

## Understanding the Socio-Cultural Challenges of the Education of Children with Hearing Impairments and the Implications for Policy and School Practice

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### Abstract

A growing body of research literature has theorised on the challenges confronting the education of children living with disabilities in Ghana. However, there is little knowledge on the socio-culturally theorisation of the learning of children with hearing impairments and how culturally responsive strategies can confront these challenges. This study investigates the socio-cultural and learning challenges faced by children living with hearing impairments and their families in a Ghanaian pre-tertiary (Grade 1-12) special school and its local rural community. Thirteen informants from four participant groups, including three students, three teachers, six parents and a community leader, participated in the study. Semi-structured interviews, document analysis and fieldnotes were used for the collection of data. Using Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, augmented by culturally responsive theorisation, a thematic analysis of the qualitative data found that socio-culturally, the studied Ghanaian community mischaracterises the causes of disabilities to superstition, leading to social stigma and the exclusion of the families of children living with disabilities. Also, the study identified a gap between the participating students' school-home learning that limited culturally responsive and experiential learning experiences, and relevant learning outcomes. This learning gap was attributable to the differences in the learners' school-home language of instruction, the multi-ethnic/linguistic classroom context, the lack of substantial instructional materials in the main local language of the community, and inadequate teachers' spatial and cultural competencies to leverage and deploy learners' rich home cultural assets into school learning. The study concludes that an intensified public education campaign can demystify the Ghanaian traditional misconceptions on disability and their attendant negative socio-cultural challenges of social stigmatisation and exclusion. Schooling for Ghanaian children living with disabilities can be culturally responsive and place-based, able to meet local and global needs if community-based teacher training and management strategies build the teachers' cultural and Ghanaian local language competencies, while aligning the teacher-student linguistic backgrounds to mitigate the negatives and leverage the positive cultural assets in the increasingly multi-lingual Ghanaian classroom context. A better grassroots collaboration among students, parents, teachers, community leaders, government and its non-equal partners in teacher training, professional development, professional learning community and curriculum implementation can enact more culturally responsive schooling to advance inclusive and experiential learning for those children living with disabilities.

**Keywords:** disabilities, hearing impairments, learning challenges, culturally responsiveness, inclusion

## 1. Introduction

The shift in global attention to the promotion of education for children living with disabilities, fuelled by international declarations such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Education for All (EFA) goals and now the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has attracted research interest.

A growing body of research literature has identified and analysed the challenges confronting the education of children living with disabilities in Africa. However, there is a gap in the available research literature on the socio-cultural theorisation of the learning of children with disabilities in Ghana and how its understanding can improve the strategies for mitigating the socio-cultural and learning challenges faced by children living with hearing impairments and their families.

Globally an education approach, culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) is emerging as a socio-culturally-informed strategy, advocating for advancing inclusive and fair learning experiences for historically marginalised groups (Anlimachie et al., 2023; Tetteh et al., 2023). The basis of this research is to understand how the socio-cultural problematisation of the learning challenges of children living with hearing impairments can inform the enactment of culturally responsive schooling strategies to improve the inclusive and experiential learning experiences of this traditionally socially excluded group.

Ghana's commitment to the education of children living with disabilities is evident in her ratification of several international treaties as well as the promulgation of national laws and policy interventions to promote the rights of children and persons living with disabilities. One such policy intervention was the establishment of special schools to provide special needs education for children living with disabilities, alongside the inclusive education in regular schools (Gadagbui, 1998). About 21% of Ghanaian children living with disabilities are enrolled in special schools such as schools for the blind and schools for the deaf. The rest are enrolled in inclusive education in regular pre-tertiary schools (Ministry of Education [MOE], Ghana, 2018a).

Recent reports on Ghana's education sector show that the overall prevalence of children with disabilities aged between four and 17 years old in Ghana is 1.6% of its 32 million population. Only 0.1% of the children with disabilities are registered at the Ghanaian pre-tertiary schools (MOE, Ghana, 2018a). The statistics on Ghana's education sector also indicates that children with disabilities are not progressing through the education system and that a large proportion of those enrolled are over age. Ghana's education assessment reports have further identified consistent gaps in learning outcomes in reading, writing, and mathematics between pupils with and without disabilities; these differences are particularly evident in the Ghanaian languages and mathematics (MOE, Ghana, 2018 a, b). The ensuing realities suggest inadequate attention to inclusive and special needs education for children living with disabilities, coupled with a weak curriculum implementation.

The Ghanaian pre-tertiary or basic education sector is a 2–6–3–3 system of two years kindergarten, six years primary school, three years junior high school (lower secondary) and three years senior high school (upper secondary), providing education from pre-school to Grade 12 (Anlimachie & Avoada, 2020). The overall aspirations for pre-tertiary education in Ghana apply to all Ghanaian children in the universal education system, which are acquiring competencies in

arithmetic, literacy, digital literacy, life problem-solving, employment skills, and becoming both culturally and globally competitive, to be able to contribute to the community, and national and global sustainability (MoE, Ghana, 2018a).

Ghanaian scholars including Yevudey (2017)) and Anlimachie et al. (2023a, 2023b) have argued that the Ghanaian pre-tertiary curricula must adequately address the students' lifeworlds and diverse learning needs, as well as the local relevance to different local environments and the growing multiethnicity. Ghana has made use of a common objective-based curriculum at the pre-tertiary level for both regular and special education needs since independence in 1957 until 2018. The goal of the basic education curriculum in Ghana is to ensure that all citizens, no matter their social status or ability, become functionally literate and productive in order to compete well in the competitive global economy. The Ghanaian formal objective-based common curriculum for pre-tertiary schools has been criticised for not considering the diverse nature of the children in the classroom to enable all children, irrespective of their circumstances, to benefit from the teaching and learning process, contradicting the goal of the national curriculum to provide an equal playing field for all learners. Therefore, weak curriculum implementation has been a longstanding challenge for Ghana's pre-tertiary education sector.

Since 2018, there are ongoing education reforms that have resulted in the enactment of a new curriculum framework for the Ghanaian pre-tertiary education sector. The Change and Sustainability framework curriculum seeks to link Ghanaian classrooms to the learners' lifeworld and community needs. A key aspiration for the new curriculum is to ensure culturally responsive, experiential and inclusive learning experiences for Ghanaian children, especially the vulnerable, to ensure that they become functionally literate, productive, and able to compete successfully in the global economy (MoE, Ghana, 2019a, 2019b).

In the Ghanaian context, research on people living with disabilities is receiving growing attention. However, there is a paucity of research literature in the field of education for the hearing-impaired. There is a need for more research to understand the socio-cultural antecedence and undertones impacting the education of children living with disabilities in Ghana. Therefore, this study investigates the socio-cultural challenges confronting the education of children with hearing impairments. The key research questions guiding the study are as follows: a) What community perceptions and beliefs induce socio-cultural challenges for families with persons living with disabilities? and b). What learning challenges do children living with hearing impairments face in the Ghanaian pre-tertiary schools and local communities?

The above research questions, through a socio-cultural lens, offer a timely analysis to inform the ongoing implementation of Ghana's new basic education curriculum on using culturally responsive pedagogy to improve education's inclusiveness and outcomes, and its relevance for Ghanaian children living with disabilities.

## 2. Theoretical Frameworks

A particular society's notion of disabilities shapes how it responds to people living with disabilities (Hammell, 2006). Traditionally, three main models have emerged as perspectives on disabilities and how society addresses the needs of persons living with disabilities. The first is the moral or religious model which is based on superstition. This traditional or pre-modern conceptualisation of disability is rooted in religious beliefs and taboos. For example, healing miracles, the focus of bodily restoration as spiritual redemption, is a crucial belief in Christianity (Benyah, 2024). In the Hindu religion, disability is seen as evil, and as a punishment for sins (Ghai, 2001). In Buddhism, disability constitutes a form of rebirth for sins committed by individuals in their previous lives. In the African traditional belief systems, disability is regarded as a punishment by the supernatural visited on the individual due to the individual's former misdeeds (Nukunya, 2016). In some Ghanaian ethnic communities, especially rural and low-income contexts, this traditional conceptualisation of disability has remained dominant owing to a low level of education. Therefore, situating the moral/religious perspective in the broader socio-cultural lens of this study has offered a deeper understanding of how disability in the Ghanaian traditional belief system induces negative misconceptions, behaviours and interactions regarding people living with disabilities in the Ghanaian rural community studied.

The second model of disability is the medical model underpinned by the rehabilitation professions which emerged from the Enlightenment period in Western civilisation. "The medical model sees disabilities as physiological impairments, illness or individual deficit amenable to 'expert' solutions" (Hammell, 2006, p.58). The medical approach is such that when a person's body structure does not align with the socially or physiologically known norms and standards, it must be diagnosed by health care professionals to ascertain the nature of the impairment and the treatment or rehabilitation thereof to ensure the provision of quality care and improvement of wellbeing (Leplege & Hunt, 1997; Amir & Pizzi, 2024). The weakness of the concept is that it does not adequately address socio-cultural wellbeing, including the inclusion of people living with disabilities in society. The medical model advances the view that persons with disabilities are dependent, justifying their exclusion from society (Asoke, 2005). They argue that because of the individual/medical model of disability in the Ghanaian context, between the 1970s and the 90s, special schools were established for specific groups of children with disabilities, instead of educating children with disabilities together with their peers without disabilities in an inclusive schooling context to promote social inclusion. Therefore, situating the medical model into the omnibus sociocultural theory of this study offered an analysis of the understanding of how the scientific enlightenment of education can change the cultural behaviour of the studied Ghanaian community towards people living with disabilities and their families.

The third model for conceptualising disability is the social/political perspective. This arose from the experiences of disabled people and was originally articulated by disabled activists (Hammell, 2006). According to socio-political theorists of disability, disability is understood as a social construct. It is shaped by environmental factors, including physical characteristics built into the physical environment, cultural attitudes and social behaviours, and institutionalised rules and procedures rather than the individual subjective construct of a physical or mental impairment (Scotch, 2000). The socio-political model of disability instigated radical changes in the religious and medical/individual models of disability relating to people living with disabilities and to society as a whole, so that physical impairments and their induced impoverished social conditions are not only attributable to people living with disabilities and their families (Hammell, 2006). The socio-political approach to disability has played a significant role in influencing the social movement addressing the challenges associated with people living with disabilities and their families (Crow, 1996). This perspective offered an analytical lens focused on the lived

experiences of children living with hearing impairments and how they perceived that their learning experiences could be improved.

Theoretically, the present study is scaffolded by a broader nested socio-cultural theory, triangulating Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory on children's learning and development, culturally responsive pedagogy, and place-based theorisation of children's learning. According to Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, children's learning is a socially mediated process involving the learners' cultural experiences. Vygotsky (1978) argued that knowledge exists at first between the adult and the child, or an older peer and the child. Knowledge and skills are then transferred through a combination of observation, imitation, and internal assimilation. The children begin their cognitive life socially and gradually move towards cognitive autonomy. At the heart of Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory is the understanding that human cognition and learning are socio-cultural rather than an individual phenomena. Hence, children's learning should be contextualised based on the cultural values of the people and should be the collective responsibility of their parents, teachers and peers who are more knowledgeable about a specific task to help the children in the learning process (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky's socio-cultural theories point to the strong relationships between language and thought/learning, family and learning, and society and learning, as well as instruction and development. Therefore, Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory offered the right analytical lens for the present study to use to understand the home-school relationship and how the learners' home cultural assets can be leveraged as learning resources to promote culturally responsive learning.

Culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) and place-based pedagogy (PBP) also offer relevant theoretical perspectives through which to analyse home-school cultural synergy and how this can inform community-based strategies for improving the learning experiences of children living with disabilities. CRP is a strategy used to bridge the home and school cultures in order to advance schooling in a manner that ensures that all students achieve academic success. This is done by advancing community cultural heritage while gaining access to dominant practices, and critically confronting the existing social inequalities perpetuated by the dominant cultures (Ladson-Billings, 1995). According to Villegas and Lucas (2002), CRP requires socio-culturally conscious teachers who know about the lives of their students and affirm the students' diverse backgrounds. Such teachers see themselves as capable of bringing about positive change to make schools more inclusive. Culturally responsive teachers design instructions that build on what their students already know, while also stretching them beyond the familiar (p.20). Similarly, PBP advances experiential learning experiences by connecting life and learning, and schooling to community sustainability. PBP harnesses active local community inputs into the teaching. Teachers imbued with place-based spatial competencies recognise the value and importance of the local environment and its embedded challenges and resources as cultural capital that has an impact on the children's learning (Wallace & Boylan, 2009, p. 25). Place-based pedagogists deploy methods that make the learners and their families active participants of their environment, connecting them to their culture and resources, and connecting lives and learning by examining local practices and resources that can enhance the curriculum and classroom practices (Comber, 2021; Zipin, 2020). The focus of the CRP and PBP concepts is that when the learners' home cultural assets and place are brought into school, learning becomes experiential and relevant to their local and global learning needs (Anlimachie, 2022).

The ensuing socio-cultural theories have offered relevant lenses through which to analyse the importance of the learners' family and community culture, specifically as important assets in relation to the children's learning. The chosen theories offered the best lens for the present study examining the education of children living with disabilities in the Ghanaian multiethnic cultural context where the rearing of children is seen as a collective responsibility of the extended family

as well as of society as a whole. As posited by Anlimachie (2022) in his culturally responsive theorisation of minoritised children's learning in Ghana, any construction of knowledge about children's learning that excludes the home and the environment (place and culture) in which learning takes place, as well as the views of extended family members, the community and the children themselves, will be deficient in enacting culturally responsive education that meets the Ghanaian community's needs. Anlimachie (2022) proposes an integration and renewal of Ghanaian indigenous knowledges through culturally responsive and place-based pedagogies as key re-positioning strategies to decolonise mainstream education through the greater harnessing of home cultural assets. These include the use of the home language, traditionally valued skills, and indigenous place-sensitive, apprenticeship-based and collectivist learning approaches.

### **3. Empirical Review**

The empirical research findings on people with disabilities in Africa – including studies by Hammell (2006), Avoke (2005), Vayrynen (1997), Breidlid (2013), and Benyah (2024) – have found that most African traditional societies attribute the causes of disability to superstitions. The aforementioned studies detail that most African societies have labelled disability as the consequence of possession by evil spirits, as due to witchcraft, or as a punishment for wrongdoing such as breaking taboos or sins committed by either the individual in this or previous incarnation or their families. The mischaracterisation of the causes of disability exposes people living with disabilities and their families to social stigmatisation and exclusion, undermining access to inclusive education and fair learning experiences. Studying inclusive education in East African for people living with disabilities, Ebuenyi et al. (2020) found negative cultural barriers impeding inclusive education to include a) cultural barriers consisting of negative attitudes towards persons with disabilities, and b) structural barriers related to social exclusion. Thus, culture and structure work together to undermine culturally responsive practices of including persons with disabilities in the experiential schooling environment. Therefore, Ebuenyi et al. (2020) argue for more inclusive societal attitudes towards people living with disabilities in the African context.

The literature on the challenges faced by teachers when implementing inclusive learning in classrooms within the African context also identified insufficient teacher training as impeding the learning of children living with disabilities. In assessing the teachers' skills when teaching children with disabilities in some schools in Ghana, Ocloo (2002) reported that a number of teachers do not have the relevant working knowledge of special education to effectively handle children with disabilities. In addition, Avoke (2005) found that in the Ghanaian context, housemothers who take care of hearing-impaired children do not have the basic qualifications necessary to work with these children. Studying the education of children with disabilities, Acheampong (2016, 2018) found that most Ghanaian special schools at the basic education level lacked teachers trained in special needs education. This undermines the quality of the teaching and learning received by children living with disabilities in both special and inclusive schools.

Insufficient educational resources are other challenges to inclusive education in Africa. Studying the challenges faced by children with hearing impairments learning in Africa, Mapolisa and Tshabalala (2013) found that most schools in Africa were ill-equipped in terms of instructional materials and school infrastructure to enable them to teach children with hearing impairments effectively.

Further research on children's learning in Africa has identified the weak curriculum implementation linked to the legacy of colonisation as a general challenge to enacting relevant education in Africa. The continuous use of colonial languages and the adoption of Western

approaches to teaching and learning tend to alienate the African learners in school, leading to a low level of school achievements (Anlimachie, 2022; Ewulley et al., 2023). The learners' mother tongue (first language) and home are the most critical foundations of a child's social and cognitive development (Asenso, 2013; Yevudey, 2017). Therefore, a state of congruence between the learners' home language and school medium of instruction, especially in the early stages of learning, has been associated with stronger bonds between the learners' home and school learning practices, and better learning outcomes (Anlimachie, 2022; Yevudey, 2017). In studying school and classroom learning in the Global South, Breidlid (2013) found a fundamental problem due to colonisation and alienation as a result of the language of instruction used in schools. The languages used in schools in the Global South are mostly colonial languages. According to Breidlid (2013), the alienation of the learners' mother tongue causes an "epistemological shock, which creates huge learning problems for the students" (p. 55). African research has established a positive link between the use of the learners' home language and improved academic, linguistic and cognitive achievements in school (Afitska et al., 2013; Owu-Ewie, 2006; Yevudey, 2017).

A growing body of literature on the decolonisation of education in Africa, including studies by Anlimachie (2022), Hlalele (2019), and Emeagwali and Dei (2014), calls for the indigenisation of the education policy, school curriculum, school culture and teachers' pedagogies in Africa through culturally responsive strategies. Such strategies acknowledge community skills, knowledge, language, cultural practices and needs in education as potent culturally responsive tools able to dismantle colonial education legacies and improve children's learning experiences while delivering relevant education. The strengths and knowledge of how indigenous African communities have successfully raised their children must be infused into the school curriculum (Emeagwali & Dei, 2014). Discounting the African indigenous epistemology on child-rearing creates a gap between the home, the school and community sustainability, leading to low relevance of education outcomes for communities (Emeagwali & Dei, 2014). Therefore, in formally colonised multi-lingual countries such as Ghana, strategies that can decolonise education by bridging the gap between the learners' home languages and the use of the English language as a medium of instruction in schools, as well as bridging the home-school cultures, are critical for the child's success in the school environment.

The findings from the above theoretical and empirical studies offer a critical link to the basis for this present study to help deepen the understanding of culturally responsive pathways to schooling and education policy. The aim is to dismantle the negative beliefs, practices, misconceptions and traditionally erected social barriers working against the education of people living with disabilities in Ghana and Africa to promote inclusive education for all.

#### **4. Methodology**

This present study's socio-cultural lens informed the need to deploy grassroots research strategies and methods that elicit a deeper meaning of the participants' ways of knowing, understanding, feeling, doing, and being in their cultural setting in ways that are culturally responsive, respectful, and sensitive to the local cultural norms (Anlimachie, 2019).

The study used an explorative case study design within a qualitative research strategy. The choice of qualitative research design stems from the need for an in-depth understanding of the lifeworlds of the participants, which was done by examining the stories of the participants through their own subjective lenses in their natural social environment to address the socio-cultural outlook of the research questions (Anlimachie, 2019). The research design adopted the inductivist, constructionist, and interpretivist approaches to data elicitation and analysis,

resonating with the Ghanaian oral traditional approach to knowledge construction (Anlimachie, 2019, 2022).

The study is a case study on the learning of children with hearing impairments. The study micro-focused on the lived experiences of students, their families, and teachers in navigating the structure of both social and learning challenges (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Purposive, cluster and random sampling methods were combined to select one special basic school and its local community in the Sekyere South District, a rural, low-income local government district in Ghana. The choice of a rural low-income community was in order to study the culture of a Ghanaian community that has retained much of its traditional culture amid colonisation and globalisation.

The accessible population regarded as information-rich participant groups in this study were students, parents, teachers and a community leader. In all, 13 participants were selected across the four participant groups. They included three students (hearing-impaired), three couples who were the parents of the hearing-impaired students (six parents), three teachers in the selected special school for the deaf, and a community leader. All the participants were randomly selected based on their willingness to participate in the study. The study sampling procedure sought to achieve representation of voices across the four participant groups identified as the key community level education stakeholders, and not necessarily achieve representation across the research population. Limiting the study to only 13 participants resonated with the qualitative approach aimed at eliciting a deeper understanding of the study problem rather than merely scratching the surface of the problem by including a larger sample size.

The study methods triangulated semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and document analysis to explore and elicit diverse and collaborative accounts to enhance the reliability and validity of the study results (Creswell & Gattermann, 2021).

Four semi-structured interview guides, one for each participant group, with open-ended probes were designed to elicit in-depth responses about the participants' lived experiences in line with the oral tradition context of the studied rural community (Creswell & Gattermann, 2021). Each of the three participating couples (parents) were interviewed together while the rest were interviewed individually in the main Ghanaian language of the studied community. The interviews were conducted in the main local language of the studied community. The interviews with the hearing-impaired students were done with the support of their parents and teachers, acting as interpreters.

Also, the entire selected school and its community were the sites of field observations and the gathering of document data. Two observational guides were designed to document aspects of households/the community and school/classroom activities and incidents. Each of the observational guides catalogued specific issues observed from each setting to ensure that salient issues were covered within reasonable timelines. Field notes were used to document incidents and behaviours, as well as informal conversations of the observed incidents.

Additionally, relevant document sources of information from the studied school such as textbooks, instructional materials, teacher lesson plans and the school attendance registers were examined to track the available teaching and learning resources and curriculum implementation in the school. Likewise, district level policy documents, national review reports, policy documents, and statistical data relating to education were also collated to ground the study in the right local and national policy and development contexts.

The study used a thematic approach to conduct the qualitative data analysis, informed by the need to inductively allow germane sensitising concepts to emerge from the data to offer a deeper elucidation as to the findings. The interview translation, transcription, coding and analysis procedures were adapted to the Ghanaian oral context in which the data was generated. In analysing the data, the recorded interviews were manually transcribed into systematic text to supplement the detailed jotted notes from the field observations and their meanings. The data was then coded descriptively and inductively into themes, allowing sensitising concepts to emerge which were further consolidated into the broader findings. First, recurring patterns in the themes resulted in the delineation of two major categories and concepts with each having sub-themes. The cogent nature of the emergent themes and concepts facilitated the in-depth analysis of the data and the writing of a detailed qualitative report (Bryman, 2012). The study data reporting strategy sought to project the emergent themes, focusing on the participating groups' lived experiences rather than those of individual participants in tandem with the social constructivist approach to this study (Creswell & Guetterman, 2021).

The study was signposted by sound ethics, informed consent, confidentiality, and navigating the study limitations to achieve reliable and credible results (Creswell & Guetterman, 2021). Ethical clearance was sought from the Ethics Research Council of the University of Oslo in 2018. Study approval was sought from the district education offices, the local studied school and the local community where the study took place. Credible sampling procedures were followed to select the sites and participants for this study. The entry into the study community, the seeking of consent from the participants, and interactions with the community were brokered and carried out in culturally sensitive ways, respecting the values and norms of the community while being empathic to the families with children living with disabilities. The study research approach advances social justice by respecting and projecting the lived realities of socially excluded groups – rural families and people living with disabilities – into strategies for formal education practice in Ghana. My Afro-centric and rural lens viewpoint, augmented by my work experience as a teacher and familiarity with the Ghanaian rural context, strengthened the reliability and validity of the study by representing the right frame of mind and the lived rural cultural experience of the studied participants. Also, this was supplemented by exploring educational experiences across school and home/community sites, and diverse grassroots participating groups, thereby eliciting diverse and joint experiences as well as comparisons and the verification of the emergent findings to enhance the validity and reliability of the study.

## **5. Findings**

### **Socio-cultural challenges faced by the families of persons living with disabilities**

This sub-section presents the data and analysis on the studied community's perceptions and beliefs as well as the induced socio-cultural challenges against families of persons with disabilities. The key concepts that emerged from the distillation of the data relating to the first research question are superstition, a lack of scientific knowledge, social stigmatisation, exclusion and bullying. Stitching together the key concepts, it emerged from the data that socio-culturally, the Ghanaian community studied attributed disability to superstition due to insufficient scientific knowledge linked to a low education level. The mischaracterisation of the causes of disability instigated the challenge of social stigma and the exclusion of families of children living with disabilities in the studied community.

The data revealed that the community mainly attributed the causes of disability to mystical/spiritual connotations such as ancestral curses, punishment and witchcraft. The community leader narrated that traditionally, families in the community have ancestral gods (idols). Families are enjoined to perform regular rituals for these gods. Therefore, if a family fails

to perform the necessary rituals, the gods can punish them by causing them to give birth to children with disabilities. Also, if a pregnant woman quarrels with someone who is a witch or wizard, that person can cause the unborn child to have a disability (Community leader's interview). Another participant, a parent of a child with a disability, affirmed that in their community, children with disabilities are seen as a punishment visited on the families for offending the gods. She did not know what her offence was (Parent's interview).

The data from the study shows that children living with disabilities and their families face the problems of social stigmatisation, exclusion and bullying due to the superstitious attribution to the causes of disability. The participating couples (parents of a child living with hearing-impairment) narrated the following:

*The people call me “Emmum Maame”, meaning that the mother of the hearing-impaired. I am not comfortable with this description. My hearing-impaired boy laments consistently how people of his age (without disabilities) tease him with signals. This is why I did not want to enrol him in school (Parents' interview).*

Another parent shared her experiences regarding her child's schooling as follows:

*I prefer my daughter to be in the house than to go out because the other children do not play with her because they see her as different from them since she cannot hear (Parent's interview).*

Narrating how the community relates to them, a parent of a child living with hearing impairment said that in the studied community, people do not want to associate actively with the families of children living with disabilities because children with disabilities are seen as a punishment for offending the gods. He also noted that the situation was changing as teachers, public health professionals and the NGOs working in the community have made them understand that health factors such as malnutrition, diseases, environmental hazards, and birth complications are the causes. Owing to this new knowledge, people are now relating better to them compared to the past (Parent's interview).

Situating the analysis into the religious model and the broader socio-cultural theoretical lens, the ensuing data suggests that the studied community's superstitious mis-conceptualisation of the causes of disabilities is influenced by their traditional belief system and further fanned by their modern Christianity and Islamic persuasions. This resonates with the findings of Benyah (2024) and Nukunya (2016) regarding the legacies of Christianisation and Islamisation, respectively, superimposed on Ghanaian traditional belief systems and creating a complex interplay of cultures, shaping behaviours and fostering social change. This needs to be understood when mapping any policy interventions to address social problems that matter to all in Ghana.

The superstitious mischaracterisation of the causes of disabilities was also identified as having a link to the insufficient scientific knowledge owing to low family education attainment and insufficient public health education. Documentary (district census) data collated from the local government district office for 2017 indicated that 20% of the adult population in the studied community had no formal education, while 75% had only basic education, and only 4% had at least upper secondary to tertiary level education.

The low level of public health education in the community was identified as having a link to insufficient public health professionals. In recent times, an ongoing activity by a non-

governmental organization (NGO) and the local school community engagement, complemented by the District Public Health Directorate's activities in the area, is where the participants acknowledged an increased public education campaign on disability in the community. Therefore, the scientific causes of disabilities were gradually being embraced. The improvement in scientific knowledge was in turn instigating a gradual positive social change in the acceptance of families of persons living with disabilities, thereby reducing the social stigma and exclusion. The reduction in social stigma and exclusion also triggered increased community and school participation for the persons living with disabilities and their families. Data from the local special school, specifically the school enrolment statistics, showed that an increase in the school's enrolment of persons with visual impairments in general reflected an improvement in age-appropriate school enrolment. The emergent analysis advances both the medical and socio-political model conceptualisations of disabilities that increase the scientific knowledge through education, prompting empowerment, activism, radical changes and new medical solutions in turn promote the physical, social and economic wellbeing of people living with disabilities (Hammell, 2006; Crow, 1996; Amir & Pizzi, 2024). The findings also demonstrate that scientific enlightenment or education can change the negative cultural behaviours towards people living with disabilities to promote inclusion.

Notwithstanding, the above negative socio-culturally induced challenges, the fieldnotes data identified rich cultural assets possessed by the studied community offering resources for children's learning. The community extended family collective way of life and its compound housing/household system (extended family and sometimes different families from different ethnic backgrounds live together in the same large compound house built in rectangular shape with the rooms facing each other) in the research community provided a robust social buffer, diverse skills, and a natural laboratory for children's learning. All the adult household members collectively train and impart important community values and skills to their children. All family members possessed diverse skills, including agriculture, commerce, artistic, oral and food-processing skills. Families were bonded by collective ownership of farmlands, cocoa farms and houses, administered for the benefit of each child (Fieldnotes). These cultural assets provide resources and social buffers for children's learning and rearing. However, there was a need to develop teachers' spatial and cultural competencies to tap into and connect learners' home cultural assets into school learning to promote culturally responsive learning.

### **Learning challenges facing the children with hearing impairments**

This section presents the data and subsequent analysis of the learning challenges faced by the children living with hearing impairments in the present study through the lens of culturally responsive and place-based pedagogy. The key themes that emerged from the distillation of the data to answer research question two were school-home learning/cultural gap, the multi-ethnic/linguistic classroom context, insufficient culturally responsive and experiential learning experiences, insufficient teacher training and professional development, and the lack of instructional materials. Triangulating the ensuing key concepts into an elaborate sensitising concept, the study found a gap between the participating students' school-home learning that limited the culturally responsive, experiential learning, and relevant learning outcomes. This learning gap was attributable to the identified differences in the learners' school-home language of instruction, the multi-ethnic/linguistic classroom context of the studied school, the lack of substantial instructional materials in the main local language, and weak teacher training and professional development.

First, the study identified a gap in the medium of instruction between school-home learning in the special school for the hearing impaired. After observing a classroom lesson in the school, it was identified that the children learn only in the English language. The school's biodata shows

that the children in the class come from different Ghanaian ethnic/linguistic groups. A participating hearing-impaired student expressed a wish to study in her own local language alongside the English language, as follows:

*It would have been good for me to study using both my home and English Signed languages. At home my family uses some sign languages different from what my teachers use to communicate the same things to me. I wish to be able to communicate with people in both Ghanaian and English Signed Languages. I want to learn in my home language to know the things around me in my own community (Student's interview).*

Another participating student added:

*Learning only in the American Signed Language is very restrictive and much different from what my family used to teach me at home. Even most of my family members do not fully understand me when I used the American Signed Language to communicate with them as each culture has different signed languages and gestures (Student's interview).*

Furthermore, the participating students expressed concern about how they find it very difficult to study in a language that is not their mother tongue.

The study also identified the teachers' difficulty in delivering a more culturally responsive instruction owing to the gap between the learners' home and school language of instruction. A participating teacher explained that the medium of instruction in the school is the American Signed Language. There is no developed Ghanaian signed language to be used in the school. The teacher posits that their students start schooling as if they were foreigners in their own land (Teacher's interview). Another participating teacher expressed concerns about the struggles she experiences when looking to use innovative ways to connect the classroom learning to the learners' home environment. She linked the challenge to the paucity of well-development instructional materials in the Ghanaian local languages and the insufficient training received in the Ghanaian local languages as part of their teacher training and school-level professional development (Teacher's interview).

Therefore, while the children received school instructions through a foreign language, at home they received learning instructions through their mother tongue. The data from both the school and classroom observations identified the lack of substantial instructional materials in the main local language of the studied community. The textbooks and other printed reading materials for the hearing-impaired were all in the English language. The insufficient available instructional materials and learning resources did not adequately connect the students to their immediate rural environment. This gap in school-home learning limits the learners' opportunities for culturally responsive learning experiences that connect the school to the home, and the school learning to the learners' lifeworlds. The teachers' efforts to make learning more experiential, culturally responsive and place-based were limited by the lack of local instructional materials and inadequate teacher training in the Ghanaian local languages. This gap runs counter to the tenets of culturally responsive and place-based pedagogy, namely that when the learners' home cultural assets and place exigencies are brought into school, their learning becomes experiential, inclusive, responsive and relevant to the local and global learning needs (Anlimachie, 2022).

## **6. Discussion**

### **Confronting the socio-cultural challenges of families with persons living with disabilities**

The study found that socio-culturally, the studied Ghanaian community attributed disability to superstition, leading to social stigma and the exclusion of the families of children living with disabilities. This finding is supported by the study's theoretical and empirical review suggesting

that a community's beliefs and perceptions of the causes of disability impact on their attitudes and how they relate to and engage with the families of people living with disabilities. Likewise, how a society relates to and engages with the families of persons living with disabilities impact on this vulnerable groups community and school participation (Avoke, 2005; Benyah, 2024; Breidlid, 2013; Ebuenyi et al., 2020; Green et al., 2007; Hammell, 2006).

According to Green et al. (2007), social stigma is not an attribute of the individual who bears the difference. Rather, it resides in the interactions between the person with the difference and others who evaluate that difference in negative terms. Social stigma not only affects the experiences of those in possession of the stigmatising characteristic (their own) but it spreads out to close family members and to others with whom the bearer of the negative difference associates. The Ghanaian community's superstitious attribution of disability instigated negative attitudes and behaviours against the families with children living with hearing impairments. The children living with hearing impairments and their families faced social-cultural problems, specifically stigmatisation, exclusion and bullying. This hostile environment limits their school and community participation. A thriving socio-cultural environment that is empathic to people living with disabilities, is enlightened about the causes and the management of disabilities, and is inclusive ensures that children living with disabilities learn and thrive to realise their full potentials in their own community environment. Stigmatising and excluding people with disabilities and their families are social problems that need to change in Ghana.

Changing the negative narratives on disability in the Ghanaian community and Africa in general must begin with confronting the negative socio-cultural practices and beliefs embedded in African traditional cultures. Superstitions and their attended taboos as part of the African traditional belief system continue to be an important part of African indigenous epistemologies preventing some defiant behaviours, preserving local cultural values, and promoting environmental sustainability (Nukunya, 2016). However, the aspect of the African traditional beliefs system that induces negative practices and behaviours such as stigmatisation against people living with disabilities needs to be questioned. African indigenous scholars, including Emeagwali and Dei (2014), Davids and Waghid (2018), and Anlimachie (2022) challenge African researchers to examine African indigenous knowledge and cultures critically to expose any contradictions and negativity that run counter to modern developmental needs, while preserving the positive traditional values, cultural assets and skills used to promote education and sustainable development. Africa needs to blend these positive indigenous epistemologies with modern scientific knowledge to catch up with the increasing global knowledge economy and to create new sustaining development strategies that meet both local and global needs (Anlimachie et al., 2023a, 2023b).

Public education emerged as a crucial strategy to eliminate the misconceptions associated with the causes of disabilities. It was identified that as public education increases in the studied community, the scientific understanding of the causes of disabilities is gradually being embraced. The gradual acceptance of the scientific delineation of disability is in turn igniting a social change of reducing misconceptions and a decrease in the social stigma associated with people living with disabilities. The finding suggests that public education is a critical strategy used to reduce social exclusion and create education and work opportunities for people living with disabilities as part of creating a sustainable and just community in Ghana. This finding resonates with the broad body of research findings in Ghana, including those of Anlimachie et al. (2020, 2022, 2023a, 2023b) and Foster (1969). They found that the expansion of access to education in Ghana has led to rapidly transformative social changes that are impacting positively on minoritised children's learning and rural development, creating a more just and equitable society in Ghana.

Also, the changing misconceptions on disabilities and behaviour towards people living with disabilities due to public education in the studied community suggests that positive social changes in the learners' home environment are crucial to the learning success of people living with disabilities. According to Vygotsky's social-cultural theory on children's learning, the children's home environment has the most potent effect on their learning and development. Vygotsky (1978) argued that learning is a socially mediated process involving the learners' cultural experiences; that children's development is a niche of interconnectedness that exists between a child's family and their community environment. As argued by Anlimachie et al. (2022, 2023), as part of the culturally responsive schooling success in Ghana, excluding the home and the community environment in which the learning takes place will be deficient in enacting culturally responsive education for minority children. This socio-cultural theorisation of education brings to the fore the need for education stakeholders, including policymakers, education officials, communities and schools, to collaborate to make the community schools and policy environment safe, embrative and supportive for all learners, especially minoritised children such as those living with disabilities, for example, children with hearing impairments. Public education campaigns on children with disabilities as an advocacy and activism tool should be intensified in Ghana to instigate a critical mass voices against any negative socio-cultural practices held against children living with disabilities and their families, focusing on creating an inclusive and socially just society.

### **Navigating the learning challenges of children living with disabilities**

The findings on the teaching and learning challenges of children with hearing impairments that emerged from the study included the disconnection between school-home medium of instruction, the lack of instructional materials and instructions, especially in the learners' mother tongue, coupled with the long-standing challenges of low grant funding leading to insufficient teacher training and inadequate infrastructural development in the special schools for the hearing impaired. All of the aforementioned learning challenges limited the teachers' ability to deliver, and the opportunity of children with hearing impairments to experience culturally responsive and experiential learning in pursuit of fair and relevant learning outcomes.

The medium of instruction of the children's learning is significant as it connects the learners to their own environment and the global context. According to Vygotsky's (19978) socio-cultural theory of learning, children's learning should be contextualised based on their culture and place. Kozulin (2003) adds that psychological tools relating to symbolic signs, artefacts, texts, symbols, formulae, and graphic elucidation cultivated in the learners' home assist individuals in understanding their world better. Each culture breeds a set of psychological tools and situations in which these tools are appropriated. Hence, when children learn in their own language and in their own culture, they can make better associations with these tools in their learning processes to enhance their learning outcomes. Thus, the learners' mother tongue as the first medium of instruction is crucial in relation to their school competency achievements. In the case of the studied school, the American Signed Language (ASL) was used as the only medium of instruction owing to the lack of a well-developed local Ghanaian signed language in the school. This impacted negatively on culturally sustaining and experiential learning.

According to culturally responsive and place-based analysts (including Ladson-Billings, 1995; Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Anlimachie, 2022), developing teachers' spatial and cultural competencies to tap into and connect learners' home environment and its embedded cultural assets to school learning is critical in promoting culturally responsive and place-based schooling. The teachers improvised to make learning experiential, culturally responsive, and place based by innovatively blending the local and the English languages, as well as using self-made instructional materials.

The teachers strive to bring their learners' home environment and its embedded cultural assets, including local language, rich families' histories on survival, collectivist way of child rearing, communal labour, extended families' diversified skills and some progressive cultural beliefs, norms and values, into school to make learning culturally responsive and place relevant. However, the teachers' efforts were limited by the multiethnic/linguistic classroom context and the mismatch between teacher–student linguistic background as well as the lack of well-developed locally-made instructional materials, and inadequate training in the Ghanaian local languages. These gaps were attributed to the low grant funding for the special education sector in Ghana. According to the Ghana Education Sector Analysis report (2018), the special and inclusive education sub-sector is severely underfunded: only 0.6% of total recurrent education expenditure was spent on the inclusive and special education sector (MoE, Ghana, 2018b). Therefore, more attention and investment are needed in Ghanaian schools to improve the learning experiences of children living with disabilities. There is also the need for effective teacher management, including training and postings to match teachers-students linguistic backgrounds.

Also, the study identified the home–school learning gap. The children in the studied community received school instructions through a foreign language while at home, they received learning instructions through their mother tongue. This home–school learning gap did not make the learning continuous and permanent. The lack of affirmation of the learners' home language in school runs counter to promoting culturally responsive, experiential and inclusive learning.

Anlimachie's (2022) PhD study examining successful culturally responsive schooling in a Ghanaian multi-ethnic rural schooling context found that Ghanaian ethnic communities are strongly attached to their local languages. However, they also want their children to be literate in global languages such as English to be able to participate in society as both local and global citizens. The Ghanaian ethnic communities see their local languages as the best medium for transferring the rich traditional epistemologies and values from the older to the younger generation to maintain their sense of identity, belongingness, and survival. At the same time, they associate English language competency with socio-economic privileges and want the younger generation to read, write and speak English as the global language of academia, business and diplomacy alongside their mother tongue (Anlimachie, 2022). Ghana's school language policy requires children to acquire competency in their mother tongue as a medium of instruction up to Grade 3 in order to lay the foundation for cultural competence and to scaffold English language acquisition as a subject of learning and medium of instruction from Grade 4 onwards (Asenso, 2013; Owu-Ewie, 2006). However, the implementation of a Ghanaian school language policy is challenged by a) the growing multilingual classroom contexts, b) a common mismatch between the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of teachers and students, c) weaknesses in aligning the teacher training and posting processes to specific cultural groups in the local communities, and d) the lack of financial resources to train more local language teachers and to develop and provide learning materials in all 79 local languages (Anlimachie, 2022).

The ensuing challenges with the medium of instruction, instructional materials and the gap between the learners' school–home learning in Ghanaian special and inclusive schools for children living with disabilities are partly attributable to the consistent gaps in learning outcomes in reading, writing, and mathematics between students with and without disabilities in Ghanaian pre-tertiary schools (Ewulley et al, 2023; MoE, Ghana, 2018a, p.7).

Therefore, there is a need for a policy intervention to develop all Ghanaian local languages as languages of learning and mediums of instruction, most especially in the early stages of the child's education. Achieving educational justice for Ghanaian children living with hearing

impairments requires the Ghanaian government to make all necessary provisions for every child to receive instructions and learn in his or her local language to scaffold the learning of the English language as a national and global language of academia in Africa. More investment is needed to develop a standardised Ghanaian local sign language and train more teachers in the Ghanaian local languages. Also, school leaders can use local community leaders and artistically skilled community members as resource persons in their school-level professional development and professional learning community's programmes to develop locally relevant and sustainable sign language instructional materials as well as classroom teaching. This will improve teachers' local cultural competencies to enhance the culturally responsiveness of teaching and learning in the studied school. This investment and collaborative school culture can improve the learning outcomes of children with disabilities in the Ghanaian inclusive and special education sub-sector.

## **7. Conclusion and Policy Implications**

The findings on the socio-cultural challenges faced by families with persons living with disabilities revealed that in the socio-cultural and historical contexts of the case study, people attributed disabilities to superstition or spiritual issues. The mischaracterisation of the causes of disabilities exposed children living with disabilities and their families to social stigmatisation and exclusion, limiting their full community and school participation.

Also, the broad findings of this study on the learning challenges faced by children living with disabilities identified a glaring gap between the participating students' school-home learning that has limited culturally responsive schooling, experiential learning experiences, and relevant learning outcomes. This learning gap has links to the differences in the learners' school-home language of instruction, the multi-ethnic/linguistic classroom context of the studied school, the lack of substantial instructional materials in the main local language of the community and weak teacher training and professional development in the Ghanaian languages and culture. Inadequate teachers' spatial and cultural competencies contrasting with the learners' rich home cultural assets also contributed to the home-school learning gap.

Therefore, the study findings' implications for both policy and school practice suggest that in order to confront the socio-cultural challenges faced by families with persons living with disabilities, there is a need for an intensified public education campaign on the causes and management of disabilities. This education and advocacy/activism tool is critical to instigate a mass action against any negative socio-cultural practices perpetuated against families with persons living with disabilities. Evidence from the study showed that an improvement in public education increases the scientific knowledge of and approach to disabilities. In turn, the scientific enlightenment reduces the social stigma and exclusion, creating an inclusive safe and welcoming environment for the children living with disabilities to thrive in the teaching and the learning environment.

Also, to leapfrog the learning challenges faced by children living with disabilities in Ghanaian schools, the teaching and learning in Ghanaian schools need to be more culturally responsive, experiential and inclusive to be able to meet local and global needs. To achieve this, there is a need for a community-based approach to teacher training and management to build the teachers' cultural and Ghanaian local language competencies. Teacher management strategies, including training and postings, must strive to align the teacher-student linguistic backgrounds. This alignment can mitigate the negative, while leveraging the positive cultural assets in Ghana's increasingly multi-ethnic/lingual classroom context. To improve the cultural responsiveness of the learning experiences for the hearing-impaired children in Ghanaian pre-tertiary schools, there is a further need for policy intervention to develop the Ghanaian local languages and its

attendant instructional materials as means and media of instruction to complement the English language-only medium of instruction at present during the study period.

In all, a deeper grassroots collaborative school culture that socialises students, parents, teachers, community leaders, district education officials, the government and its non-equal partners such as NGOs can mobilise local cultural assets. These include learners' home knowledge, local language, histories of survival, collectivist way of child rearing, communal labour, extended families diversified skills and progressive cultural beliefs, norms and values. Blending these with government and donor fundings, resources, support, plus school-level teacher professional development and professional learning community and rallying a critical mass of people will enact a more culturally responsive schooling and inclusive schooling for children living with disabilities.

Generalisation of the findings of this study is limited by the study scope of a single research community and school sites, plus the fact that there were only 13 study participants. Therefore a future broader multi-sited study across all the 260 local government districts, and the two main cultural regions (the Christian-dominated south and the Islamic-dominated north) of Ghana will offer a broader and comparative perspectives of the problem. However, the multi-ethnic and multi-religious nature of the selected studied community, mimicking the realities of the present-day local communities in Ghana inundated by increasing migration and the study's focus on school as well as community cultures, plus the commonality of the study problem across all local communities in Ghana, make the findings and their policy implications valid to the entire Ghana, and elsewhere in Africa with a similar context.

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