

## STRENGTHENING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN GHANA





Source: [thenewsgod.com](http://thenewsgod.com)

## INTRODUCTION

Ghana's education system is considered to be one of the most progressive in Africa. In 2004 the government introduced free compulsory education for the first nine years of school for all Ghanaian children with the initiative being increased to 12 years in 2017. Overall the country is considered to be on track towards achievement of universal access to primary education for both boys and girls. However, there are still challenges with addressing the needs of children with special education needs. In Ghana, Special Education, as a descriptive term, covers an array of possible conditions, ranging from learning disabilities and Attention Deficit Disorder to autism and deafness, and on to severe intellectual and physical handicaps, many of which are, in turn, on continuums of their own. How can the education system best serve this particular population of learners?

Identification of children for special education services has long been associated with socio-economic levels and ethnicity, a problem that education officials must be aware of and attempt to ameliorate since research shows placement in Special Education can have long-term implications for children well into adulthood. Probably the most critical – and debated – question is that of inclusion. Some argue that inclusion is not the best option for some categories, while others envision a system of total inclusion in which all children are served in the regular classroom. Special education students have special needs and how best to meet those needs in the general education setting is a challenge, one that research demonstrates not all teachers are rising to. This policy brief discusses the barriers to inclusive and special education in Ghana based upon a desk research conducted on strengthening inclusive and special education

and the approaches to effective identification and community involvement.

Inclusive and special education is one of the seven pillars of the Ghana education system and as such included in the Education Strategic Plan (ESP 2018-2030). The target for Inclusive and special education under the ESP 2018-2030 is to "Improve access for persons with disability, the vulnerable and the talented". Despite remarkable progress in special and inclusive education, challenges still remain. Education stakeholders in Ghana note with concern that inclusion of children with special needs within the mainstream education system is limited and as such access to quality education remains a challenge for children with varied forms of disabilities in Ghana. The world report on disability by World Health Organization (WHO) indicates that young people with disabilities are less likely to be in school than their peers without disabilities with the pattern being more pronounced in countries such as Ghana. The many barriers that hinder children with disabilities from accessing quality education in Ghana can be categorized under systemic and school-based problems as well as social and community related challenges

## SYSTEM-WIDE PROBLEM

In Ghana, education, care and support for children with disabilities falls under separate ministries including Ministry of Education, Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development), and Ministry of Gender and Social Protection. Overall, education for children with disabilities has not been well coordinated, there is a lack of strong collaboration between different ministries with a mandate touching on children with disabilities. The ESP notes this and proposes strong coordination between different ministries and agencies beyond the education sector, particularly those in the Health, Social Protection and Local Governance sectors. Although Ghana has taken significant steps towards establishing a national SEN strategy, limited resources combined with lack of technical ability as well as continuing community misconceptions has meant that progress in many areas remains slow.



## LACK OF ACCURATE DATA ON CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

According to the Population and Housing Census 2010, the overall prevalence of children with disabilities aged between 4-17 years old in Ghana is 1.6% or 130,000 children with wide regional disparities; however, this may be underestimated due to low detection rates. However, enrolment of children with disabilities ranges from just 0.2% to 0.4% of total enrolment between Kindergarten and Senior High School. Children with disabilities have lower attendance rates compared to children without

disabilities at all levels of pre-tertiary education, and the lowest attendance rates are at the Senior High School and Technical and Vocational Education and Training levels. It is also clear that children with disabilities are not progressing through the education system and a large proportion of those enrolled are overage. The lack of facilities in basic and secondary schools disproportionately affect children with disabilities with almost no regular basic schools having ramps, and only 8% equipped with ramps. There has been anecdotal evidence to suggest that there is stigma toward children with disabilities.

## IDENTIFICATION: GETTING IT RIGHT

No discussion of Special Education can avoid addressing the problems inherent in identifying children who need services. Over-representation of marginalised groups, and children of poverty in Special Education is a national issue and one that education officials must keep at the forefront as they seek to develop protocols for identification because that identification, however well-intentioned, can have a negative long-term impact on the child. On the continuum of disabilities, identification becomes more problematic the less obvious the disability is. A child who is deaf and blind obviously qualifies for services, while one who might have a learning disability requires more examination. Getting it wrong may have a very real, life-long, negative impact.

## SCHOOL CAPACITY

Teachers in Ghana struggle to teach children with special needs. Most educators lack the skills required to achieve inclusive education within the mainstream education system in the country. MOE acknowledges in the Education Strategic Plan (ESP 2018-2030), that special needs education has not been given sufficient attention. One of the challenges noted under the ESP, is that most schools and learning institutions are not adequately equipped with appropriate facilities, learning materials and teaching aids to integrate children with special needs. Specialist skills for the education of particular groups of children with special needs continues to be the greatest gap. For instance, only a small handful of teachers exist in Ghana that are capable of teaching and teaching through Sign Language and Braille or using the very specialist methodologies required for teaching children with intellectual disabilities. As a result of lack of ability of mainstream schools to welcome children with disabilities, relatively few children with special learning needs attend their local mainstream school and if they do, often drop-out quickly.

## STIGMA, MISCONCEPTIONS AND LACK OF SKILLS IN THE HOME AND AMONGST COMMUNITY MEMBERS

According to UNICEF, a recent national census on people living with disabilities found that despite improvements in national legislation, people and especially children who live with disabilities face great discrimination and stigma in Ghana. They are often hidden and treated as outcasts, particularly if their disability is severe. Many families hide children with special needs at home because having a disability is a shameful thing for the child and the family, as it is considered to be a punishment

In Ghana children with disabilities typically face discrimination and are excluded from many aspects of community life. The task of caregiving can be overwhelming at times. Caregivers experience mixed emotions such as feelings of loss, anxiety, frustration and guilt. Poor families often discover that they are unable to cope with disability and children can be neglected or even abandoned. Moreover, for many parents of children with disabilities, their desire to protect their children from harm and further discrimination often result in parents keeping their children at home rather than send their children to a school that is not able or not willing to receive them. Involvement of parents of children with disabilities in schools so that they can influence and support the school to welcome their children is still very weak.

## COVID-19: THE RISKS OF HARM FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

Covid-19 has the potential to be a global disaster for children with special needs and disabilities, particularly in low-income countries. Available evidence suggest that with current school closures,

- They will fall behind in learning due to inaccessible distance learning modalities.
- They will not have accessible educational materials.
- They will not know how to use the technology appropriately to continue their learning.
- They will not go back to school once they reopen.
- They will not access basic nutritional needs that are typically provided for at school.
- They will not have access to important therapies, services, or accommodations that they typically receive at school.



Source: UNICEF(Twitter)

## ADDRESSING THE SPECIAL AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION GAPS

Special Education presents educators with a number of challenges, chief among which is how to ensure that those who are identified for services are actually in need of them because of the long-term negative impact such designation can have on students.

- Focusing efforts on early interventions such as preschool and extended Head Start and investing heavily in teacher and psychologist training to measure progress and use data to modify instruction as part of a clearly defined Response to Intervention program are viable options to help reduce overall identification and improve the accuracy of those who are referred to special education. Inclusion for as many students as possible should be the goal in light of the many benefits accruing to both special education students and general education students in both academic progress and social skills.

- Educators need to monitor instructional delivery with great care to insure that quality teaching is taking place and again, training in differentiation, use of data to inform instructional choices, RTI program protocols and evaluating intervention effectiveness are of critical import. The more capacity teachers have in these areas the more successful such programs will be.

- Finally, clustering and grouping need to be carefully monitored to keep sizes small; clusters in individual classrooms should be no larger than six students and staffed with additional adults to provide targeted support and instruction to all students. Groups must remain fluid to prevent de facto tracking from occurring and delivery of instruction needs to be monitored to ensure that the overall quality of instruction remains high and that special education students are provided with problem solving opportunities

and not denied instruction related to making meaning of text.

- The likelihood of disadvantaged students thriving is increased when governments seek to harness the power of parents, the wider public and non-state organisations, working together to maintain continuity of learning. In the COVID era and beyond, parental support for effective home learning is key and disadvantaged parents and caregivers will require more assistance than others.

- Local community leaders and local government officials have a potential role to play in mobilising parental support for effective home learning.



Source: [www.eifl.net](http://www.eifl.net)

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Good Governance Africa – West Africa Center aims to promote good governance in English Speaking West Africa through applied research and critical debate (advocacy). Our past research publications include “Slums and Informal Settlements Development towards making Ghana’s Cities Resilient”, “Deepening Fiscal Decentralization for Effective Local Service Delivery in Ghana”, “Economic Development Pathways for Local Area Development”...(Find these reports and more on [www.gga.org/West-Africa](http://www.gga.org/West-Africa)) . Research areas of the Center include local governance, land and natural resources, early childhood education and national security. GGA West Africa is also concerned with the promotion of local economic development, urban governance, right to information, justice and accountability, innovation, environmental sustainability (including climate change issues) and leadership.

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Published by  
**GOOD GOVERNANCE AFRICA - WEST AFRICA**  
(GGA-WA)

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