Policies that have been put in place for the education of persons with a disability must be enforced and well implemented by the Ghana Education Service and other educational practitioners.
- 2) The government, district assemblies and management should ensure that the existing structures in schools are made disability friendly as provided in the disability act, inclusive education policy and policy framework.
- 3) There should be a continuous and sustained awareness programme for stakeholders, especially on inclusive education policy.
- 4) Resource persons and other supporting staff must be trained regularly to be abreast with current trends in education.
- 5) Increase counselling services for both able and disabled persons to address attitudinal issues
- 6) Management of institutions should provide regular motivational programmes for PWDs to make them more assertive and self-confident.
- 7) Government should provide resources in the right quantities at the right time.
- 8) Management must ensure that both staff and students do not discriminate against PWDs in their schools. They should also advocate for the provision of the required resources.
- 9) There should be regular interaction between staff management and persons with disabilities in their institutions to appreciate their progress and challenges.
- 10) Annual reports on the state of inclusive education in the various schools should be sent regularly to the GES and ministry of education to enhance better understanding and appreciation of issues that need to be improved or corrected.

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The authors declare that they had no financial or personal relationships that may inappropriately influence the writing of this article.

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