

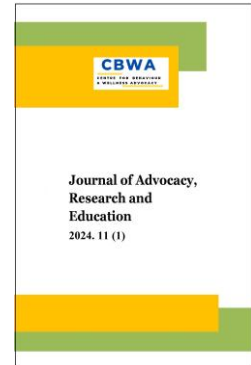


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Beyond Teacher Competencies: A Position Statement on Meeting the Needs of Neurodevelopmental Disorders in Inclusive Classrooms in Ghana

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Abstract

Inclusive education stands as a beacon of progress in ensuring the holistic development of children with neurodevelopmental Disorders. Ghana has made significant strides in promoting inclusive education through the inclusive education policy developed in 2015. Central to the successful implementation of inclusive education is the attitude and competence of teachers in managing children with special needs. Notable progress has been observed among teachers, reflecting a growing recognition of the importance of inclusive practices and a willingness to embrace diversity within the classroom. Yet, the journey toward successful policy implementation is fraught with substantial institutional challenges, such as inadequate resources and curriculum rigidity. This paper contends that addressing the complexities of inclusive education demands a comprehensive strategy that extends beyond the realm of teacher attributes alone. Recognising that the barriers to inclusive education in Ghana are multifaceted and encompass various systemic, environmental, and attitudinal factors is imperative. This paper emphasises the imperative for a multidimensional approach that extends beyond the teacher.

Keywords: inclusive education, inclusive education policy, teacher competence, neurodevelopmental disorders, mainstream schools.

1. Inclusive Education Policy in Ghana

In Ghana, the shift towards inclusive education has been driven by several factors. Legal and policy frameworks, including the Ghana Education Act and international agreements like the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, have emphasised the rights of children with disabilities and promoted inclusive practices (Deku, Vanderpuye, 2017; Ministry of Education..., 2013; Naami, Mort, 2023). There is a growing recognition of the diverse learning needs of students, leading to efforts to integrate children with disabilities into mainstream educational settings. Inclusive education is seen as a means to promote equity and ensure equal access to quality education for all children (Gómez-Marí et al., 2021).

Additionally, inclusive education is essential for social inclusion, economic development, and poverty reduction (Vanderpuye et al., 2020). Evidence-based research supports the benefits of inclusive education for students with disabilities and their peers, highlighting improved academic outcomes and social integration (Akalin et al., 2014; Karr et al., 2020; Strnadová et al., 2023).

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Overall, the necessitation of inclusive education in Ghana reflects a commitment to creating inclusive, equitable, and sustainable educational opportunities for all children. This demonstrates the government's commitment to upholding the rights of every child to education, including those with disabilities, and contributes to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 4 and 16 (United Nations, 2015). By promoting inclusive practices, Ghana aims to create a more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable educational environment, fostering social inclusion, promoting tolerance, and building inclusive institutions for the benefit of all its citizens.

2. Neurodevelopmental Disorders and Inclusive Education

Neurodevelopmental disorders encompass a spectrum of conditions affecting cognitive, behavioural, and motor functions, posing unique educational challenges (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). While previously confined to specialised schools, advocacy efforts and the implementation of the Inclusive Education Policy (IEP) have propelled the integration of children with NDDs into mainstream educational settings, a move associated with significant social, psychological, and academic progress (Akalin et al., 2014; Gómez-Marí et al., 2021; Roberts, Webster, 2020). The research underscores the benefits of inclusive education, including stigma reduction, enhanced academic and social development, and improved mental wellness (Asamoah et al., 2023; Nyaaba, Nyaaba Akanzire et al., 2021; Opoku, 2022; Vanderpuye et al., 2020), aligning with the MOE's assertion of its cost-effectiveness over special education (MOE, 2013).

In recent years, Ghana has made significant strides in advancing inclusive education policies through the sensitisation of communities, screening of school children, and training of teachers to identify children with special educational needs (Duorinaah, 2023; Naami, Mort, 2023). While positive strides have been made in cultivating teacher attitudes and readiness to support children with NDDs, institutional challenges persist, transcending individual attributes. Inadequate resources pose a primary hurdle, with many mainstream schools lacking tailored materials and assistive equipment for accommodating diverse needs (Nyaaba, Aboyinga et al., 2021). Furthermore, physical accessibility barriers hinder the mobility and participation of students with physical disabilities (Asamoah et al., 2023). A shortage of specialised teachers exacerbates the issue, and insufficient orientation on inclusive practices leads to implementation gaps. The rigidity of the curriculum further limits equal participation, necessitating adaptations to ensure inclusivity (Naami, Mort, 2023). Moreover, the underutilisation of relevant stakeholders, including parents and therapists, hampers the creation of a supportive ecosystem vital for holistic child development (Hervie, 2023).

This position underscores the imperative of addressing multifaceted challenges within inclusive education, recognising the pivotal role of institutional readiness alongside individual preparedness. By surmounting these hurdles and leveraging available opportunities, Ghana can foster a more equitable and inclusive education system, ensuring that children with NDDs receive the support and resources necessary to thrive within mainstream settings.

3. Psychological Implications of Inclusive Education

Inclusive education carries profound psychological implications that cannot be understated. It is not merely about physical integration but entails a profound interplay of psychological factors that significantly impact the well-being and development of children, particularly those with neurodevelopmental disorders.

One psychological theory that elucidates the benefits of inclusive education is Vygotsky's Social Development Theory (Vygotsky, Cole, 1978). According to Vygotsky, learning occurs within the zone of proximal development (ZPD), which is the gap between what a learner can accomplish independently and what they can achieve with guidance and support from more knowledgeable others (Fani, Ghaemi, 2011). Inclusive education allows children with neurodevelopmental disorders to interact with typically developing peers, facilitating social learning and cognitive development. Through peer interactions, children with special needs can access role models and social scaffolding, enabling them to acquire competencies faster and expand their ZPD (Balakrishnan, Claiborne, 2012).

Moreover, inclusive education serves as a potent antidote to the marginalisation and stigmatisation that characterised the special schooling system (Deku, Vanderpuye, 2017). By dismantling barriers and fostering an inclusive learning environment, it promotes acceptance, belonging, and a sense of dignity for all students. However, the persistence of challenges within the

implementation of inclusive education poses a threat to its effectiveness and risks exacerbating the marginalisation and stigmatisation of children with neurodevelopmental disorders.

Also, positive psychological well-being, characterised by self-esteem, resilience, and a sense of belonging, is nurtured within supportive learning environments where students feel valued and included (Liu et al., 2016). However, the reality is that many children with neurodevelopmental disorders face significant barriers to their psychological well-being within the inclusive education system. These barriers include inadequate support services, negative attitudes and stereotypes, social exclusion, and bullying (Bakare et al., 2014). Without adequate interventions, the challenges within the inclusive education system could undermine its fundamental purpose and exacerbate psychological issues. Without adequate intervention, these challenges have the potential to diminish the psychological well-being and impede the academic success of children with neurodevelopmental disorders, thus perpetuating cycles of marginalisation and stigma.

4. Way Forward: Harnessing an Institutional Culture of Inclusivity

Equipping schools with expertise and infrastructure sends a clear message of commitment to inclusion and diversity. By prioritising inclusive practices and providing the necessary support structures, schools foster a culture of acceptance, respect, and belonging for all students. This inclusive culture not only benefits students with disabilities but also enriches the educational experience for all students by promoting empathy, understanding, and appreciation of differences. This notion aligns strongly with Social Cognitive Theory, proposed by Albert Bandura, which emphasises the reciprocal interaction between personal factors, environmental factors, and behaviour (Bandura, 2001). According to this theory, individuals learn through observation, imitation, and reinforcement of behaviours exhibited by others in their environment. In the context of inclusive education, providing schools with the expertise and infrastructure necessary for inclusive practices serves as a powerful environmental cue that shapes the behaviours and attitudes of students, teachers, and staff members.

In pursuit of genuine inclusivity, policymakers must broaden their focus to encompass the entire ecosystem of inclusive education. Beyond equipping teachers with requisite skills, schools must fortify their support systems to accommodate the multifaceted needs of students with neurodevelopmental disorders. This entails provisions for ancillary support practitioners such as speech therapists and physiotherapists, as well as fostering robust partnerships with parents as integral stakeholders in the educational journey of their children.

By promoting diversity and inclusion, schools contribute to the achievement of SDG 4 – Quality Education, which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all. Furthermore, fostering a culture of acceptance and respect within educational institutions aligns with SDG 16 – Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions. The SDG 16 emphasises the importance of promoting inclusive societies, ensuring equal access to justice for all, and building effective, accountable, inclusive institutions. By prioritising inclusive practices, schools contribute to creating peaceful and inclusive societies where every individual, regardless of their abilities or backgrounds, has the opportunity to thrive.

5. Conclusion

Inclusive education is a fundamental human right and a key driver of social inclusion, equity, and sustainable development. By addressing the remaining institutional challenges and leveraging available opportunities, Ghana can further advance its inclusive education agenda and ensure no child is left behind. To unlock the transformative potential of inclusive education, a multi-pronged approach is crucial. While building teacher competencies is vital, systemic readiness through extensive resources, multi-disciplinary collaborations, and holistic involvement of all stakeholders is equally paramount. Only then can the true spirit of inclusion be realised, empowering students with NDDs to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally in a supportive, enriching environment. A robust policy framework prioritising both teacher preparedness and school-level provisions is the way forward.

6. Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

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Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Availability of data and materials

Not applicable.

Conflict of interest statement

The author reports no conflicts of interest.


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