Discrimination against children with disabilities in mainstream schools in Southern Ghana: Challenges and perspectives from stakeholders

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A B S T R A C T

There are less favourable attitudes towards inclusion of children with disabilities in Ghana as a result of historical assumptions concerning Persons With Disabilities (PWDs). These assumptions are cultural beliefs which look down upon persons with disabilities, leading to either the exclusion of PWDs from mainstream schools or including them adversely; for instance, when they are provided with separate facilities which sometimes are not conducive for learning. Using Ghana as an example, the study examined challenges children with disabilities face in mainstream schools as well as perspectives on disability. The study utilised qualitative method of research mainly in-depth interviews and social model of disability, advanced by Mike Oliver as an underpinning research technique theory. The study found that children with disabilities mostly face challenges such as discrimination from their colleagues, teachers, and non-teaching staff in the school. Also, government does not adequately plan for children with disabilities by way of policies and programmes. The number of special education teachers in the mainstream educational facilities are inadequate, and the few available teachers seem to lack the competence to properly impart knowledge to them to ensure the development of their potentials. Besides, findings indicated that, the understanding of the word “disabled” and its explanation associated with cultural beliefs cause and worsen disability in these group of children denying them their rights. These challenges indicate that, children with disabilities educational needs were not properly taken care of and the system does not help them to benefit from education. The study therefore recommends the need to re-orient people’s thoughts and their beliefs towards children with disabilities to reduce or eliminate the challenge they encounter in schools and in the larger society.

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1. Background

The importance of education to the development of children cannot be overemphasized. Education helps individuals to develop skills, improve their social status and gain access to networks that could lead to enhanced social outcomes, independently from the effect of education on income (OECD, 2010). Globally, children with disabilities experience marginalisation within the educational system and also traditionally experience varying forms of discrimination from mainstream society. Children with disabilities have remained relatively invisible in most governments’ efforts to achieve universal access to primary education, (UNESCO, 2012). As a result of these inequities, many children with disabilities are not reaping the full benefits of education. Internationally, a growing focus has been placed on social inclusion as the key strategy for promoting the right to education, including those of children with disabilities. Thus, global trends in special education have shifted from the institutionalisation of children with disabilities in special schools towards inclusive approaches that enable children to access mainstream educational programmes in the communities where they live (Ainscow and Sandall, 2010; Hutchinson and Martin, 2012). Governments owe it to their citizens to make the necessary investment in education in order to provide the best standards possible, (Porter and Smith, 2011). More so, it is well documented that disability presents certain challenges that influence the learning modes of persons; especially, children. Therefore, it is claimed that persons with difficulties including children are “non-educable” (Culham and Nuid, 2003; Reiter and Vitani, 2007; Maul and Singer, 2009; Porter and Smith, 2011). But, all children are capable of learning and becoming recipients of quality education if the right environment of inclusion and acceptance are created, (Mittler et al., 2002).
Inclusive education practices are built around the concept of accessibility which is essential if children with disabilities are to enjoy their right to participate in education. Since the inception of formal education many years ago, Ghana has provided special education and regular education separately. For instance, a study by Walker et al. (1986:191-201) provides information to support the statement that education has been provided separately. They state, inter alia, that “the blind, deaf, and mentally retarded children are educated and cared for in categorical and segregated settings such as Demonstration School for the Deaf at Mamppong-Akwamip and Children with orthopaedic problems are educated in mainstream settings”. Education will improve if a system of education moves away from special education for persons with disabilities towards a more inclusive system whereby education is made more suitable for all with individual peculiarities taken into consideration in policy design and implementation.

It is worth noting that, there are legal framework legal frameworks such as the 1992 constitution which encourages inclusive education in Ghana. For instance, the Salamanca Statement (1994) and the Dakar Conference (2000), international protocols which Ghana is a signatory to, emphasise more on inclusive education among member countries. In line with this, the Ministry of Education pursued those rights and the Ghana Education Service in its Education Strategic plan 2003–2015 adopted inclusive education as one of the main policy priorities. The Ministry, thus, envisions the achievements of an inclusive education system by 2015 (Special Education Division (SpEd, 2005). As a result, both government and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) have supported inclusive education and special needs education in Ghana.

In 2003/2004 academic year, the SpED of Ghana Education Service (GES), in addressing the policy objectives, initiated the implementation of Inclusive Education on pilot basis in fourteen (14) districts of five (5) regions namely, Greater Accra, Eastern, Central, Volta and Northern. As a result, the practice of inclusive education in a developing country like Ghana could be explained as being at its embryonic stage. This is consistent with the notions of WHO and World Bank (2011) which stated that although inclusion is gaining roots in Western countries, the move towards inclusive education is at its early stage of adoption and implementation in developing countries such as Ghana due to people’s perceptions and beliefs about children with disabilities and their positions in society. In view of the statement by WHO and World Bank (2011), it appears that there is a negative perception about children with disabilities in Ghana, with levels of stigmatisation and discrimination associated with disabilities. Cultural beliefs and practices and inadequate provision of special education needs are barriers in full participation to education for persons with disabilities. Persons with disabilities are often seen as unproductive to the economic and social needs of society and consequently experience many forms of exclusion. In spite of available policies that seek to address their educational needs, many children with disabilities are out of school or excluded from any form of education. For instance, census (2010) and UNICEF (2015) indicated, in Ghana, children with disabilities are mostly children who reflect evidence of marginalisation and vulnerability and are generally described as the last ‘batch’ of out-of-school children. Projections from the 2010 Population and Housing Census (PHC) indicate that about 2% (120,576) of the entire population (7,586,475) of school going children aged between 6 and 14 years have some form of disability, of which 14% (16,288) are out of school. In all, over 470,000 children are out of school due to learning difficulties and others challenges that are not addressed by the current education system. Also, children with disabilities dropped out because they could not find schools suitable to meet their educational needs.

Ghana has ratified several international conventions and declarations on the right to education. Some of these are the United Nations declaration of human rights, UN Convention on rights of children, UNESCO convention against discrimination in education (1960), the Education For All (EFA) goals, the MDGs and their successors the SDGs, and many other international policy prescriptions which have been absorbed into the national laws. As a signatory to most of these international conventions, Ghana passed the National Disability policy Document in December, 2000 and Disability Act in 2006 as part of in-country efforts to eliminate discrimination against PWDS and enhance their wellbeing. Again, Ghana’s Education Education Strategic plan 2003–2015 called for inclusion of all children with disabilities in the mainstream school by 2015. It suggests that, Ghana has made effort and an attempt to comply with the principles underpinning the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCPRD). All these policy frameworks are significant and laudable steps towards expanding educational opportunities for PWDS. However, implementation has continuously become a challenge. Hence much more efforts is needed to protect the rights of children with disabilities and to fully enhance their participation in education. Therefore, this study examined the challenges children with disabilities face in mainstream school, stakeholders perceptions and causes of disabilities and implication for policy and practice.

2. Theoretical framework

This study was guided by the social model of disability. The social model of disability was developed in the 1970s by activists in the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS), and given academic credibility through the works of Vic Finkelstein (1980, 1981), Colin Barnes (1991), and Mike Oliver (1990, 1996). The social model sees disability as the result of the interaction between people living with impairments and an environments filled with physical, attitudinal, communication and social barriers. It carries the implication that the physical, attitudinal, communication and social environments must change to enable people living with impairments to participate in society on an equal basis with others. The model offers a critical understanding of the reasons why discrimination occurs in the society. The study embraced this model because the social model challenges to the medical model of disability which rejects the patient as defective by situating disability exclusively in the individual rather than in the society. The medical model focused on the individual with disability, mainly on his or her biological defects. The defects leads to limitation in functioning which is seen as the basis of disability. Thus it perceive disability as lack of ability to perform an activity in a normal way. The model encompasses the notion of medicalisation suggesting professional dominance in the lives of persons with disability and being defined by their impairments excludes them from decisions and research related to them (Borsay 2005; Shakespeare, 2006). In line with this, Hughes (2000) asserted that, the impact of the medical model of disability is far from benign, and there is evidence to support the notion that a predominantly medicalised notion of disability is pathological in its effects. The medical model is viewed as the contributor to the causes of disability discrimination. In effect the medical model contributes in suppressing the ability of persons with disabilities to challenge the status quo.

The principle of inclusive education is based on the social model which perceives the current education system and schools as discriminatory and inadequate. It therefore requires schools to adapt to meet the individual needs of all learners whose exclusion from mainstream education may have been the results of disability. The model has greatly influenced the area of disability as well as educational perspectives on inclusion. It sees the
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