



Challenges in accessing education for children with disabilities in Ashanti and Brong Ahafo regions of Ghana

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses factors restricting access to education for children with disabilities in Ashanti and Brong Ahafo regions of Ghana. The aim is to identify barriers hindering access to education for children with disabilities and make recommendations to increase access. A one round in-depth interview was conducted with 31 participants, made up of officials of special education at the national head office of the Ghana Education Service, district special education coordinators, resource teachers, headmasters, and classroom teachers in inclusive and special schools. Stakeholders perceived that children with disabilities encountered challenges in accessing education. The common barriers identified were inaccessible physical environment, limited resources, teachers' attitudes, limited special educators and limited government commitment. The study concludes on the need for concerted efforts to ensure that children with disabilities are able to access education on equal basis as other children.

Keywords: Accessibility, special needs, inclusion, education, disability, Ghana

INTRODUCTION

Barriers to education for children with disabilities

Although there has been a significant increase in access to basic education for children with disabilities in the last two decades, access to education is still limited to millions of children with disabilities around the world.¹ Children with disabilities have lower educational attainment than other children. They are also more likely to enroll in school late and leave earlier with fewer qualifications than other children.^{2,3} Estimates show that of the 67 million children who are out of school worldwide, children with disabilities constitute more than one-third, and the chances of children with disabilities not attending school are two or three times greater than children without disabilities.⁴ United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)¹ estimated that 75 million primary school age children with disabilities were not in school as of 2006 and by 2007, the number had increased to 101 million. Similarly, United Nations Education⁵ reported that exclusion from

education "is particularly more serious among persons with disabilities, of whom approximately 97 per cent do not have the basic reading and writing skills." The situation could be worse for children with disabilities in developing countries. For example, in a study of 11 developing countries, Filmer⁶ found that disability accounted for most of the cases of school enrolment shortfalls than any other reason. According to estimates by United Nations Education,⁵ children with disabilities "who attend school in developing countries range from 1% to 5%.

In Ghana, a study by Ministry of Education⁷ indicated that 10% of children without disabilities were out of school compared to 70% of children with disabilities. The study further revealed that there has been a decrease in the number of children with disabilities enrolled in various basic schools. For example, in 2006/2007 academic year, the total number of children with disabilities enrolled in public basic schools was 34,729. This was reduced to 16,596 pupils at the end of the 2012/2013 academic year. Similarly, there has been a slight reduction in the number of children enrolled in special schools within the same period. Enrolment during the 2006/2007 academic year was 6,432 pupils but was reduced to 6,180 at the end of the 2012/2013 academic year.⁷

A myriad of complex factors account for the low enrolment of children with disabilities in schools. They include unfriendly physical environment, hostile attitudes of teachers and parents, inadequate trained teachers, difficulty in finding schools that support the needs of children with disabilities and lack of awareness about the potentials of children with disabilities.⁸⁻¹⁰

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Children with disabilities thus encounter physical barriers such as lack of ramps and elevators in school buildings, inaccessible washrooms, rough terrain, and inaccessible transportation to and from school. They also face obstacles resulting from negative and stereotypical attitudes due to lack of knowledge about and insensitivity to disability issues on the part of educators, parents, staff and colleagues.^{3, 11, 12}

The role of social and physical barriers in excluding persons with disabilities from participating at all levels of society has been recognized by disability right activists, and the removal of barriers is the central tenet of the social model of disability. Proponents of the social model of disability view disability in terms of social, cultural, and political phenomenon, shifting the focus from individuals with impairment to limitations imposed by a complex range of factors arising from architecture public transport system, and the often misguided societal attitudes.¹³⁻¹⁵ This study therefore draws on the assumption that the removal of physical barriers, provision of appropriate resources, which create physically accessible environment and a drastic change in societal attitudes and public policies are key to inclusion of children with disabilities in education.

Structure of Education in Ghana

The current educational system of Ghana is based on a 6-3-3-4 structure: six years of primary education, three years of Junior High School (JHS), three years of Senior High School (SHS), and four years of University education. All pupils take the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) at the end of the ninth year. The results obtained by pupils at this stage determine their next educational path. Three options are available to pupils depending on their interest and results obtained at the BECE: an enrolment in SHS, a Technical school or a Commercial/Vocational school.¹⁶⁻¹⁷

The structure of special education in Ghana is similar to that of general education, and therefore, special schools use the same curriculum as general education, but with slight modifications to suit specific categories of disability.¹⁸ Special education focuses only on children with visual impairment, hearing impairment, and children with intellectual disability. Children with physical disabilities can only be enrolled in mainstream schools.^{4, 19}

Ghana is currently adopting inclusive education. Consequently, a number of schools have been practicing inclusion on pilot basis since 2003. This implies that all existing educational institutions will have to be modified to accommodate children with disabilities. Since the introduction of inclusive education, some children with disabilities have been enrolled in selected mainstream schools.^{7, 14, 20} It should also be noted that before the introduction of inclusive education, some children with disabilities were already enrolled in mainstream schools.

However, little is known about the challenges children in special and mainstream schools encounter. This study therefore investigated barriers hindering participation of children with disabilities in education in the Ashanti and Brong Ahafo regions of Ghana. The aim is to bring to the fore challenges children

with disabilities encounter in their quest to access education. The identification of these challenges would help policy makers to design interventions that would respond to such challenges. The study was therefore guided by the following questions: 1) What is the extent of accessibility of basic educational facilities in Ashanti and Brong Ahafo regions of Ghana to children with disabilities? and 2) What are the factors hindering access to educational facilities for children with disabilities in Ashanti and Brong Ahafo regions?

METHODS

Study Site

The study was conducted in Ashanti and Brong Ahafo regions, located in the middle-belt of Ghana. These regions are centrally located in the country and are among the regions chosen for the pilot inclusive education in Ghana. The two regions are also among the regions with the highest population of children between 3 and 18 years who are out of school.²¹ Although, there is no information on the number of children with disabilities who were out of school in these regions, it is possible that high proportion of them were among those who drop out their school. This is because children with disabilities are more likely to be affected by factors that compel children to drop out of school than children without disabilities.²² Besides, their central location becomes an attractive factor for people from all over the country. Consequently, the population of these regions is generally heterogeneous and views from the participants are therefore likely to be representative of different cultural groups.

Study Design

It is an exploratory study which adopted qualitative methods of data collection and utilized in-depth interviews as a tool for data collection. One advantage of qualitative method is the use of open-ended questions, which allow participants to respond in their own words rather than compelling them to choose from fixed and predetermined responses.^{23, 24} Using qualitative methods for this study provided deeper insights into participants' perception about barriers children with disabilities encounter when accessing education in the two regions.

Participants and Sampling Techniques

Table 1 below presents information on the distribution of participants.

A total 31 participants were interviewed. They consisted of four officials from the Head Office of the Special Education Division (SPED) of Ghana Education Service in Accra (the Deputy Director, the Head of Inclusive Education, the officer in-charge of Deaf and Blind schools, and the Head of schools for the Intellectually Disabled). At the time of the study, there were three districts practicing inclusive education in Ashanti region whilst in the Brong Ahafo region, out of the three districts selected for inclusive education, only one was practicing. However, all six District Coordinators of Special Education from six districts selected for piloting inclusive education in the two regions were selected.

Table 1 Distribution of Participants in the Study

Type of Study Participants	Ashanti Region		Brong Ahafo Region		Total	
	No.	%	No	%	No.	%
	Special Education coordinators	3	9.68	3	9.68	6
Heads of inclusive schools	3	9.68	1	3.23	4	12.90
Classroom Teachers from inclusive schools	3	9.68	1	3.23	4	12.90
Heads of special schools	2	6.45	2	6.45	4	12.90
Classroom Teachers from special schools	2	6.45	2	6.45	4	12.90
Resource Teachers	3	9.68	2	6.45	5	16.13
Total	18	51.62	13	35.49	26	87.09
Officers from Special Education Division	4		12.90%		99.99	

Each region had two special schools—one for the hearing impaired and one for children with intellectually impaired. All four Headmasters from the four special schools in the two regions were selected, and upon the advice from the District Special Education Coordinators, the four Headmasters from the four schools practicing inclusive education in both regions (three schools from Ashanti region and one from Brong Ahafo) were also selected. Again, eight classroom teachers (four from the special schools and four from the selected inclusive schools) and five resource teachers attached to the inclusive schools were selected.

Two sampling techniques were used to select participants for the study. A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants from SPED, District Special Education Coordinators, Resource Teachers and Headmasters while the classroom teachers from both the inclusive and special schools were selected by the simple random sampling technique.

Initial information about the study was communicated to officials at SPED through letters, notifying all heads of departments at SPED about the study and the assistance needed. After agreeing to participate, informed consent forms were sent to them to read through a week prior to the interview. Each head of department signed the informed consent form before being interviewed. Through officials at SPED, the district special education coordinators and the resource teachers were also recruited. With assistance from the district special education coordinators, schools heads and teachers who fell within the eligibility criteria were selected to participate in the study. In inclusive schools, teachers who had children with disabilities in their classes were chosen while in special schools, teachers who had taught in the school for at least three years were chosen.

Data collection and analysis

Three slightly different semi-structured interview guides were used to collect data from participants - one for officials at the SPED Head office, one for the District Special Education Coordinators and Resource Teachers, and one for the Headmasters and Classroom Teachers. Interviews were conducted on one-on-one basis and audio-recorded with permission from participants. The choice for this instrument was based on its flexibility, which allowed the researchers to modify questions as and when required. Although three

different interview guides were used, the issues covered were similar. They included the number of children with disabilities in mainstream schools, the needs of the children in the schools, types of resources available for the children, teaching strategies, funding, attitude of teachers, and challenges teachers encounter with children with special needs.

The audio-recorded interviews of the three categories of participants were transcribed verbatim by the researchers. The researchers listened to each audio recording several times before transcribing. A Microsoft word file was created for the transcripts, which was saved on a portable computer accessible to only the researchers. The researchers read through the transcripts several times to be familiar with responses. Afterwards, sub-themes based on the research question using Weft Qualitative Data Analysis software (Weft QDA) were developed. Weft QDA is a free qualitative data analysis programme, which was used to identify and merged similar themes from the different categories of respondents. The main themes identified were related to barriers hindering access to education for children with disabilities—inaccessible school facilities, attitude towards children with disabilities, lack of qualified teachers, lack of resources, and inadequate government commitment. Supporting quotes from the text were linked to each relevant theme.

Trustworthiness of the data

The sampling procedure used for selecting participants for this study was purposive. One of the decisions guiding the use of purposive sampling was to involve participants who had adequate knowledge on the issues affecting children with disabilities and access to education. This maximized the utility of the data. Also, the researcher allowed some participants to read through their responses after transcribing.

Ethical consideration

Ethical clearance was obtained from Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology Committee for Human Research Publication and Ethics before the fieldwork. The researchers respected the rights of the respondents and ensured that informed consent was completed before implementing the interview. The informed consent process included giving information about the expected duration of the interviews and confirming that participation was completely voluntary.

RESULTS

The findings from the study indicated that a number of interrelated barriers were hindering access to education for children with disabilities in the two regions. These included inaccessible school facilities, attitude towards children with disabilities, lack of qualified teachers, lack of resources, and inadequate government commitment.

Inaccessible school facilities

Participants described facilities and physical environments of schools as unfriendly. Responses from the participants indicated that the physical environment in all the special schools was not accessible to children with physical disabilities and those with visual impairment. However, those who are deaf and intellectually disabled did not encounter barriers with the physical environment. For example, two Headmasters of special schools indicated that children with physical disabilities would have problems moving around the buildings in the special schools. According to the Headmasters, although the schools were put up purposely to cater for the needs of children with disabilities, little consideration was given to those with physical disabilities and the visually impaired. This is expected since special schools in Ghana do not target children with physical disabilities.

The physical environment in the inclusive schools was not different. The schools were originally built for children without disabilities and so the needs of children with disabilities were not incorporated. As a result, children with physical disabilities and those who are visually impaired enrolled in these schools found it difficult to participate on equal basis with others. A Resource Teacher, for example, complained of the inaccessibility of the environment and the need to do something about it.

The environment is too bad, it is not the best. It has become very difficult for us to tell the Headmaster that we need ramps, pavements and rails around here or cementing the area because the capitation [grants for basic schools] is not enough. The school has been built for the normal children without disabilities and not for those with disabilities [sic].

Personal observations by the researchers confirmed assertions by the participants that the physical environment in the special and inclusive schools is inaccessible as the terrain in all the schools was rough, the buildings were without ramps and there were no disability-friendly sanitary facilities.

Distance was also one of the barriers identified in this study. All participants agreed that the location of the schools was a barrier to most children with disabilities. The schools were few and located in places that are far from the residences of the children, creating problems for some of them and depriving others access to education. Providing transport to and from school would have helped deal with this barrier but the schools and parents are constrained in this regard. A Headmaster of a special school noted that:

The school is supposed to transport some of the children from nearby suburbs to the school but we don't have buses to do that. We mostly house those from afar and tell parents who stay

around to find their own means of transport. They are not coming because the parents can't afford the cost of daily transportation.

Since inclusive schools do not provide boarding facilities for their pupils, all children, including those with disabilities trek to and from school daily. This, according to a Resource Teacher, is making it difficult for some parents to send their children to school. The Resource Teacher explained:

Distance to the schools is too far and the children walk daily to school, which is hard for children with disabilities. Some of the parents who want to send their children with disabilities to school said they don't have time to bring them to school and pick them after school. They stay far away so the children are at home and there is nothing I can do about it.

Many of the children in the special schools are very young. Regular visits by their parents help them to cope with conditions in the boarding house. It also enables the school authorities to discuss issues affecting the children with their parents. However, due to distance, parents are unable to visit their children regularly. A Classroom Teacher in a special school explained how distance was affecting interaction between the school and parents.

Because the children are coming from far places, it is very difficult for us to arrange meetings with the parents and this is affecting the children. At times we invite them to discuss issues affecting their children with them but they won't come. In fact, some parents do not visit them at all. Mostly, it is because of the distance so they are here only at re-opening or vacation.

From the above comments, it is clear that distance to school is a crucial factor affecting education of children with disabilities in the area.

Attitudes towards children with disabilities

Participants cited parents and teachers as people whose attitudes were hindering access to education for children with disabilities. Almost all the respondents agreed that negative attitudes of parents were affecting education of children with disabilities. Two officials of SPED explained that parents discriminated against their children with disabilities. According to them, because of the negative perceptions about the capabilities of children with disabilities, parents preferred to educate their children without disabilities to those with disabilities. This view was supported by a Classroom Teacher in a special school who claimed that parents spent less on their children with disabilities than those without disabilities. He argued that:

Most parents think children with disabilities cannot do anything so there is no need exposing them or sending them to school. Some parents end up hiding their children with disabilities because of stigmatization. Most of these children are out of school because their parents are hiding them.

Another view from a Classroom Teacher suggested lack of cooperation from parents leaving little room for any help.

Attitude of parents does not help in educating children with disabilities. Some parents don't co-operate with us at all. Many of them are not ready to listen to us as they give excuses that the

child can't learn so they won't spend on them. They think that children with disabilities have challenges so they can't be in school or be educated. Some parents see them to be useless and they see no reason to send them to school. If the parent has negative attitude and not ready to educate his child, what can you do?

Besides parents, some participants blamed teachers for the challenges children with disabilities encounter. For example, a Classroom Teacher alleged that:

The way teachers talk to children with disabilities discourage them from coming [to school] again. Comments from some of my colleagues create the impression that the children are useless and that they would be better for them to stay home.

Also, some of the teachers were against educating children with disabilities, and would not allow resource teachers in their classrooms to assist the children. A Resource Teacher remarked:

Some of the teachers are not cooperating with us. I could remember sometime ago when we were going round as a team to screen. You would get to a class and when you want to take the children out to do the screening, some of the teachers would tell me I'm busy, we are doing exercise.

Supporting the claim, another Resource Teacher said that:

At times, I enter a class and introduce myself as a resource teacher who is helping children with disabilities. The class teachers won't cooperate with me. Some may think you have come there to sabotage their work. Some tell me no child is having disability in their class but I know the children are there. The commitment of the general teachers is questionable in accepting the inclusive concept.

Undoubtedly, support from parents and teachers are essential because they are important stakeholders in the education of children with disabilities. Therefore, if they exhibit negative tendencies towards the education of children with disabilities, the future of these children would be negatively impacted.

Lack of qualified teachers

Availability of teachers who understand the needs of children with disabilities is essential for their effective participation in education. Responses from the participants suggest that many of the teachers in the inclusive and special schools were not special educators and had little or no knowledge on special needs education. All the participants agreed on this issue. Comments by officials of SPED indicated that the universities do not train enough special educators so the SPED was finding it difficult getting enough well trained teachers to handle children with disabilities in the schools.

As a result of lack of qualified teachers, the schools relied on teachers who did not have the competence to teach children with disabilities, thereby, creating huge challenges for both pupils and the teachers. For example, a teacher in a deaf school said, *"it is very frustrating and I cannot effectively explain things to the children."*

He had difficulty teaching deaf pupils because he was not fluent in the sign language.

Another teacher without special training stated:

I have four children with disabilities in my class. Sometimes it is difficult teaching them but I try my best to help them. At first, it was very difficult for me to cope with them but with time, it has become normal but I am still having problems handling them effectively.

For some participants, these could be one of the factors accounting for the poor academic performance exhibited by children with disabilities, especially hearing impaired students. An official at SPED noted:

Generally, children with special needs perform worse than those without disabilities but the situation is worst among deaf children. The results of the BECE for the past three years showed that, deaf students had 46% pass in 2011; 32% pass in 2012 and 30% passed in 2013. The deaf students are not performing because most teachers don't understand the children and don't know the sign language so it really affects their performance.

The situation seemed to have been compounded by inadequate supply of resource teachers to support the teachers and children in inclusive schools. One Headmaster of an inclusive school commented:

The resource teachers are inadequate. They are supposed to be in every classroom but they are not enough. We have seven classes where the visually impaired students are. But we have only three resources teachers. There should have been one in every classroom assisting them but how can three teachers be in seven classrooms?

A Resource Teacher agreed with the above assertion and explained that *"when I go to a school, there are about seven classrooms and I am the only resource teacher. The fact is, I can't reach most of the children in the schools."*

Since resource teachers are needed to support children with special needs and the classroom teachers, especially those without training in special needs education, challenges related to the supply of their services could create frustration for both teachers and the children who need them.

Lack of Teaching and Learning Resource

Resources for teaching and learning such as Braille sheets, stylus, recorders, embossers, colours, toys and pictures are needed to make teaching children with disabilities effective and to enable children with disabilities participate in class activities. However, responses from the participants suggest that the schools lacked the appropriate resources to match the teaching and learning needs of children with disabilities. A Classroom Teacher in a special school revealed that:

It would be good I use audiovisuals to enable them (intellectually disabled children) see what I'm teaching but these are not provided. In my class, I should have electricity but I don't have it. If I want them to watch something or play a sound for them, I can't. As a teacher, I can only improvise in the absence of these resources.

These claims by the teachers were confirmed by two officials of SPED who indicated that the Special Education Division seldom supplied resources purposely meant for children with special needs to the schools and that, *"these resources are only*

supplied to the schools every two years because they are expensive.”

Participants from the special schools claimed they sometimes acquired the teaching and learning materials with funds from the government. However, they are unable to acquire the materials because of inadequate funding from government. They cited situations where teachers bought the materials with money from their own pockets. Since teaching and learning materials are vital in teaching children with disabilities, the lack or inadequate supply could be a serious setback to effective interaction between teachers and their pupils.

Lack of resources also affected proper assessment of the children before admission. Teachers relied on “*symptoms and appearance*” techniques to identify children with special needs in their classrooms. They observed the physical appearance and behavior of the children so as to decide how to approach such children. With this approach, it is likely that some children with disabilities would not receive the support they needed to participate effectively in classroom activities.

Inadequate government commitment

Government support is important for the smooth running of schools. However, responses from the participants suggest that the schools were not receiving the needed support from the government. Inadequate government support, according to the participants, was making it difficult for school authorities to make the school environment accessible to children with disabilities. For example, a Headmaster said that, “*it is the responsibility of the government to provide facilities such as ramps, light doors, and accessible toilets but these facilities are not being provided and the schools do not have the resources to provide them.*”

Also, government is responsible for providing funds for the boarding and lodging needs of children in the special schools. However, Headmasters of the special schools complained about the insufficiency of the funds as well as delays in releasing the funds to the schools. This claim by the Headmasters was confirmed by an official at SPED who explained that “*support of government to special schools has always not been enough. Out of the budget for the Ghana Education Service, SPED gets only 1% allocation.*” The following quotes from two Headmasters further illustrate the extent of the problem.

Normally, it [funds] comes very late. Even at the beginning of the term we delayed in re-opening because of lack of funds. The grant from the government is woefully inadequate. No money for administration, electricity and water bills. Now we do not receive service grants for administration since 2009 so everything is based on the feeding grant. For the whole of the year, no registers, no notebook has been supplied us. So we buy all these from the same feeding grant given us. The sad thing is that, these monies are not coming. We have not received funds for this term.

The money should come every term but of late, it is not coming. We reopened the whole term and nothing has come. This term’s grant is yet to come and I don’t know when they are going to bring it. We buy on credit. It has gotten to a time food

sellers don’t want to sell to us. We are just handicapped if the grants are not in. The school has been served a letter by Volta River Authority, that if we do not come and settle their electricity bills, our lights will be disconnected. The bills have piled up and they have threatened to disconnect the lights.

Although it is hard to verify some of the claims made by the Headmasters, they cannot be ignored completely, especially because they seemed to be consistent with claims by officials from SPED.

DISCUSSION

Although the study appears to be limited in scope in that it covered only two out of the ten regions in Ghana, the findings provide useful insights into education for children with disabilities in Ghana. One of the finding which suggested that attitude towards educating children with disabilities was negative is not unexpected as they are consistent with findings from other studies that investigated attitudes towards educating children with disabilities.^{3,8,9, 11} For instance, studies in Ghana and elsewhere revealed that parental and teacher attitudes as well as lack of commitment on the part of governments are major barriers obstructing efforts to increase access to education for children with disabilities.^{3, 7, 14}

Negative perceptions about disability and lack of societal understanding of their concerns are major impediments to the social, economic, and political inclusion of persons with disabilities.²⁵⁻²⁶ This negative perception about disability coupled with ignorance about the capabilities of persons with disabilities has resulted in the unwillingness of society, including parents, to invest in the education of children with disabilities.^{26, 27}

It is expected that the government, which has the obligation to provide education for all, and has been a signatory to many international conventions on disability, would be more positive towards the education of children with disabilities and would create the enabling environment for them. However, as indicated by the findings of the study, government seemed to have shirked this responsibility. For instance, financial support to the special and inclusive schools has been inadequate and often released late to the schools, a situation that often disrupts academic work. Indeed, there are instances whereby special schools have re-opened late or closed down due to lack of funds.²⁸ Studies by Akyeampong (2010)¹⁶ and Miles (2000)²⁹ have also identified negative attitudes of teachers, families, and parents as well as lack of government support as obstacles hindering efforts to educate children with disabilities.

It is worthy to note that while getting enrolled in schools is one of the major challenges for children with disabilities, the few who get enrolled encounter numerous difficulties in the schools because conditions in the schools are not tailored to meet their needs. The nature of the environment—inaccessible buildings, lack of support services, and non-availability of qualified teachers who understand the needs of the children—make teaching and learning unsuitable for children with disabilities. According to the World Health Organization

(2011),³ although physical access to school buildings is an essential requirement to increase access to education for children with disabilities, this essential condition is often ignored, because most educational facilities are built without taking into account the concerns of children with disabilities.

Since most of the schools that are practicing inclusive education were built without incorporating disability-friendly features, it will require substantial retrofitting to make them accessible to the children. This will require huge financial outlay which the Government of Ghana finds difficult or unwilling to commit to. The lack of a policy framework in Ghana to ensure that buildings conform to guidelines provided in international standards to make them disability-friendly and fact that the Persons with disability Act 715 is yet to be implemented, means that school buildings are unlikely to be accessible to children with physical disabilities.

Furthermore, distance to the schools and the fact that there are no school vehicles to convey the children to schools would deprive access to many children with disabilities. Even if there are vehicles, they are unlikely to be accessible to wheelchair users, and many parents will have difficulty paying extra cost of transporting their children to and from school daily. In view of the fact that educating children with disabilities is often not a priority of parents, thus, any additional burden in terms of cost will worsen the situation for children with disabilities.^{9, 10}

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The study has a number of implications for policy making and programme design on education for children with disabilities in Ghana. The manifestation of ignorance and poor cooperation between parents and teachers towards children with disabilities suggest the need for intensive national awareness campaigns to sensitize people on disability issues, especially education for children with disabilities. In the communities, measures that will engender positive change in beliefs, attitudes and behaviors should be put in place to change negative perception towards persons with disabilities. For example, activities such as celebrating persons with disabilities who have succeeded academically would change perceptions about the capabilities of persons with disabilities and serve as motivation to invest in persons with disabilities.

Since teachers' attitude is central to implementing inclusive education, effective teacher training to prepare them adequately towards differential learning outcomes should be pursued. Pre-service training programmes should include courses on disability and disability related issues to promote positive attitude among teachers. Regular workshops, seminars and in-service training for teachers to update their knowledge on inclusive education should also be undertaken.

Disabled People Organizations (DPOs) should be encouraged to prioritize education for their members and dialogue with stakeholders in education on how to increase access to education for children with disabilities. Currently, DPOs seem to be paying more attention to issues that they consider vital to their survival such as "direct cash benefit".

While these issues are important, improving access to education can address most of the challenges they encounter. Consequently, they should redirect their advocacy efforts towards improving access to education for their members. The DPOs should also fight discrimination against persons with disabilities since discrimination is one of the major challenges hindering access to educational opportunities for persons with disabilities. They should lobby for the implementation of provisions in the Persons with Disability Act so that issues concerning the education of persons with disabilities receive greater attention.

Since poverty is an important factor hindering access to education for children with disabilities,⁶ parents of children with disabilities could work with the DPOs to increase access to the District Assemblies Common Fund for their children in order to reduce the financial burden on them. In addition, government should increase its funding to special and inclusive schools and disburse the funds timely.

CONCLUSION

Findings of the study indicated that children with disabilities were encountering challenges in accessing education in the study region. The barriers include inaccessible physical environment, inadequate resources, negative attitudes of teachers, lack of qualified teachers, and inadequate government commitment. These findings are consistent with many findings on education for children with disabilities across Sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia. Thus, although the study is limited in scope, that is, focused on just two regions, the situation in other regions might not be different. It is expected that policy makers and other stakeholders will initiate effective policies to address the challenges children with disabilities encounter in accessing education. It should be noted that quality education is critical to the human resource development of every nation, and it is a right for every individual. Therefore, for all children, including those with disabilities to participate effectively as equal members of society, this fundamental right must be guaranteed and protected, and barriers that hinder access to education removed.

For this to be more effective, there is the need for a large scale study to provide a deeper understanding of factors hindering access to education for children with disabilities across the country. Studies could also be conducted to explore the perception and experiences of children with disabilities and their parents as the current study did not consider their views.

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