

## **Factors Influencing Parents' Perceptions on the Education of Children with Disability in the Wa West District of Ghana**

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### **Abstract**

*There is heightened concern about the need to provide equal access to education for children with disability. Children with disability form part of the many disadvantaged groups who are denied access to education. A qualitative approach with descriptive design was used to study the perceptions of parents in the Wa West district of the Upper West Region of Ghana, on the education of their children with disability. Twenty (20) parents of children with disability were purposively selected and interviewed. The data collected were analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings showed that factors such as parents' understanding of disability, cost-benefit issues, awareness/knowledge levels and concerns about safety/security determined parental decisions to send or not to send children with disability to school. The study recommended that there should be comprehensive public education for parents with children with disability as well as opinion leaders in various communities about the potentials of children with disability.*

**Keywords:** *Children with Disability, Perception, Parents, Education, Ghana*

### **Introduction**

According to Munyi (2012), perceptions towards disability have varied significantly from one community to another. The attitudes and reactions towards disabled persons is a clear manifestation of how they are perceived. The history of societal perceptions and treatment of disabled persons shows that ignorance, neglect, superstition and fear are social factors that have exacerbated isolation of disabled persons (Thomas, 1957). Just like other places around the

world, Africans perceive disabled persons as helpless, burdensome and has little hopes (Davidson, 2005). These perceptions were found to be a mere misconception that stems from lack of proper understanding of disabilities and how they affect functioning (Gyamfi,2015). These misconceptions could have resulted in the neglect of disabled persons in society compared to their non-disabled counterparts.

Generally, children stand the risk of suffering from social vices and discriminations among others. However, this seems to be worst for children with disability due to the misconceptions surrounding their disabilities. Studies by Donkor, (2010) indicated that, the parental perceptions and expectations for the future of their children with disability strongly influence the resources they are willing to invest in treatment, training and education of these children. Perhaps this makes it common to see children with disability abandoned in African communities and orphanages, denying them basic human rights such as education, probably due to negative perceptions as perpetuated in literature(Larsson,2016).

In the light of these dehumanizing ideologies tagged on children with disability by both parents and the public which results in educational exclusion, the African Child Policy Forum (ACPF, 2014) noted that, the existence of policy frameworks, educational materials, trained educators, could facilitate the provision of quality education for children with disability.

Following this, Section three, clause16 (1) of the Ghana Disability Law made it mandatory for parent, guardian or custodian of a disabled child of school going age to enroll the child in school (Ghana Disability Law, 2006). The Ghana government also introduced the inclusive education policy in order to allow children with disability have access to quality education being offered in the mainstream schools (Thomas, 2014).

In the Wa west district in the upper west region of Ghana, the Ghana Statistical Service (2010) estimated 3% of its population as disabled and 24.5% of them are children of school going age. The statistics further proved that 74% of these disabled persons never attended school. However, only 20.8% of children with disability acquire basic education as against 77.5% of their non-disabled counterparts. However, the district health department does not have the list of all children who may need special interventions. This serves as a barrier for the children to have access to special interventions which may improve their conditions

This trend is no different in other African countries and other countries around the world. Report from the Ministry of Education in Ethiopia indicated that fewer than 3% of children with disabilities have access to primary education. The access to education by this insignificant proportion of children with disability decreases rapidly as they move up the education ladder. Similarly in Nepal, 85% of all children out of school are disabled. In Bolivia it is estimated that 95% of the population aged 6 to 11 years are in school, while only 38% of children with disabilities have gain access to primary education (Global campaign for education, 2017).

The challenge today is changing the negative perceptions attached to disability by stakeholders and even parents which directly results in exclusion of children with disability in schools. The study therefore assessed the perception of parents in the Wa West District on the education of their children with disability and factors influencing these perceptions.

## **Methods**

A qualitative approach and a descriptive design were adopted to explore factors influencing parents' perceptions on the education of their children with disability. A qualitative method is concerned with subjective assessment of attitudes, opinions and reasons for a behavior (Dudwick

et al, 2006). Though it is criticized for time consuming, its strengths of allowing researchers to raise more issues through broad and open-ended enquiry made it helpful for this study.

Purposive and cluster sampling techniques were used to obtain 40 parents as respondents for this study. The parents were divided into clusters based on the towns within the districts where they lived. After randomly selecting the towns, the parents were then selected using purposive sampling. It is used when a researcher chooses specific people within the sample to be used for a particular study (Crossman, 2014). The idea was to concentrate on parents who were in a better position to provide the needed data. Though this sampling technique may be criticized for being bias, Tongco (2007) reported that, the inherent bias of the method contributes to its efficiency. The study sample was biological parents or caregivers who live with and are taking responsibility for their disabled child's full development and education. For each of the disability groups involved (intellectual, visual, hearing and physical disabilities), five parents were selected from each.

Structured interviewing was adopted in collecting the data from the respondents. Interviews are believed to provide a 'deeper' understanding of social phenomenon than would be obtained from purely quantitative methods, such as questionnaires (Silverman, 2000). With the help of an interview guide, which consisted of several key questions that helped define the areas to be explored, parents were met in their respective homes for the interview. The interview was tape-recorded alongside notes that were taken during the interview. Four research assistants carried out the interview.

The data gathered by taking notes and audio recording were transcribed and analyzed using data-led thematic analysis procedure. The research assistants transcribed the audio recordings and compared them with the notes taken. Their transcriptions were later compared to correct inconsistencies. The transcribed data were then grouped under different themes and were assigned codes. Responses were coded by assigning the same code to the same responses on an issue and different codes on diverging views. The data were then categorized by grouping extracts with the same code while taking note of other codes. Themes were then generated to make meaningful interpretations and to highlight important findings. Some of the quotes from participants have been presented as part of the findings.

### **Ethical issues**

Ethical approval was obtained from committee on Ethics and Human Publication at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology. The purpose of the study was explained to participants prior to the commencement of data collection and participation was purely voluntary.

### **Results**

**Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants**

<b>Demographics of respondents</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	22	55
Female	18	45
<b>Total</b>	40	<b>100</b>

<b>Age category</b>		
Below 30years	2	5
30 – 50years	22	55
51-70years	12	30
71-90years	4	10
<b>Total</b>	60	<b>100</b>
<b>Child's disability</b>		
Intellectual disability	10	25
Physical disability	10	25
Hearing impairment	10	25
Visual impairment	10	25
<b>Total</b>	40	<b>100</b>
<b>Educational background</b>		
No formal education	28	70
Junior High School	8	20
Senior High School	4	10
<b>Total</b>	40	<b>100</b>

Source: Field Work, 2016

The respondents comprised of eleven (22) male and nine (18) female parents, representing 55% and 45% respectively. The range of respondents was from 28 years to 76 giving an average age 49. 75% of the respondents have never been to school, while 25% attained some level of education with the highest level being a senior high school graduate. Five parents were selected to represent each of the disability groups involved (physical, hearing, visual and intellectual disabilities).

### Parents' general understanding of disability

The understanding of disability by parents was found to greatly influence their perceptions, attitudes and treatment of their children with disability. Parents understood disability in different ways and therefore interpreted the capabilities of their children with disability differently.

The study showed that, majority of participants understood disability as sickness and therefore their children could not participate in daily life activities. Others understood that, once someone becomes disabled, he or she becomes unhealthy and his capabilities are lost. ;

*“If am with her alone in the house, then am alone because I cannot talk to her. Even though she is here during this our conversation, she will have no impact, so if you are a human being and cannot talk, are you not sick?”* (Female participant, individual interview’)

*“This one what can he do again? The sickness has damaged his whole body.”* (Female participant, individual interview).

A significant number of respondents also described disabled persons as those born with either deformed body parts, cannot see, hear, or not mentally sound. They explained that the body parts of disabled people are ‘not up’, either in number, size. However, other parents described the disabled as those possessed by spirit or received the wrath of a deity or God.

*“Disabled persons are those cursed by God, and they do not possess human legs”* (parent participant, individual interview).

### **Perceptions of parents on the education of children with disability**

Majority of the respondents were optimistic about educating children with disability. However, this depends on the kind of disability of the child. Majority of parents of intellectually children with disability were highly pessimistic about educating their children. They perceived the intellectually disabled child as less human and cannot simply sit in the classroom to learn. Some stressed that, these children cannot be educated by any person not even the parents. The following were their words: *Though she doesn't like fighting, she cannot just go to school. If she behaves like human being then she can go to school, but she doesn't just behave like human being.* (Male participant, individual interview)

*"If a parent cannot train his/her own child to be sensible, how can someone else do that? The teacher cannot do it."*

However, parents of children with physical, visual and hearing impairment expressed positive perceptions that, their children can be educated in schools. They perceived their children's disability as not suppressing their learning ability.

*"Though he cannot walk well, it does not mean the sickness is in the head. If only he goes to school he can learn."* (Parent participant, individual interview)

*"I know is only the intellectual disabled child that cannot go to school, but all others have been going to school because they are reasonable. There is nothing wrong with my child because he has a brain to learn."* (Female participant, individual interview)

Few respondents believed that severe physically children with disability cannot attend school, because such children cannot walk to school, rather they need attention at home due to their vulnerable nature.

### **Factors influencing parents' perceptions towards the education of children with disability.**

The study discovered different levels of positive change in parents' perceptions towards educating their children with disability as compared to previous studies. However, negative perception still exists as some literature indicated. These perceptions, either changing or unchanging were found to be influenced by the following factors;

#### **Economic factors**

Parents expressed the need for disabled people to be economically independent as a key factor that drive them to consider educating their children with disability. Majority of respondents indicated that they want their children with disability to be self-reliant in adulthood than to be dependent on people. Some emphasized that if they are educated, children with disability will financially support their parents when they (parents) are old and become vulnerable if they are educated to have jobs. They added that educating children with disability will serve as means of reducing family burden and a source of financial support.

For instance, a parent whose daughter with hearing impairment learnt decoration at school said;

*"My daughter is now working for herself. She is usually called to decorate things at the hospital and other places after which she is paid, so if am not here she can take care of herself. If she had not gone to school who will give her money?"* (Female respondent, individual interview).

Another respondent stated:

*“If he go to school and get job like some disabled people I know, we will not use money on him again. He will even help us when we call on him.”*

However, few respondents said the special schools are too far from them and they can't afford always traveling to check on their child.

### **Awareness/informational accessibility**

Majority of respondents saw children with disability as educable after been informed of schools meant for them and the capabilities of disabled persons. Some parents also perceived their children can obtain meaningful education when they became aware of some disabled people who made it in life and helping their families. This is what some parents of children with disability have to say;

*“I was at home when some people came to say my child can go to school, so I gave her out to be sent to school. Before then I don't know she can go to school.”* (Parent participant, individual interview)

*“I saw the school where the visually impaired are educated and also heard of the School for the Deaf. I even saw ‘blind’ people who are teachers and my child can equally do that.”*

However, all parents of intellectually children with disability expressed ignorance about schools for the intellectually disabled. Most parents stressed that, they have never heard of or see a school where intellectual children with disability are educated. A parent stated;

*“How can I think of something am not aware of, I don't know any school for them not to even talk of thinking about their education. I only know the ‘deaf’, ‘blind’ and ‘cripples’ go to schools.”* (Male respondent, individual interview)

### **Child monitoring**

A good number of respondents especially those who perceived disability as sickness expressed the need to monitor the health of their children with disability (particularly the intellectually disabled) at home. Parents said their children are exposed to danger walking to and fro school and even on the school premises. A parent reported that his intellectual disabled child with epilepsy can fall at risky place and die if there is no one to help. They said it is punishment to send such a child to school. Few parents also added that there is nobody to take care of their children in school especially those that cannot clean up themselves. A respondent said this about his child;

*“She is also epileptic and when it occurs she cannot do anything, so assuming it occurred on her way to school when there is no one, she will die. It is worse in the raining season where there is water everywhere. So, it is safe for her when she is in the house.”* (Parent participant, individual interview)

### **Attitude of Teachers and children with disability**

Majority of respondents described intellectually children with disability as difficult to control and will not stay in school when sent. Others described them as “not having human behavior” and will harm other students. Others perceive their children as not sensible to follow instructions and cannot perform well in school.

*“My child even threatens to stone me when am against his will, how more of other students.”* (Female respondent, individual interview)

*“If the mother even send her she won’t go, and how can this do what the teacher ask her to do?”*  
(Male respondent, individual interview)

Some parents also revealed that, not all teachers are willing to have intellectual children with disability in their schools. They said some teachers do not have the patience to tolerate their behavior and may sack them.

## **Discussion**

### **Parents understanding of disability**

In this study, majority of participants perceived disabled persons as sick and cannot do things ‘normally’ or participate in daily life activities. They understood that, once someone becomes disabled, he or she becomes unhealthy and his capabilities are lost. The participants also described disabled persons as those born with either deformed body parts, cannot see, hear, or not mentally sound. They explained that the body parts of disabled people are not up, either in number, size or cannot perform the function it supposed to do accurately. Different ideas and perspectives of parents accounted for different ways of understanding disability. The assertion by Lee & Yuen (2003) that disability is given by God to families or a spiritual punishment for acts performed was confirmed as respondents see intellectual disability as a curse and punishment onto individuals. The strange behavior of some intellectual children with disability, their mannerisms, and interaction in society had possibly made people to see them as less human and controlled by spiritual forces. These children therefore stand the greatest risk of being excluded in many life endeavors such as education.

The findings can be seen as a deviation from the ideal way of understanding disability as proposed by the social advocates (what does the social model of disability say?). This deviation can be attributed to low awareness creation/disability education by Disabled Persons Organizations (DPOs) and the government through relevant authority such as the Social Welfare Department and the National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE).

The understanding of disability by most parents revealed a close consistency with the general historical understanding of disability. Labeling children with disability as sick people and therefore cannot do things ‘normal’ by their own parents called for medical attention, which is perpetuated by the medical model of disability. As parents hold onto this ideology, they resort to medical care as the first intervention to mitigate the impact of their child’s disability. This could imply that, other social measures intended to mitigate the plight of children with disability at adulthood such as education will be seen as irrelevant. Viewing disability from this perspective only means that children with disability are likely to attend school late because education will be a last resort. However, the parents understanding of disability as sickness which focused on medical care could actually lead to an almost effective care that made it easier for their children with disability to function, just as Wasserman et al. (2015) indicated that, this will devise an effective way of caring for the life of children with disability.

### **Perceptions of parents on the education of children with disability**

The study found that parents see the need of enrolling their children with disability in schools without necessarily understanding disability properly. The findings that disabled persons are sick, unhealthy, lost capabilities, not mentally sound and possessed by evil appeared somewhat inconsistent to Moa (2007) assertion that, parents’ understanding of disability translates into the perceptions they hold about educating their children. The possible reason for this inconsistency

may be that, effort is being made to educate all children by the education ministry through public education and policies. Despite the fact that disability is not well understood by most parents, majority of them expressed their willingness to educate their children with disability. They do not see their children's disability overruling their learning abilities. However, this positive thought is limited to parents of physical, visual and children with hearing impairment.

Most parents of intellectually children with disability remained that there are no possibilities of educating their children, simply because they are seen as less human and cannot simply sit in the classroom to learn. These parents believed their children's disabilities has taken control over their learning abilities and therefore cannot be educated by any person not even the parent.

These varying perceptions found indicated similarity of findings to the assertion by Munyi (2012) that perceptions towards disability vary from one person to the other. Contrarily to most literature that reported parents' negative perceptions towards educating their children with disability in general (ACPF, 2011), the findings of this study demonstrated a significant shift from negative perceptions to embrace the idea of educating the physical, hearing and visually children with disability for diversified reasons. These positive perceptions endorsed the assertion by Munyi (2012) that, perceptions towards educating children with disability and adults have changed significantly in the field of education.

This could be as a result of the increased awareness on national and international legislation and policy frameworks which seek to change perceptions and attitudes towards disabled persons in all facets of life. For instance, the Ghana Disability Law, which specifically stated in clause three, section 16, subsection 1 that a parent, guardian or custodian of a child with disability of school going age shall enroll the child in school (Ghana Disability Law, 2006).

Notwithstanding this, few parents still perceived children with disability as uneducable for reasons of inaccessible mainstream educational structure. This thought portrayed ignorance about special schools meant for children with disability. For this reason, Banga (2016) noted that, the greatest challenge in education today is ensuring that all schools are as readily and fully accessible to disabled persons as to the non-disabled.

In this study, however, the negative perception about disabled child's education still hold for the intellectually disabled. The relegation of intellectual children with disability to non-human characters and their strange behavior as well as multiple health conditions related to intellectual disability as indicated by parents could probably contribute to this unchanging perception. This was compounded by the fact that parents were ignorant about special schools for the intellectual children with disability hence perceived them as not educable. Intellectual children with disability will continue to be excluded from school if this trend is not immediately corrected.

### **Factors influencing parents perceptions towards the education of children with disability**

Elkins, Kraayenoord and Jobling (2003) reported that the examination of parents' perceptions on their disabled child's education is neither homogeneous nor static. Among the different factors include;

The recognition of the need for children with disability to be economically independent and serve as a security for parents at old age accounted for a positive change in perception towards educating children with disability. These findings could mean that parents have realized the role of education in the economic transformation of individuals especially the disabled and their families. The chronic dependency of disabled persons on their families without economic contribution is perhaps becoming unbearable in many families due to the increasing standard of

living, hence the need for getting everyone to become economically active. In early studies by Heckman (2007) he equally noted a return to educational investments due to families' ambition to increase the overall well-being and secured future for all members. This paradigm shift has an important implication for children with disability since they will attain better education and probably become more economically empowered. It can therefore be stated that the kind of investment made by parents towards their disabled wards' educations was dependent on what parents expect from the child. This is consistent to Donkor, (2010) indication that, the parental expectations for the future of their children with disability strongly influence the resources they are willing to invest in training and education of those children.

Another issue worth mentioning especially from the perspective of parents who perceived disability as sickness, is the need to monitor the health of their children with disability (particularly those with intellectual disability) at home. They held the view that their children with disability are exposed to danger walking to and from school and even on the school premises. These reasons can be linked to the understanding of disability as sickness by most parents. The health and safety needs of children with disability remain the priority of parents and nothing else because of their vulnerability, and therefore the reason to monitor them in homes. Parents probably described mainstream schools as risky because they see no special care or treatment for children with disability and to avoid these risks simply implies keeping children with disability indoors. This finding, according Wasserman et al (2015) is important because it has devised an effective way of caring for the life of children with disability.

The assertion by Ramirez, Peek-Asa and Kraus (2004) that parents perceived their children with disability, particularly those with severe physical or sensory impairments as vulnerable to accidents and injuries still holds true because even. Schools are seen to be unsafe, a dead trap and as a result, a punishment to send these children to school.

This overprotection has a negative implication for children with disability's educational attainment as well as national development in that, poverty will still prevail among disabled persons as they may not be gainfully employed without education.

Again, children with disability are perceived as educable by their parents after been informed of the existence of schools meant for children with disability and the capabilities of disabled persons when given education. Some parents also perceived that, their children with disability can obtain meaningful education when they became aware of some disabled people who made it in life and helping their families due to education.

It can be inferred from the above finding that, the exclusion of children with disability from schools do not have its cause entirely rooted in negative perceptions of parents but also due to lack of knowledge or information. It can therefore be said that, it was for this lack of knowledge in special schools and the capabilities of children with disability that made most children with disability to be 'perishing' for long time without education. The finding is crucial in re-strategizing policies to embrace the establishment of special schools in most communities

These findings therefore debunked report by the African Child Policy Forum (ACPF, 2014) that Parents' negative perceptions are solely responsible for parents keeping their children with disability in homes and denying them education. As revealed, keeping children with disability in homes and denying them education does not simply connote that parents have negative perceptions about their children with disability's education, but largely because parents are

unaware of special schools where they can be educated. This assertion by the ACPF may drive away the attention of government and stakeholders in establishing special schools to educate the children with disability, even though the presence of special schools was found to be contributing to change in negative perceptions.

### **Conclusion**

Parents' perceptions have a significant impact on their disabled child's education. Parents showed mixed (positive or negative) perceptions about their children with disability's education. These perceptions emanated from how disability is understood, as well as the disability type and its severity.

Generally, Parents are increasingly becoming aware of the educational benefits for children with disability and are gradually adhering to this by changing their perceptions positively. The major area of reservation pertains to educating the intellectually children with disability as the study discovered no clues of changing in negative perceptions already held about them.

### **Recommendations**

- **Public awareness on understanding about children with disability's education**

The government through the appropriate ministry in collaboration with Disabled People's Organizations (DPOs) and advocates should undertake advocacy at all levels to highlight the urgent need to include children with disability in schools. This should be done by utilizing diverse communication channels such as mass and community media and more importantly the traditional media which includes poetry, storytelling, drama and interpersonal communication. This has the potential of changing the perceptions of the general public and more importantly parents of children with disability on the education of the disabled child. Stigma and prejudice attached to children with disability and sometimes their families are likely to be eliminated and promote positive attitude in the community and at school.

- **Training of teachers on special education**

Teachers in the regular schools must be trained in special education to equip them with the knowledge and skills they require to teach children with disability. This is because the trend universally is not in favour of building special schools, but including these children in the regular public school system in order to promote co-existence. To achieve this, it is important for the government to provide training for teachers in regular public schools

- **Inclusion of children with disability in mainstream policies, systems and services**

Stakeholders and policy makers should make provisions for children with disability in formulating policies that has to do with education to support and maximize their development potentials. This should include different ways of assessment and promotion. Giving necessary attention and promoting children with disability's games at basic schools and ensuring an accessible school system in terms of mode of teaching and the environment are likely to make parents perceive their children as educable upon seeing provisions made specifically for their children with disability. Parents are also more likely to change their perceptions if they witness children with disability in various schools engaged in games.

- **Involvement of parents with positive perceptions**

Efforts should be made by stakeholders to identify parents of children with disability who have positive perceptions and has enrolled their children in school to advocate for a change in perception. It is established that, people within the same community or situation are best in understanding the problem on the ground. Parents with negative perceptions are more likely to adhere to people who share similar concerns, and at the same time those with positive perceptions will know much better how to address their concerns. DPOs can financially support these individuals to organize focus group discussions at community levels or a house to house visit for interpersonal discussions.

- **Opinion leaders training**

The government through its ministries should endeavour to provide education and training for relevant opinion leaders such as teachers, chiefs and assembly members on disability. The training may cover the rights of children with disability, the need for both mainstream and targeted services like education, and strategies for the inclusion of children with disability. These people will function as community-based educators on disability issues, who will regularly organize meetings or take opportunity of community meetings to brief parents and community members on the need of disabled child's education.

- **Promoting inclusive education**

The government through the Ministry of Education should promote inclusive education in the district as a way of informing parents of the government's commitment to educating children with disability. Promoting inclusive education will have a positive impact on parents' perceptions about educating their children with disability. The impact will be much greater when the school start achieving results in terms of transforming lives of disabled children.

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