

Understanding Barriers and Facilitators to Inclusive Education for Grade 7 - 9 Students with Disabilities in Ethiopia and Ghana: A Qualitative study

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Youth with disabilities in Africa continue to face significant challenges in accessing and participating in general education settings. This study aimed to explore the barriers and facilitators to inclusive education among youth with disabilities in Grades 7-9, in Ethiopia and Ghana.

Method: A qualitative descriptive approach was adopted to explore the lived experiences of students with disabilities in Grades 7-9 in Ethiopian and Ghanaian schools. Five focus group discussions were conducted, with an average of six students in each focus group. Thematic analysis was used to explore and analyse study participants' schooling experiences.

Results: There are commonalities and differences in the barriers and facilitators to inclusive education among students with disabilities in Ethiopia and Ghana. Participants reported that psychosocial, physical, systemic, and resource-related barriers hinder their access to education and school participation. They also identified facilitators including emotional and material support from various sources, and personal coping strategies and perseverance in overcoming barriers to their schooling.

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Conclusion: *A complex system of structural, institutional, and individual factors affect school enrolment and participation among Grade 7-9 students with disabilities in Ethiopia and Ghana. Concerted and multisectoral inclusive education programming and supports are needed.*

Key words: *inclusive education, students with disabilities, disability, Africa, Ethiopia, Ghana*

INTRODUCTION

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides that “everyone has the right to education” (United Nations, 1948, Article 26). Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) recognises the right of persons with disabilities to inclusive education, without discrimination and based on equal opportunity (United Nations, 2006). Despite these global commitments to inclusion, there are causes for concern about the implementation of CPRD as it relates to (a) student outcomes; (b) trained teachers; (c) attitudes; and (d) adequate facilities, classroom support (Plotner and Marshall, 2015), and learning resources (Mupa and Chinooneka, 2015). Young Africans with disabilities continue to face significant challenges in accessing, navigating, and succeeding within general educational settings (McClain-Nhlapo et al, 2018; Shakespeare et al, 2019; Duri and Luke, 2022). Prejudiced practices have contributed to children without disabilities receiving priority access to educational opportunities over children with disabilities (UNESCO, 2015). Even when children with disabilities are willing to attend school, most schools are inaccessible and do not provide disability-related accommodations (Mont, 2021). Moreover, poverty, environmental barriers, a lack of accessible transportation, negative attitudes, and the lack of social protection and support services for children with disabilities have limited their access to (inclusive) education (Plotner and Marshall, 2015; Hästbacka et al, 2016). As a result, school enrolment for youth with disabilities remains very low, with three in ten children never having been in school, and only 48% of these – sometimes even below 10% - completing primary schooling (African Child Policy Forum, 2011).

Ghana and Ethiopia, the focus of this study, have children with disabilities living in underserved rural areas, with limited to no access to necessary education, health, or social services. This is despite both countries signing and ratifying the CRPD and implementing various programmes toward inclusive systems. Ethiopia and Ghana are democratic republics and despite differences in their legislative

governance structures, the respective Ministries of Education centrally oversee the agencies responsible for education from kindergarten to tertiary level.

The Ghanaian school system constitutes six years of primary, three years of junior secondary, and three years of senior secondary schooling (6+3+3). Grades 1-9 (primary and junior secondary schooling) are treated as basic education. Ethiopia operates with eight years of primary, two years of general secondary and two years of college preparatory schooling (8+2+2). Grades 1-8 are treated as basic/ primary education in Ethiopia. In both countries, the completion of basic education comes with formative student assessments, and performing well on these examinations is mandatory for students to proceed to the next level. For this study, Grades 7-9 were selected for their status as upper-level basic education and due to their relevance in the educational transition of students. Grade 8 in the Ethiopian education system represents a transitional class, involving a national examination to screen who progresses from primary to secondary level of schooling. Grade 8 also has the highest dropout and lowest progression rate for all students, including students with disabilities (Woldehanna, 2021). In Ghana, Grades 7-9 register a steep decline in student completion rate (Adam et al, 2016). To date, there have been limited studies internationally describing barriers and facilitators to inclusive education at this level of schooling (Huus, 2021).

Objective

This study aimed to explore, (a) the experiences of students with disabilities in these middle/transitional school grades, which, based on their performance on the national exam, determines their educational trajectory and, ultimately, occupational opportunities, and (b) the contributing factors to successful transition from primary to secondary schooling – as well as persistent challenges. The study addresses the key questions about factors enabling and hindering inclusive education by exploring the experiences before (grade 7), during (grade 8), and after (grade 9) students transition to secondary education. The study engages in a comparative exploration of barriers and facilitators of inclusive education for youth in key grades 7, 8, and 9 in Ethiopia, and Ghana.

METHOD

Study Design

This is a qualitative descriptive study, which drew from hermeneutic-phenomenological approaches (Creswell, 2007) to explore and interpret the

experiences of students with disability in Ethiopia and Ghana (grades 7-9). The authors aimed to understand the diverse lived experiences of students with disabilities along the key abiding concerns of barriers and facilitators towards a negotiated interpretation and conceptualization of access to education and inclusive education in the two countries. Data collection involved five in-person focus group discussions, two in Ethiopia and three in Ghana, with an average of six participants each (range: 5 to 8).

Participants

Study participants were purposively identified through community-based rehabilitation centres, schools, and disability advocacy organisations. In Ethiopia, focus groups were conducted in Gondar (with participants identified through the University of Gondar - Community-based Rehabilitation programme) and Dessie, South Wollo (with participants identified through local Organisations of Persons with Disabilities - OPDs). In Accra, focus group discussions were conducted with participants identified through disability associations, local schools, and advocacy groups.

To facilitate a free and diverse exchange of ideas and information, while recruiting the authors balanced participant homogeneity (organising participants of similar Grade levels into one focus group) and heterogeneity (ensuring participant diversity by gender and disability type) (Halcomb et al, 2007). Participants above the age of 18 provided written informed consent, and for participants younger than 18, the caregivers or guardians provided informed consent while the minors were asked for their assent.

Data Collection

Data collection involved five in-person focus group discussions, two in Ethiopia and three in Ghana, with an average of six participants each (range: 5 to 8).

In Ethiopia the focus groups were conducted in Amharic, the widely spoken and working language of the federal government of Ethiopia. In Ghana, English was the language used. Participants with hearing impairments used a sign language interpreter.

Semi-structured guides were used, comprising an introductory section (confidentiality, ethics, ground rules), warm-up questions on personal data, main and probing questions, and a conclusion. The guides were prepared in English

first and qualified language experts translated them into Amharic for Ethiopia. Questions were pre-tested to ensure their usefulness in helping moderators conduct fruitful discussions. All focus group meetings were in person, while adhering to relevant local Covid-19 protocols. Two recorders were used simultaneously to capture discussions.

Moderators began with introductions of participants and gradually moved to discussing schooling experiences, personal career goals, barriers and facilitators to education, participation in extracurricular activities, and ways to improve access to education among the youth. Moderators used group processes that aimed at encouraging participants to share, reflect, and challenge their views (Scheelbeek et al, 2020). Note-takers summarised participants' ideas shared during the discussions.

Data Analysis

Audio-recordings of discussions were transcribed verbatim. In Ethiopia, Amharic phonetics was used to transcribe audio-recordings, which competent language experts translated into English transcripts. A qualitative descriptive analysis was used (Kim et al, 2017). First, three researchers carefully and independently reviewed the transcripts to familiarise themselves with the data and took memos important for data coding; second, all researchers from Ghana, Ethiopia, and Canada virtually discussed ongoing analysis, on a biweekly basis, to identify unique and shared cases across the study sites, and, inductively and iteratively generated codes, subthemes, and themes for data analysis; third, researchers in each site reviewed and revised the codes, which they shared and discussed to refine and finalise; finally, researchers used the code list to produce reports using NVivo and draft a synthesised report on the experiences of participants.

This iterative analysis identified two themes that underpin the experiences of students with disabilities in both countries: Psychosocial, physical, and systemic challenges (barriers); and Coping strategies and supports (facilitators). Study participants identified several factors that hinder accessing and/or continuing education, and personal strategies and supports that enable them to access and/or continue education.

Ethics Approval

Ethical clearance was obtained from the institutional Ethics Review Boards of the University of Gondar (Ethiopia), Ashesi University (Ghana), and Queen's

University (Canada).

The study was carried out with respect for the integrity of the informants. All informants gave their consent to record the interviews and use the material for publication in anonymised form.

RESULTS

Sociodemographic Profile of the Participants

Participants were 31 students with hearing (7), visual (13), and physical (11) impairments. There were 10 females and 21 males and their ages ranged from 14 to 25 years, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of Sociodemographic Characteristics

Attribute	Ghana	Ethiopia
Age*	16-22 years	14-25 years
Gender		
	Male 10	11
	Female 6	4
Type of disability		
	Visual impairment 6	7
	Hearing Impairment 5	2
	Physical Impairment 5	6
Total	16	15

* Age of participants is usually higher than the standard age group for Grades 7-9 due to the fact that children with disabilities often begin schooling at older ages than their peers and/or experience higher rates of Grade repetition.

Psychosocial, Physical, and Systemic Barriers

In both countries, study participants discussed the effects of psychosocial (attitudinal and lack of support), physical, and systemic barriers to starting or continuing education. Many raised the challenges of scarcity of resources and educational materials to meet basic needs, and the psychological effects of isolation and stigma as hindrances to their participation and success in education.

Psychosocial Barriers

The participants reported negative attitudes and poor psychosocial support from

their significant others like peers, family and community members and teachers. Both in Ethiopia and Ghana, they discussed how stereotypes, prejudice, stigma and discrimination that emanate from community values and institutional contexts undermine public perception on disability and possible supports to students with disabilities.

“What I want to say is that in our area persons with disabilities are seen as very weak. And there is no support for the weak. Only the strong and powerful take what they want. There is no such effort or view by people to support the disabled so that they may change their lives” (Participant in Ethiopia).

The discrimination that students with disabilities faced caused them psychological distress which resulted in avoidance of socialising with peers without disabilities.

“The attitude of the society where I grew up makes me have great pain. I cannot go with my peers because of disability, so it has a lot of impact on my life” (Participant in Ethiopia).

This disabling environment also impacted their capabilities to perform better in education. They claimed to usually be labelled as low academic performers. They stated that community members frequently used traumatizing words to bully and tease them.

“There is an aspect that, even though I’m happy with what I’m learning of the Braille and everything, like my brother said, the teasing, sometimes, it makes me unhappy” (Participant in Ghana).

It is not unusual for school authorities to quietly ignore reports of bullying, as reported by a participant.

“I got teased and bullied a lot because of my disability at the farm (at their village). I hated the place. I thought a lot about committing suicide” (Participant in Ethiopia).

Consequently, students with disabilities reportedly felt ashamed of their disability, and responded in compromising ways.

“At school I used to cover my hand with a head scarf so that people cannot see it. I was so ashamed of my disability” (Participant in Ethiopia).

“I was so ashamed of my disability. I avoided participation in sports. I get very angry when people ask me about my disability” (Participant in Ethiopia).

Physical Barriers

The physical landscape and built areas of the schools and communities usually hinder the movement and participation of persons with disabilities. A participant from Ethiopia raised the problem of inaccessible school buildings that, due to lack of ramps, made movement difficult for students with physical impairments.

“Getting into the classroom is a painful experience for me. I find it very difficult to go up and down the steps. It gives me pains in my back and legs” (Participant in Ethiopia).

It was a similar problem in Ghana.

“In the school, you see plenty gutters around and someone (who cannot see) who does not know will just bump into it and get hurt. And it’s very bad because some of our buildings too are spoilt so at times, you don’t know where to pass and you don’t know how to move your legs around. So, some feel it’s difficult to walk around on the campus” (Participant in Ghana).

Participants in Ethiopia raised a unique challenge related to the inability of students with disabilities to access school sanitation facilities, inconveniencing them to wait until they return to their homes.

“The problem is the school. In my school, the toilets are far away from the classrooms. I did not go to the toilet in my stay there. We entered to class at 8:00 morning, and I did not go the toilet till I went back home in the afternoon” (Participant in Ethiopia).

Though they did not consider their school facilities and sanitation arrangements inaccessible, as did their Ethiopian counterparts, participants in Ghana raised security issues that make them feel compromised while using sanitation facilities or simply going about their usual school business.

“One thing that we are not comfortable with is that sometimes when we are washing or we are making ourselves fine, the hearing people in the environment, they come to spy and looking at us. ... they want to see us” (Participant in Ghana).

“Our school, because we have problem with the (short) walls, stealing and theft cases is so much from the hearing community. So, we need security and CCTV camera so if anything gets missing, we can easily trace and get them. We need security officers” (Another participant in Ghana).

Systemic and Institutional Barriers

In both countries, participants frequently raised non-inclusive curricula, lack of trained teachers, inaccessible educational materials and school facilities, inadequate school disability support services and limited social services accessibility as manifestations of systemic barriers to their participation and success in education.

With few specifically-trained inclusive education teachers, many students with disabilities are taught in regular classes, along with students without disabilities, by teachers with no training in special needs and inclusive education.

“We need teachers who will teach only the deaf. For example, like my blind colleagues who said that sometimes the sighted are reading and they don’t have books to read, leaving them behind. So, they should also give us teachers who are for the deaf to teach us” (Participant in Ghana).

The same participant added,

“I think the government should train more teachers to become IT users for us, the visually impaired”.

Consequently, students with disabilities stated that they suffer from communication barriers and non-inclusive educational assessments. Despite the expectation that they should receive special considerations in schooling because of their disabilities, participants claimed that teachers did not support them during exams and tests, and used inappropriate assessment tools to evaluate their performance.

“Sometimes during Basic Education certificate examination, the deaf students perform poor score. They are always late, and they are not fast. So, if the teachers take their time to teach them, they’ll do better. The deaf people can, they can also learn fast” (Participant in Ghana).

There was no difference in Ethiopia.

“The teachers do not consider our cases when they mark our exams. They are not helpful. They even do not motivate students to support us” (Participant in Ethiopia).

Communication barriers primarily affected students with hearing impairments.

“The teachers may not understand me when I use sign language. Even now in

Grade 9, when the teachers ask me, my friend tries to translate it” (Participant in Ethiopia).

This was reiterated by a participant in Ghana.

“Sometimes, when they write the note on the board and leave the class, sometimes we find it difficult to understand what is going on. But notwithstanding, I continue to attend the school. But no detailed explanation with a sign, so I continue, I try what I can do” (Participant in Ghana).

The lack of personal assistants limited classroom participation and active learning among students with disability, and created a difficult learning environment.

“Since I am not learning using sign language in class, I do not respond when the teachers ask me questions. But, if they make it using sign language, I can easily understand the subject matter” (Participant in Ethiopia).

This challenge, study participants added, is linked to the absence of school-based support packages for students with disabilities.

“My school does not have any support package for students with disabilities. The needs of students with impairments are not considered at all by the school administration. They do not even support us with basic educational materials like exercise books and pens. We were also made to pay for campus security” (Participant in Ethiopia).

Participants in Ethiopia and Ghana also discussed the lack of accessible educational material as a challenge to persons with disabilities at school. The design and content of educational materials were not accessible to students with different types of impairments.

“There are no Braille materials, but I get normal books at school that I cannot use without readers” (Participant in Ethiopia).

A student in Ghana noted a similar challenge.

“We don’t have any Braille textbook to use at that place. So, I think some of our friends use laptop, aha. So, I think that one too can help us” (Participant in Ghana).

Participants commented on the inclusivity of the school curricula, especially in courses like physical education and mathematics, and shared their experiences of exclusion from formal curricular activities.

“I do not engage in sports activities. When my classmates go to the field for physical exercise sessions, I do not go with them” (Participant in Ethiopia).

“When it comes to balancing and chemical compounds, how to this and that... that makes it difficult because it contains mathematics” (Participant in Ghana).

Resource-related Barriers

Fulfilling students' basic needs is a fundamental requirement to get them ready for learning. Supporting basic needs is vital for all students, but the challenge is more impactful for students with disabilities, especially as reported by Ethiopian participants, who claimed to be severely challenged to find adequate shelter, food, and clothing.

“I need financial support for rent and to buy educational materials, clothes, and supplies to keep my personal hygiene. I need those to continue going to school and succeed through high school” (Participant in Ethiopia).

Ethiopian students with disabilities, of rural origin, stated that while searching for inclusive schools, they were usually forced to migrate to urban areas and get separated from their families and relatives.

“Obviously, we all do not have our families to help us, so economically we are poor. If we live together with our families, we can share ideas, we can live together and score better, but now as we live far away from each other, we are not able to alleviate problems we face every day” (Participant in Ethiopia).

On the other hand, being orphaned created an additional burden for several students to actively and effectively engage in learning.

“Some of us are orphans and we need a monthly stipend to buy clothes, to get a haircut, etc. All of us here need financial support, at least pocket money for looking after ourselves” (Participant in Ethiopia).

Despite several governmental and non-governmental organisations offering financial and material supports to persons with disabilities, study participants claimed these supports benefit others instead of students with disabilities. They discussed how people and organisations raise funds in the name of persons with disabilities without providing them to target beneficiaries. Consequently, many persons with disabilities live in economic hardship. The problem is worse for persons living in the remote areas.

“There is one thing I have to say here. We hear that there are lots of support packages and resources for persons with disabilities. But it does not reach the beneficiaries. We rarely get some pens and exercise books at most. We are not getting the benefits being reported by the government and other non-government organisations. Especially those of us living far away from major cities are getting nothing” (Participant in Ethiopia).

Study participants also discussed the difficulties in obtaining assistive devices such as canes, insoles, crutches, and adaptive technologies like computers and software.

“I always needed insoles for support to my shorter leg. If I cannot have a constant supply of this material, I may stop walking to school. It has always been a challenge for me to replace old insoles as my body grows year after year. That is my concern in the future” (Participant in Ethiopia).

Participants in both countries also identified difficulties in getting assistive technologies to support their learning engagement. Furthermore, participants reported lack of personal assistants, forcing them to ask other students, volunteers, and/or teachers to read or translate lessons into sign language. There were occasions when they could not find anyone to respond to their requests.

“It’s always a challenge to find volunteer readers from students. It bothers them because they have to do their own schoolwork too” (Participant in Ethiopia).

“English is our problem. Because for the hearing people, they learn it very fast. But other subjects, we are ok. But for English, is our issue. So, the teachers should be able to learn sign language so that they can follow the English for us. So, when we leave the English classes, we are ok. Some teachers, they can’t sign well. So, we get problem understanding things. It’s an issue” (Participant in Ghana).

The participants in Ethiopia, unlike their Ghanaian counterparts, stressed the negative impacts of limited social services, such as health, rehabilitation, and transportation, on their participation and success at school. Despite their need for various health and rehabilitation services, students with disabilities stated they did not have adequate access to these services, and shared worries that the lack of services may cause them to leave school sooner than desired.

“Because of my poor health condition, there are several kinds of support I need to attend school in the future. My disability situation is deteriorating from time to time” (Participant in Ethiopia).

Enabling Factors and Facilitators

Study participants in both countries identified factors that they thought have reinforced or enabled their enrolment and continued participation in school. They also identified various coping strategies that they employ to mitigate aspects of their deprivation.

Emotional and Material Support

Students with disabilities discussed the importance of emotional/material support from their family, friends, and teachers.

“When I was in Grades 6 and 7, the teachers supported and encouraged us to be active learners. They taught by preparing materials for us. They helped us to promote from one Grade to the other, and we improved and became high achievers. The teachers were cooperative enough to help us. I also thank my mom who always supports me to arrive at this stage” (Participant in Ghana).

The same participant added,

“When we go to school too, our teachers and headmasters are always behind me, encouraging us and teaching us to shape us to move forward”.

Emotional and material support also came from students’ communities – and sometimes more profoundly than from families. A participant in Ethiopia highlighted how a community member financed his medical treatment and convinced the family to send him to school.

“I thank the doctor who helped me to learn. My father did not want me to go to school. The Dr. supported me a lot. When my problem/illness aggravated, my father took me to Addis Ababa for medical treatment. I informed everything to the doctor and he convinced my father to change his attitude towards my education. Then after, my father allowed me to go to school” (Participant in Ethiopia).

The participants also appreciated support from governmental and non-governmental organisations which enabled them to continue schooling. Through schools, students with disabilities have received educational materials, including exercise books and pens, and a monthly stipend.

“My school provides exercise books, pens, and related educational materials for students with disabilities. It is not enough because of the high cost of living but

I appreciate that the blind also receive a 350-birr monthly stipend” (Participant in Ethiopia).

But the availability of these supports is not without its challenges.

“We have some common fund that we receive from our districts and most of us, we are not getting it. So, I want to follow up. I will follow up” (Participant in Ghana).

There were promising improvements in schools’ inclusivity and responsiveness to persons with disabilities and their needs, which participants excitedly reported.

“I am happy that we learn together much better than ever before. Previously, the school environment was not convenient to us. Now, there is a better condition that we are able to express our ideas freely, we ask questions to our teachers and giving responses. We visually impaired students are happy to live and learn together with other students” (Participant in Ethiopia).

“We are not being abandoned by them that we are visually impaired so they won’t mind you... we are being treated equally and fairly” (Participant in Ghana).

Coping Strategies and Perseverance

Students with disabilities revealed that they devised effective strategies to solve their problems and keep their educational progress on track. They engaged in building positive self-image, creating self-motivation for learning and harnessing their social skills. These strategies enabled them to overcome feelings of inferiority due to their disability.

“I do not think my disability will affect my education in the future. I mean I personally do not believe I will have problems with my education because of my impairment” (Participant in Ethiopia).

Some participants believed that such a positive self-image, coupled with strong commitment to stay in school, improved their school participation and success.

“I am determined to get an education. I tell myself not to give up, to go to school no matter what. I do not feel inferior to my non-disabled friends” (Participant in Ethiopia).

Participants in Ghana made similar comments.

“Sometimes, I get to realise that no matter how hard it will be, we’ll still cross, whether by boat or plane, we’ll still cross the river” (Participant in Ghana).

Having good social skills has enabled students with disabilities to harness positive networks and relationships with the school community, which improved their learning experiences and outcomes.

“I have not experienced any problem in class so far. Everybody at school knows me. I have no problems with my teachers. That’s all I can say about what happens at my school? I do not have any problems with the teaching-learning process” (Participant in Ethiopia).

There was a similar reaction from a participant in Ghana.

“I feel good at school. We share jokes, we play together. We do a lot of good things. We interview ourselves, quizzes, entertainment; we learn... we do a lot of good things at school which encourages us to be very good. We do a lot of quizzes, tests, class tests, and other things” (Participant in Ghana).

DISCUSSION

This study explored the complex structural, institutional and individual issues that affect the school enrolment and participation of students with disabilities in Ethiopia and Ghana. Findings illustrate common and different barriers and facilitators of inclusive education for students with disabilities in Ethiopia and Ghana. Findings highlight that students with disabilities face challenges in the form of systemic, institutional, and psychosocial barriers and resource and support limitations. Study participants mentioned challenges in terms of negative community attitudes towards disability and persons with disabilities, and insufficient resources and financial and social supports for their education as well as in their everyday lives. These barriers were also reported in several studies from USA, India and Canada (Cohen, 1994; Pivik and Laflamme, 2002; Ahmad, 2018).

In both Ethiopia and Ghana, study participants underlined the negative impacts of unfavourable community attitudes and stereotypes on the educational opportunities of persons with disabilities. In communities with low disability awareness, people subscribe to stereotypical views that persons with disabilities cannot perform as well as persons without disabilities, thereby undermining the formers’ self-image and educational participation and success, and creating

obstacles to their schooling experience (Laflamme, 2002; Lamichhane, 2013). The present study calls on teachers, family members, and other community members to hold high expectations for all youth with disabilities, regardless of the nature of their impairments.

Physically accessible schools promote inclusivity, though study participants in Ethiopia and Ghana complained about lack of accessible and accommodating schools. They described school buildings as lacking in ramps and with rugged compounds and inaccessible toilets that were far from classrooms. These circumstances make the lives of students with disabilities challenging (Cohen, 1994; Laflamme, 2002; Stumbo et al, 2011; Lamichhane, 2013).

Resource and financial constraints that hinder the educational participation and success of students with disabilities were more frequently mentioned by study participants in Ethiopia than in Ghana. The participants in Ethiopia and Ghana discussed the challenges of meeting their basic needs and obtaining educational materials. This is a chronic scenario in resource-limited countries like Ethiopia and Ghana; and is in line with another study done in Nepal (Lamichhane, 2013).

The Ethiopian students with disabilities in this study indicated that the lack of inclusive post-primary schools in remote villages forced those of rural origin to migrate to nearby semi-urban and urban centres where such types of schools are available – leading to loss of family support, which, with limited school support, compounded their educational challenges. Studies in this area (e.g., Boyden, 2013; Yorke et al, 2021) reported similar findings whereby educational, resource, infrastructural, and quality of life disparities between rural and urban areas force the rural youth to migrate to urban areas. For instance, Yorke et al (2021) reported that even if migrating youth access greater opportunity to continue their higher levels of schooling with increased freedom, it comes at the costs of losing family and community support and experiencing highly uncertain urban living and challenges for the future. For Schewel and Fransen (2018), these consequences of geographic and social mobilities are the natural outcomes of an unbalanced but rapidly expanding educational system that did not prioritise bridging rural-urban disparities in resources and accessibilities (Boyden, 2013; Mupa and Chinooneka, 2015; Yorke et al, 2021). This study also found institutional barriers to inclusive education, including lack of teachers trained in inclusive education, exclusionary pedagogy, inaccessible transportation, and insufficient social and rehabilitation services. These barriers negatively affected teacher-student communications, quality of learning and educational success among students with disabilities.

Similar findings were also reported by other researchers. For instance, a study in Ethiopia (Woldehanna, 2021) found schools in Harar prioritising regular students' academic performance over creating inclusive school environment for students with disabilities. It reported that a particular school was nationally recognised for students' excellent academic performance but it lacked basic considerations of accessibility and inclusion of students with disabilities.

The current study also identified educational supports and personal coping strategies that helped students with disabilities to stay in school. Though on a limited scale, the emotional, financial and material supports from friends, family and teachers have reportedly facilitated education. Government and non-governmental organisations have also supported students with disabilities to continue their education. Several studies concurred with these findings on the role of diverse supports in the educational participation and success of students with disabilities (Burgin, 2004; Genova, 2015; Arishi, 2019). Burgin (2003), for instance, specifically discussed how the involvement of teachers in creating inclusive curricula and supporting students with disabilities has improved students' participation and performance in the school system, and (Arishi, 2019) identified that teacher supports to inclusive education favoured students' integration into the school and their performance. Importantly, the current study findings also emphasise the crucial role of self-determination and commitment of students with disabilities to success in their schooling. Moriña (2019) reported on the positive association between the educational motivation of students with disabilities and their teachers' support and communication to foster a sense of school belongingness and learning outcomes. The supportive factors that contributed to staying at school were the ability to cope with the diverse systemic, institutional and attitudinal barriers through sheer perseverance and inventiveness.

CONCLUSION and IMPLICATIONS

This study, based on participants from Ethiopia and Ghana, revealed that students with disabilities faced significant barriers to inclusive education. It identified commonalities and differences in the two countries in their progress towards promoting inclusive education for youth with disabilities at the critical middle school stage - at the time when the educational trajectory is determined. It is critical that governments, schools, and the community take action to ensure that youth with disabilities are not left behind – particularly at crucial times

of transition in their education. These measures include budgeting for and investing in inclusive education, training teachers in inclusion skills including sign-language and Braille, providing inclusive resources and support, training students with disabilities on life-, social- and communications- skills, and fostering school environments favourable to students' sense of belongingness, engagement and outcomes. Existing toolkits (UNESCO, 2015; Crespi et al, 2022) and empirical studies (Ainscow, 2020) suggest a holistic approach to tailor interventions and create inclusive and learning-friendly environments that the two countries covered in the study could contextualise (Pacific, 2009; Ainscow, 2020; Crespi et al, 2022).

Disclosure

Ethics approval and consent to participate: The study was carried out with respect for the integrity of the informants. All informants gave their consent to record the interviews and use the material for publication in deidentified form.

Data sharing statement: We have to abide by the data sharing policy of the Queen's University, University of Gondar, Ashesi University and University of Cape-town; nonetheless, we have included all important information regarding the data presented (No additional data are available).

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