

Understanding Inclusion Through the Eyes of the Visually Impaired: Students Perceptions at Ghana National Basic School, Cape Coast

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Abstract: The advancement of inclusive education in Ghana represents progress toward educational equity. However, challenges remain, particularly for students with visual impairments. This study investigated the perceptions of such students at Ghana National Basic School in Cape Coast. It aims to understand their academic and social experiences within a mainstream environment. Guided by Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, the research used a phenomenology research design involving 11 participants purposively selected (8 students, 2 teachers and a special educator) with visual impairments. Data were collected through structured questionnaires focused on academic participation, peer interaction, and support systems. Findings indicate that while students value the opportunity to learn alongside sighted peers, there are significant gaps in instructional access, teacher preparedness, and learning materials. Social inclusion is generally positive, but academic support is inconsistent. The study emphasizes the need for professional development in inclusive pedagogy, increased provision of accessible learning tools, and the establishment of structured peer mentoring systems.

Keywords: *Inclusive Education, Visual Impairment, Sociocultural Theory, Academic Access, Peer Support, Ghana.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has increasingly gained international recognition as a critical component of equitable and quality education for all learners, regardless of ability. Global frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 4, emphasize inclusive and equitable quality education and the promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for all. In line with these global objectives, Ghana has made concerted efforts to transform its educational system to accommodate learners with diverse needs, including those with disabilities. The Ministry of Education's Inclusive Education Policy, introduced in 2015, marked a significant milestone by outlining comprehensive strategies for integrating children with special educational needs into mainstream schools. This policy has been supported by capacity-building programmes, including ongoing in-service training for teachers, curriculum reviews, and collaborative partnerships with non-governmental organizations (Ministry of Education, 2015; Opoku et al., 2021). These initiatives reflect

the country's commitment to ensuring that every child has access to quality education, regardless of disability status.

However, despite these policy-level advancements and institutional reforms, learners with visual impairments continue to face considerable barriers in mainstream school environments. These challenges manifest in various forms, including the lack of appropriately adapted instructional materials such as braille textbooks, audio resources, or tactile learning aids that suit the needs of students with visual disabilities. In addition, many teachers lack the necessary pedagogical training to implement inclusive teaching strategies effectively, particularly in addressing the unique learning styles and pace of students with visual impairments. Furthermore, social inclusion is often inconsistent, as peer support mechanisms are either weak or absent, and students with disabilities sometimes face subtle or overt forms of discrimination and isolation (Anthony, 2019; Avoke et al., 2023). These persistent challenges hinder not only the academic progress of visually impaired students but also their sense of

belonging and participation in the wider school community. Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to investigate how students with visual impairments perceive both their academic engagement and social integration within a selected mainstream basic school in Ghana. By centering the voices of these students, the study aims to generate insights that can shape more inclusive educational practices and influence future policy decisions.

Inclusive education should not only be viewed through the lens of human rights but also as a practical strategy for promoting economic growth, social cohesion, and equal opportunity. Societies that invest in inclusive educational systems tend to produce more diverse and capable workforces, reduce long-term socio-economic inequalities, and foster civic responsibility and mutual understanding among citizens. For students with visual impairments, true inclusion extends beyond mere physical access to the classroom; it involves ensuring that learning content is accessible in formats they can perceive, that teachers employ instructional strategies responsive to their needs, and that peers and staff adopt supportive and inclusive attitudes. According to UNESCO (2020), the success of inclusive education depends largely on how well educational environments are adapted to support diverse learners, particularly through inclusive curriculum design, resource availability, and school-wide cultural change. Therefore, the inclusion of visually impaired learners must be understood as a multi-dimensional endeavor that incorporates academic, emotional, and social considerations.

This research also sought to fill a notable gap in the existing body of literature on disability and inclusive education within the Ghanaian context. Although awareness and academic interest in disability studies and inclusive education have grown in sub-Saharan Africa, most studies remain generalized and often do not focus specifically on the experiences of students with visual impairments in mainstream basic schools. There is limited empirical evidence capturing how these students navigate the academic and social demands of inclusive settings, especially from their own perspectives. This study addresses this critical gap by conducting an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of visually impaired students enrolled at the Ghana National Basic School a school recognized for implementing inclusive education practices in the Central Region of Ghana.

➤ *Statement of the Problem*

The process of including students with visual impairment in regular schools in Ghana is still in the initial stage and very little is known about students with visual impairments' perception towards their inclusion in regular schools. The perceptions of teachers have been the main focus of various studies on providing instruction to individuals with visual impairments or blindness in general education settings (Avramidis & Norwich 2010; Rae et al., 2010; Wungu & Han, 2008), owing to inadequate data and research on the perception of students with visual impairment towards inclusive education.

During my school internship program at Ghana National Basic School, I observed that students with visual impairment do not participate actively in class. Also, it appears they do not receive the support needed to meet their academic needs, and this has serious repercussions on their performance.

➤ *Purpose of the Study*

The study investigates the lived experiences of visually impaired students within an inclusive school.

➤ *Objectives of the Study*

The objectives of the study were to;

- assess students' attitudes and feelings toward their academic and social inclusion.
- identify and describe the types of support students with visual impairments receive from teachers and peers.

➤ *Research Questions*

The following research questions were;

- How do students with visual impairments perceive their inclusion in a mainstream educational setting?
- What specific forms of academic and social support are made available to them, and how effective are these supports?

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, with particular emphasis on the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Vygotsky posits that learning is fundamentally a social process, deeply embedded in interactions between the learner and more knowledgeable others such as teachers, peers, and caregivers. The ZPD refers to the range of tasks that a learner can perform with guidance but not yet independently, highlighting the importance of scaffolding, a process through which educators or peers provide the necessary support to bridge learning gaps and gradually lead the student toward independence.

In the context of inclusive education, this theory provides a powerful lens through which to understand how structured support systems can facilitate the academic and social development of students with disabilities. For students with visual impairments, scaffolding may include verbal explanations, the use of tactile instructional tools, audio formats, assistive technology, and peer-mediated strategies. These tools and interactions enable them to access the same curriculum as their sighted peers and participate meaningfully in classroom activities.

However, Vygotsky's theory also highlights that effective learning is not merely about individual support, but is influenced by broader contextual factors including school culture, teacher expectations, peer relationships, and institutional policies (Rogoff, 2016; Florian & Pratt, 2022). Thus, the theory reinforces that inclusive education is not a one-

size-fits-all model but a dynamic and evolving process, shaped by the quality of interactions and the learning environment. When such conditions are absent or poorly implemented, visually impaired students may remain on the periphery of classroom engagement despite being physically present. As Sharma et al. (2020) note, the absence of intentional planning and inclusive practices can lead to passive exclusion. Consequently, this study applies Sociocultural Theory to explore how visually impaired learners' inclusion is co-constructed through both interpersonal relationships and institutional structures within the school.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological research design to gain an in-depth understanding of how visually impaired students perceive their academic and social inclusion in an inclusive school. Phenomenology, as a qualitative approach, is particularly useful for exploring individuals' lived experiences and the meanings they attach to those experiences. The study was underpinned by an interpretivist research philosophy, which holds that reality is socially constructed and that understanding human experience requires engaging with the perspectives of those living it. Interpretivism aligns with the aim of this study, as it prioritizes the voices of the visually impaired students and values their subjective interpretations of inclusion within the educational context. This philosophical orientation allowed the researcher to explore the complex social, cultural, and institutional factors that shape the students' experiences in a meaningful and context-specific manner.

The population for this study consisted of visually impaired students enrolled at the Ghana National Basic School, an institution recognized for its commitment to inclusive education in the Central Region of Ghana. This school was purposively selected because it serves as a model for inclusive education practices, and it accommodates a significant number of students with various disabilities, including visual impairments. The study focused specifically on Upper Primary and Junior High School students, who were considered mature enough to articulate their experiences and had spent sufficient time in the school to provide informed reflections on their academic and social inclusion. A total of eight (8) visually impaired students were selected using purposive sampling. This technique was employed to ensure that participants who could provide rich, detailed, and relevant insights into the phenomenon under investigation were included. The selection criteria required that students be officially identified as visually impaired by the school's special education unit, be enrolled in the school for at least one academic year, and be willing to participate in the study. To enrich the data and enhance the depth of understanding, two teachers and one special education coordinator were also interviewed. These key informants provided valuable contextual information regarding the school's inclusive practices, the types of support available, and their observations of the students' integration experiences.

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, which allowed for flexibility in probing deeper into emerging themes while maintaining consistency across participants. This method was particularly appropriate for exploring sensitive and personal experiences, as it encouraged open dialogue and provided space for participants to express their thoughts and emotions in their own words. For the student participants, individual interviews were conducted using a well-structured guide that focused on their academic engagement, social relationships, experiences of inclusion and exclusion, and the support received from teachers and peers. Interviews were held in quiet, familiar environments within the school to ensure the comfort and privacy of the participants. Each session lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent for accuracy and later transcription. In addition, interviews were conducted with two teachers and the special education coordinator to gain deeper insight into the school's inclusive education practices. These interviews explored the strategies employed to support visually impaired students, the challenges encountered in implementing inclusive teaching, and their perceptions of how well the students were integrated into the academic and social fabric of the school.

The data collected from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process began with familiarization, where the researcher transcribed the audio recordings and read through the transcripts multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of the data. This was followed by the generation of initial codes, where meaningful units of data were identified and labeled. The codes were then sorted into potential themes that reflected recurring patterns in the participants' narratives.

These themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately captured the essence of the data. Once finalized, the themes were defined and named, and illustrative quotations from participants were selected to support the analysis. The final phase involved writing the report, where the themes were linked back to the research questions and theoretical framework. The analysis was conducted manually, but where necessary, qualitative data software such as NVivo could be employed to support the coding and organization process.

To ensure the credibility and rigor of the study, several strategies were employed to establish trustworthiness, as outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with the field and member checking, where participants were given the opportunity to review and validate the transcripts and interpretations. Transferability was addressed by providing thick descriptions of the study setting, participants, and research procedures, allowing readers to determine the applicability of the findings to other contexts.

Dependability was ensured by maintaining a clear audit trail of all decisions made during the data collection and analysis processes, enabling the study to be replicated under similar conditions. Confirmability was strengthened by minimizing researcher bias through reflexivity and by triangulating data from students, teachers, and the special education coordinator. These measures collectively ensured that the findings accurately reflected the experiences of the participants and were not influenced by the researcher's assumptions.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the appropriate Institutional Review Board (IRB), and strict ethical protocols were followed throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from the parents or guardians of the student participants, while assent was sought from the students themselves. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any point without any consequences.

To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in place of real names, and all data were stored securely. Respect for the dignity and autonomy of participants with disabilities was paramount, and care was taken to ensure that interviews were conducted in a sensitive and supportive manner. For instance, assistance was offered to students with mobility challenges, and interview questions were explained patiently to ensure understanding. These ethical considerations ensured that the study was conducted with integrity and respect for the rights of all participants.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This version integrates interview responses to enrich the findings, links them to your literature review, and provides a more nuanced interpretation of the data.

➤ *Social and Academic Inclusion*

Findings from the interviews revealed a mixed experience of inclusion among the visually impaired students. On the one hand, most participants described their social inclusion as generally positive. Several students shared that they felt welcomed and accepted by their sighted peers, often participating in classroom discussions, recess activities, and school routines alongside them. For instance, one student expressed:

“I like being in this school because my friends help me and talk to me like everyone else. We eat together and sometimes play games during break.” (Student 4, JHS 1)

Such experiences reflect a growing sense of belonging and identity within the inclusive school environment and align with the findings of Kpeglo et al. (2022), who emphasized the importance of peer interaction in building a supportive educational climate. These moments of inclusion enhanced the

students' self-confidence and reinforced their sense of being valued members of the school community.

However, when it came to academic inclusion, the picture was less optimistic. Despite their social acceptance, students consistently reported difficulties in accessing learning materials and instructional content. A recurring issue was the lack of accessible resources such as Braille textbooks, screen readers, audio devices, and tactile learning aids. One student lamented:

“Sometimes the teacher writes many things on the board, but I don't know what it is. I wait for someone to tell me, or I just try to remember what the teacher said.” (Student 2, Primary 6)

Many students relied heavily on oral instruction and memory, which often led to partial understanding or complete disengagement, especially in subjects requiring visual aids or written materials. These findings support earlier observations by Anthony (2019) and Opoku et al. (2021), who reported that resource constraints remain a significant barrier in inclusive classrooms across Ghana. The lack of appropriate learning materials not only impedes comprehension but also contributes to unequal academic opportunities, reinforcing the need for targeted investment in inclusive instructional resources.

➤ *Teacher Support*

The study also explored the role of teachers in supporting visually impaired students, revealing mixed levels of responsiveness. Several participants acknowledged the effort made by some teachers to accommodate their needs through verbal repetition, detailed explanation, or rephrasing of concepts. One student shared:

“My English teacher sometimes explains things twice just for me, and she always asks if I understand. That helps me a lot.” (Student 6, JHS 2)

This individualized attention, though appreciated, appeared to be the exception rather than the norm. A majority of students indicated that most of their teachers lacked specialized training in inclusive pedagogy and were unsure of how to modify content or assess their progress fairly. Another participant reflected:

“Some teachers just teach normally, and if you don't understand, you are on your own. They don't know what to do to help me.” (Student 1, Primary 5)

This suggests that while some teachers show a willingness to support, their lack of professional preparation limits the effectiveness of their efforts. Avoke et al. (2023) and Osei-Poku and Yawson (2022) similarly argue that inadequate teacher training is a critical weakness in Ghana's inclusive education system. Teachers' uncertainty about how to differentiate instruction or use assistive technologies contributes to the academic marginalization of students with disabilities.

The findings point to an urgent need for professional development in inclusive education. As Florian and Spratt (2022) emphasize, equipping teachers with knowledge and skills in differentiation, the use of assistive devices, and understanding disability from a rights-based perspective is essential for fostering equitable learning environments. Without such training, inclusive education risks becoming superficial, offering physical integration without meaningful participation.

➤ *Peer Support and Integration*

Peer interaction emerged as both a strength and a gap in the inclusive experience of visually impaired students. In several cases, peers provided practical support such as helping students navigate the school compound, reading notes aloud, or assisting with classroom tasks. One student described:

“My best friend helps me find my way to the classroom and tells me what the teacher writes. If I have homework, she explains it to me.” (Student 5, Primary 6)

These relationships were vital to the students' sense of inclusion and academic engagement. However, peer support was often informal and inconsistent, depending on individual relationships rather than a coordinated school-wide approach. Not all students benefitted equally from peer interactions. A few participants reported feeling isolated during group work or being excluded from extracurricular activities. One respondent noted:

“When there are games or group discussions, sometimes they forget about me. I just sit there.” (Student 3, JHS 1)

This inconsistency highlights the fragility of informal support networks and the need for structured peer mentorship programmes. Research by Donkor and Agyemang (2023) emphasizes that formal peer support systems such as buddy programmes, peer tutoring, or cooperative learning groups significantly enhance both the academic achievement and social well-being of students with disabilities. Without such systems, inclusive education relies heavily on the goodwill of a few students, which cannot be guaranteed. Thus, while peer relationships offer potential for meaningful inclusion, schools must take deliberate steps to formalize and monitor these interactions to ensure that all students with disabilities have equitable access to academic and social support.

V. CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore the lived experiences of students with visual impairments in an inclusive mainstream basic school in Ghana. Through in-depth interviews with students, teachers, and the special education coordinator, the study examined how inclusion is experienced both socially and academically. The findings reveal that inclusion in the studied school is partial and uneven, marked by greater success in social integration than in academic participation. On the positive side, many students with visual impairments reported feeling socially accepted by their peers. They valued their friendships, appreciated being included in informal interactions, and felt that their presence in the school was largely respected. This sense of social belonging contributed positively to their self-esteem and emotional well-being and reflects a growing cultural acceptance of inclusive education among the student body.

However, despite this progress in social inclusion, students continued to face significant academic barriers. These included a lack of Braille textbooks and other adapted learning materials, limited access to assistive technologies such as screen readers, and an overreliance on oral instruction. As a result, students were often unable to fully engage with lesson content, leading to learning gaps, reduced participation in academic tasks, and a heightened dependence on memory or peer assistance. These challenges highlight the disconnect between policy intentions and practical realities, as the absence of essential teaching and learning resources compromises academic equity for students with visual impairments. Additionally, the study revealed that most teachers lacked formal training in inclusive pedagogies. While some demonstrated willingness and empathy, their ability to modify instruction or use assistive tools was limited. This lack of preparedness reduced the effectiveness of their support and, in some cases, led to passive exclusion. Moreover, while some students benefited from peer support, such assistance was informal and inconsistent, often dependent on personal relationships rather than institutional structures. Without a formalized peer support framework, inclusion becomes uneven and unsustainable.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusion, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen the implementation of inclusive education for students with visual impairments:

- Inventory checks should be conducted regularly to assess the availability and functionality of inclusive learning tools, and mechanisms should be put in place for timely replacements and updates.
- There is a critical need for comprehensive training of teachers in inclusive education, with specific focus on visual impairment. Pre-service teacher education curricula should include mandatory modules on inclusive pedagogy, while

in-service teachers should receive regular professional development.

- Schools should implement structured peer mentorship programs, such as buddy systems, cooperative learning groups, and peer tutoring arrangements, with guidance from teachers and special educators.
- Headteachers and school administrators should be trained to lead inclusive change, ensure teacher accountability, and facilitate resource mobilization.

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