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Exploring narratives of education: disabled young people's experiences of educational institutions in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Disabled young people in many low and middle-income countries experience significant levels of educational exclusion due to disabling social and physical environments and are more likely to be illiterate than their non-disabled peers. Most social sciences and development literature, however, tends to homogenise the educational trajectories of disabled young people and focuses predominantly on the perspectives of educationalists, development experts and carers in assessing educational needs and institutions. Consequently, the experiences of young people across multiple categories of social difference, and their agency in shaping their own educational trajectories, remain largely unknown. This article contributes to filling this gap by exploring the educational narratives of young people with different impairments in mainstream, special and integrated schools in Ghana. The article shows how exploring individual narratives provides new insights into the educational needs of and 'appropriate' education for disabled young people in the Global South.

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Points of interest

- The literature on disability and education is largely based on the perspectives of educationalists and disability professionals in the Global North.
- The individual experiences of disabled young people in different educational institutions in the Global South are largely unknown.
- Based on education-specific and impairment-specific narratives, this article provides an understanding of how disabled young people in Ghana experience and assess different types of education, including mainstream, special and integrated education.
- The focus on individual narratives sheds light on young people's agency in shaping their education trajectories.
- The article's focus on individual narratives in various types of educational institutions generates new insights into debates on 'appropriate' education and different educational needs of disabled children and young people in the Global South.

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Introduction

Education is central to the lives of all children and young people, and schools are crucial spaces for acquiring valuable skills and knowledge deemed important for their economic and social lives (Ansell 2005). Debates surrounding education in the Global South generally focus on issues of access and participation, and its importance with regard to poverty alleviation (World Bank 2011). Despite considerable improvements in increasing primary school enrolment and reducing gender disparities in many countries in the Global South, the education of disabled young people continues to face significant challenges due to disabling social and physical environments (Chataika et al. 2012; Filmer 2008; Singal 2010). Although accurate data on the education of disabled children and young people in the Global South are scarce, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) estimates that 98% of these young people do not attend school and are more likely to be illiterate as compared with their non-disabled peers (UN 2010). Although this figure is debatable, it highlights the urgent need to include disability more effectively in international education agendas and to implement appropriate models of education that are context specific. Disabled young people's limited access to education and lower educational attainments than their non-disabled peers significantly affects other areas of their lives, which complicates achieving adulthood status (Gregorius 2014).

Within the international development community, Education for All (EFA) and inclusive education agendas have been considered suitable approaches for responding to the educational challenges facing disabled children and young people in the Global South. Rooted in a human rights perspective, EFA seeks to ensure that every child and adult receives good quality, basic education (Miles and Singal 2010). Since 2002, EFA has actively promoted the inclusion of disabled people in its action plans (Miles and Singal 2010). Inclusive education aims '… to respond to students' diversity in order to increase their participation and reducing exclusion within and from education …' (UNESCO 2009, 1). Furthermore, inclusive education has recently been included in one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of 2015 (UN 2015). Despite the positive developments these frameworks have effected in international education and disability agendas and campaigns (e.g. raising government and community awareness), in practice disabled people in the Global South often remain excluded from any formal education (Filmer 2008; Groce and Bakhshi 2011; Miles and Singal 2010). In recent years, there has also been a small number of studies challenging the appropriateness of inclusive education for Global South contexts (Armstrong, Armstrong, and Spandagou 2011; Singal and Muthukrishna 2014).

AQ1

Generally, the educational needs of disabled children and young people and how these should be met remain determined by educationalists, psychologists, health practitioners and other disability experts (Barnes and Mercer 2010). Recently, however, there has been an increased interest in exploring the educational narratives of disabled young people (Curtin and Clarke 2005; Davis and Watson 2001; Diez 2010; Llewellyn 2000; Tangen 2008; Vlachou and Papananou 2015). These studies show how investigating the educational experiences of disabled children and young people is crucial in generating inclusion and finding the most appropriate ways of meeting their educational needs. As these studies focus predominantly on young people in high and middle-income countries in the Global North, the educational experiences of disabled young people in the Global South remain largely unknown. This article seeks to address this gap by reporting on a major qualitative study of

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the transitions to adulthood of disabled youth in Accra, Ghana, including their educational trajectories.

Theoretically, this article is embedded in critical youth and disability studies, which focus on the voices of individuals and conduct research with rather than on youth and disabled people (van Blerk 2006; Goodley 2013). Such critical approaches seek to explore the role of the individuals' agency in shaping their own lives and the changing socio-cultural contexts that inform the understandings of concepts of youth and disability. A key aspect of these studies is disentangling the complex interrelationships between power relations, authority and representation that are manifested in the dichotomous conceptualisations of young people/adult and disabled/non-disabled (Best 2007; Goodley 2013).

AQ2

The Ghanaian context

Since 1945, the Government of Ghana has shown commitment to improve access to education and universalise basic education for all through introducing a number of educational reforms and policies, including: Universal Primary Education, 1945; Accelerated Development Plan, 1951; and National Education Act, 1961 (Akyeampong et al. 2007). In order to address the needs of disabled children and young people, 'special education' emerged in Ghana more than 50 years ago during the early post-independence period (Gyimah, Sugden, and Pearson 2009; Ocloo and Subbey 2008). Although a few special schools started to operate during that time, generally the post-independence educational system paid little attention to the particular education needs of disabled people (Obeng 2007). With the government's increased recognition of the importance of education, free and compulsory education for all children of school-going age was pursued and enacted through the National Education Act in 1961, which included children with special education needs and disabilities (Gyimah, Sugden, and Pearson 2009). The number of segregated special schools then rose during the 1970s and 1980s in response to a growing national recognition of the need for additional educational services including students with special needs (Anthony 2009). Since 1985, the Ghana Education Service's Special Education Division has been responsible for the provision of services and facilities for children and young people with impairments and special education needs at the pre-tertiary level (GES 2013). It caters particularly for people with bodily disabilities, including physical, visual and hearing impairments. The majority of segregated schools that operate specifically for disabled students are located in urban areas and focus primarily on students with profound physical and learning impairments (Casely-Hayford and Lynch 2003; McMillan 2012).

In addition to special education, in recent years Ghana has increasingly recognised the importance of inclusive education, whereby the regular education system is considered to be responsible for educating all children (UNESCO 2009). The Government of Ghana is committed to provide equal education opportunities for all children and youth with special needs, with relatively recent education policies highlighting the importance of access, participation, quality and inclusion (Agbenyega 2006). The Special Education Division has initiated a number of projects to realise the Ministry of Education's vision of an inclusive education system (Gyimah and Vanderpuye 2009; MoE 2012, 31). Despite significant policy initiatives such as community awareness creation, training of teachers and restructuring facilities, barriers remain to achieving this vision, including disabling social attitudes, physical barriers (especially the inaccessibility of public buildings),

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inadequate assessment facilities, the inaccessibility and inflexibility of the curriculum, and inadequate training for teachers (GoG 2004; Danso, Owusu-Ansah, and Alorwu 2012). Ghana still predominantly practices a segregated and institutionalised approach to the provision of special education services, which prevents many disabled children and youth from reaching their full potential and being included in society (Ocloo and Dogbe 2006). In a recent study on the impact of education in shaping the lives of disabled young people in Ghana, Singal et al. (2015, 4) found that despite the expansion of an inclusive education agenda in the country, disabled students' enrolment in mainstream basic schools has significantly decreased.

Research design: combining qualitative methods

This article draws on nine months of fieldwork conducted in the Greater Accra Region in Ghana between 2011 and 2012, which aimed to explore the transitions to adulthood of disabled youth, including their educational trajectories. In order to capture the complex trajectories of disabled young people with varying categories of social difference (including impairment type, gender, age and socio-economic status), multiple qualitative methods were combined. The multiple-methods approach has been described as beneficial in destabilising unequal power relations between the researcher and young participants (Langevang 2007) and disabled people (Gregorius 2015; Wickenden and Kembhavi-Tam 2014), and can be particularly advantageous in understanding social phenomena such as attitudes towards disability. The methods employed to elicit information on young people's educational trajectories included life-story interviews, participant observation, focus group discussions and solicited diaries.

Life-story interviews were the main method of data collection to facilitate the process of disentangling the complex, reversible and protracted character of young people's transitions to adulthood in the Global South (Jeffrey 2010; Langevang 2007). This research method finds additional value in disability research in promoting the expert roles of disabled people in their own lives, and facilitates understandings of the changing character of the disability experience during the life course (Morgan 2001; Seddon, Lang, and Daines 2001). In total, 42 youth with disabilities (20 women and 22 men) aged between 16 and 35[1] with different physical and sensory (visual and hearing) impairments participated in life-story interviews. Educational narratives were both retrospective and current, depending on the age of the participant as well as their current educational situation.

Overt participant observation was used to explore the meanings of different educational institutions in young people's everyday lives. The researcher spent extended periods of time at a special school (for deaf students) and an integrated school (integrating blind and low vision students), and interacted with both students and teachers to complement the information gathered from individual interviews. Despite not being able to observe participants in more educational institutions, spending time at both schools generated valuable insights into how processes of inclusion and exclusion vary across different educational institutions.

Participant observations at both schools were supplemented by focus group discussions. At the special school, two focus group discussions with three female and three male students were conducted respectively in order to highlight gendered accounts of young people's special school experiences. At the integrated school, one focus group discussion with two

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female and three male visually impaired students was conducted to highlight their impairment-specific educational trajectories in the integrated school environment.

The study also employed solicited diaries to shed light on the educational trajectories of five (three female and two male) hearing-impaired students at the special school. Solicited diaries were used to physically remove the researcher and the interpreters from the research process. Each participant was provided with a pen and a diary and asked to write down anything relating to their daily activities in and outside school, the experience of their hearing impairment, their social interactions at school, the place they spent time in, situations in which they felt comfortable or uncomfortable, or anything they wanted to discuss concerning their lives. These young people had five weeks to complete the task, which included three weeks of term time (life at boarding school) and two weeks of vacation (life at home).

Data management

The large amount of data collected was organised into smaller segments associated with specific education-related research questions. This process was facilitated by the use of the qualitative data analysis software package NVivo 9. Key themes were organised according to descriptive and analytic codes. Coding the data helped to support the study's conceptual underpinning and to generate new insights from the data collected. Memos and identified relationships between the codes were closely linked with suitable secondary data.

Ethical considerations

All participants were informed that their participation was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any point without giving an explanation. The participants' names have been replaced with pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. To respond to unequal power relations between the researcher and the participants, selected research participants were involved in the research design and conduct. In order to find ethical solutions that were appropriate for the Ghanaian context, the leaders of specific disabled people's organisations, teachers, research assistants and disabled young people themselves were regularly consulted to discuss and elaborate on context-specific approaches for data collection and analysis. Critical reflexivity was exercised throughout the research process through regular and close interaction with all stakeholders involved. Overall, using multiple qualitative methods proved beneficial in disentangling the complexities of disabled young people's educational experiences and helped address the varying abilities of participants with different impairment types (Gregorius 2015). This also enabled disabled young people to gain ownership of the project (e.g. through solicited dairies) and create platforms (e.g. through focus group discussions) that enabled them to voice their own opinions. The findings of disabled young people's educational trajectories are organised under three themes, reflecting their experiences in mainstream, special and integrated schools.

Young people's experiences of different educational institutions

The study explored both current and retrospective experiences across different educational institutions (mainstream, integrated and special schools), at both the primary and secondary levels. This article uses particular examples of key experiences relating to either enabling or

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disabling social and physical environments in each type of educational institution, which serve to illustrate their effect on young people's educational trajectories and personal development. Specific 'coping' strategies participants employed to negotiate such disabling environments are also highlighted.

Mainstream education

In the Global North, and increasingly in the Global South, being enrolled in mainstream education is perceived as a facilitator to promoting social inclusion for disabled young people and is commonly accepted as the most appropriate form of education (Cooney et al. 2006; Curtin and Clarke 2005; Miles and Singal 2010). However, the attendance at mainstream schools for participants in this study was mainly due to the lack of adequate alternatives that suited their individual needs, as similarly noted elsewhere (Singal et al. 2011). Finding a mainstream school that can accommodate and accept a disabled child was highly challenging, as conversations with participants and their parents revealed. Reasons for this related to teachers' inexperience of working with disabled students, misconceptions about disability, as well as inadequately equipped and inaccessible teaching facilities. Generally, decisions about schooling were taken by parents and carers, without the involvement of disabled children and young people themselves. These decisions were largely influenced by conceptualisations of disability, socio-economic status and access to information; factors which were intricately intertwined.

Being the only pupil with an impairment was a common experience among those participants who had attended mainstream schools (both at the primary and secondary levels). The everyday school life of participants at mainstream schools was predominantly influenced by discrimination, exclusion, dependence and emotional and physical violence by students and teachers who 'othered' disabled young people based on bodily differences. However, these experiences differed across impairment types.

Atsu (male, aged 24, physically impaired) reported on the treatment he received when he reconvened secondary school after a one-year break due to the onset of his impairment at the age of nine:

> By that time, I didn't have a wheelchair and I had to crawl everywhere on my hands. Because I was dragging my legs behind me, it made a sound and my colleagues [students without impairment] called me 'sweeper': you know my legs made the sound when you sweep … I don't know why, but some of them [students without impairment] didn't like me … and sometimes they kicked me in the face. You know I was much lower than them and I couldn't run away; that's why. That was very painful … I, I, I suffered a lot.

This illustrates the experienced level of social exclusion, marginalisation, and physical and emotional violence that Atsu encountered within the mainstream school environment. He was, however, able to destabilise the misconception of some of his peers, as highlighted in the following statement:

> He [God] has given me that intelligence and I am able to teach them [classmates], even though I am in this situation … It brings some kind of equality … We [he and his classmates] sit together; I sit with them. So it is like they irritate me, but they like me in one way or the other, because in class I was very brilliant. Even though I was in this situation [physically impaired], I was very brilliant in class.

Through a strong belief in God, Atsu was able to regain trust in his abilities and put all his efforts into his scholastic performance. He was also able to regain a certain level of respect

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through demonstrating his academic skills. This example suggests that perceptions about disability in this mainstream school were fluid and could be destabilised through Atsu demonstrating his agency.

Most participants with physical impairments who reported their experiences in mainstream schools, however, had comparably lower self-esteem and little faith in their own abilities, and tended to internalise their stigmatised and excluded social positioning. They also had different coping strategies to deal with such situations. Ali (male, aged 21, physically impaired) shared one particular experience that illustrates some of his social interactions with other students within a mainstream school setting:

> If, like, I want to go to toilet, sometimes they [classmates without impairment] were shouting at me, that I am disturbing them. They were making fun, but sometimes I don't understand them, they won't come to me at all … Honestly, I always feel lonely and sad that I am in this situation [physically impaired]. I wish I can move and do other things as my school friends and that makes me very sad. Now, I don't even have friends here [in school].

Further conversations with Ali revealed that he deliberately withdrew from social interactions in an attempt to avoid discrimination or humiliating experiences. His quote also suggests that he considered his impairment as the main reason for his limited social interactions with his peers. He even considered quitting school as an option to escape experiences of exclusion and discrimination.

Although the predominantly disabling environment at mainstream schools made some physically impaired students want to quit school, changing schools was another strategy to escape discrimination and stigmatisation, as demonstrated by Ruth (female, aged 29, physically impaired) who talked about how she experienced mainstream primary school:

> The children [at primary mainstream school] are laughing at you and I came back and told my parents that I won't go to school again and they said no. And then they moved me from that school to another.

When asked about whether the disability-related discrimination stopped at the new school, Ruth answered:

> They [students without impairment] didn't stop [to tease Ruth], but some teacher encouraged me that I should not think about them, because it [education] is my future … So I forced myself to go [to school]. When they are laughing at me, I don't care about them. I forced myself and complete the JSS [Junior Secondary School].

This quote shows that Ruth deliberately withdrew from social interactions in an attempt to escape the discriminatory mainstream school environment and to achieve positive educational outcomes. It also demonstrates that although negative social interactions persisted especially between Ruth and her peers, a teacher played a pivotal role in supporting her to complete Junior Secondary School. This highlights the need for increased emotional support for disabled students who experience discrimination within the mainstream school environment. Such support is likely to enhance these students' learning experience and can contribute to positive educational outcomes.

Differently to physically impaired participants who needed assistance mainly to navigate across the disabling physical environment, visually impaired students attending mainstream schools highlighted that they needed support from their sighted peers and teachers predominantly in order to follow the curriculum. Students without impairments were generally presented as being rather hesitant or even unwilling to support their disabled peers during

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class. The experience of frequent rejection when needing support led to Mabel (female, aged 21, visually impaired) feeling uncomfortable approaching her class mates:

> So you know when you ask the person to help you [e.g., with reading and repeating what the teachers writes on the blackboard] the person start shouting at you: I can't, I can't. I have other things to do. Then I have to sit down quietly.

Some visually impaired young people mentioned that finding assistance required constant effort, which reduced their energy for learning and education and thus impacted negatively on their educational outcomes. This situation was aggravated by the lack of appropriate teaching material (e.g. books in Braille) and the inexperience of teachers to work with visually impaired students. These students also reported that a large amount of their time within mainstream school was filled with 'just sitting around alone, not doing anything'.

Hearing-impaired participants mentioned that the main challenge of attending mainstream school was the difficulty of communicating with peers and teachers without impairment, as similarly observed elsewhere (Gregory ~~et al.~~ 1995; Valentine and Skelton 2003). AQ3 Neither teachers nor students knew sign language and their interactions were based mainly on written communication and speech reading. This was perceived as tedious and hindered the social interaction of hearing-impaired students. Furthermore, not being able to communicate effectively affected these participants' performance in school and maintained the feeling of being different. Albert, for instance, considered 'integration' to be his 'obligation' AQ4 rather than the responsibility of students and teachers within the mainstream school:

> I was the only deaf in that school [public primary mainstream school], so I have to integrate. […]. But the teachers cannot sign, I was not having an interpreter, I was not hearing what was going on, so I had to quit.

Assessing mainstream education mainly in negative terms has been observed in a similar study in Ghana (Singal et al. 2015) and highlights the urgent need for mainstream schools to create an enabling and inclusive environment that addresses the different educational and social needs of disabled students. The experience of mainstream education for the participants of this study demonstrates that their needs for inclusion, supportive teachers and students, and adequate infrastructure are not met, which significantly complicates their educational trajectories. Exploring the narratives of disabled young people with different impairment types also highlights the heterogeneity of their educational challenges and needs, which should inform discourses of disability and education.

Special education

All participants with sensory impairments (12 with visual impairments and four with hearing impairments) were at some point in their lives enrolled in special education at secondary level. These special education institutions were boarding schools, and because of their limited number in the country were often situated a long distance away from the participants' family homes. Decisions about being enrolled in special education were often influenced by the parents' and disabled young people's knowledge about special schools and conceptualisations of disability and special education, as Joseph (male, aged 25, visually impaired) explained during an interview:

> I would say that they [parents] didn't know anything about it, about the blind education … So, it is like they were feeling reluctant to send me because they thought when they send me

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> there [special school for persons with visual impairments], I will be totally blind. So I stayed in the house for more than seven years [after becoming visually impaired].

In contrast to disabled young people's accounts of mainstream education, experiences in special schools and their impact on education trajectories were assessed largely in positive terms. The time at specials schools constituted crucial periods in the lives of participants where the commonality of being impaired brought about both positive identity formations and belief in one's own abilities. This is crucial for achieving positive educational outcomes (Burchardt 2005). Participants' previous experience of disability-related discrimination and marginalisation at mainstream schools and in broader society was modified by their new interactions with other impaired students and specialised teachers in special schools. Charles (male, aged 29, visually impaired) highlighted how attending a special school for visually impaired students in his early 20s has changed his life:

> I was happy when I was sent to the School for the Blind. Normally, I was thinking that I was the only one who has the problem [being visually impaired] … I have not seen anybody else [who is visually impaired] until I went to the School for the Blind and I have realised that there are a lot of people who are in this condition … [Since then] I consider myself as somebody who is [more] fortunate than others who don't see at all.

Josephine (female, aged 18, visually impaired) emphasised how the role of disability experts and the interaction with role models in the special school had positively affected her self-esteem that was damaged due to her experiences of disability-related emotional and physical violence in her home environment:

> I came to the School for the Blind … we had a counsellor there. He was always advising me. … [At the special school] I got to a point I have been hearing and seeing people …, the blind doing this, the [blind] lawyer [came as motivational speaker to the special school], the guy who reads news on TV. I said to myself that I can do it, if they have also done it … I can also make it life … So it is better now.

Charles's and Josephine's examples show how counselling, the work of positive role models and the interaction with other impaired students within the special school environment can restore disabled students' self-value and faith in their own abilities, which is crucial to achieving positive educational outcomes. Participants attending special schools reported that they did not experience such valuable interactions at mainstream schools, where they predominantly felt lonely and misunderstood and were discriminated against by teachers and peers.

Furthermore, boarding facilities were also considered discrimination-free spaces and unique opportunities to escape the disability-related physical and emotional violence that some participants experienced in their home environments, as Josephine's story exemplifies:

> My stepmother was maltreating me [mental and physical abuse]. When people come to the house she locks me up in the room. She doesn't want people to see me. According to her, she said it was a disgrace, so it is a shame her stepdaughter being blind and when people come to see me blind in the house.

Experiences of disability-related discrimination and stigmatisation within the home environment were not impairment specific. In a focus group discussion with three hearing-impaired female students at a School for the Deaf, when asked about experiences of discrimination in their home environment one student noted:

> Because we are deaf sometimes the society neglects us. Because we are deaf, they think we can't do anything, so there is no respect. Sometimes when my mum sends me to the market

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> to get food, people get angry at me, they shout and they don't give you what you want – it's difficult. That makes me feel bad.

These examples explain why special schools were important spaces for those disabled young people who were 'othered' and experienced different levels of discrimination and stigmatisation in their home environments. However, Linda (female, aged 18, hearing impaired) highlighted that attending a boarding school could also be emotionally challenging at times, as expressed in her diary:

> Today was a bad day, because I expect [expected] a visit from my family, but they did not show up. I felt no good. They always say they are busy. (Linda's diary entry, 18 February 2012)

Despite the negative feelings Linda experienced, she considered the new social interactions in school to be very important because it gave her the attention she missed from her family. Formal education was still of primary importance for her, which becomes apparent in another of her diary entries:

> I and a few students remained at school without going home for the mid-term break. When all the students left for home, the surrounding [surroundings] of the school was [were] peaceful and there was no disturbance to focus [focusing] on my study. (Linda's diary entry 6 March 2012)

Students also reported that their enrolment in the School for the Deaf and the School for the Blind enabled them to learn sign language, and Braille and walking with the white cane, respectively. Participants noted that teaching facilities at special schools were significantly better equipped (although still insufficient) for the needs of impaired students than mainstream schools. For hearing-impaired students, learning sign language and being able to communicate more effectively increased their self-confidence and faith in their own abilities. For instance, informal conversations with Isaac (male, aged 19, hearing impaired) revealed that he used to be less confident before attending a special school due to the experience of disability-related discrimination in his home environment. His belief in his own abilities has improved significantly since then, as the following diary entry suggests: 'I do very well at school by working hard, not because I am deaf. School is challenging for everyone' (Isaac's diary entry, 20 March 2012).

Visually impaired students highlighted that learning Braille was crucial for improving their educational achievements. Learning how to walk with the white cane increased their mobility and subsequently their independence, which participants considered important for their personal and educational development.

Despite the predominantly positive assessment of special education for the participants' personal and educational development, students also highlighted disadvantages of special education. For instance, a number of students at both special schools lamented the limited curriculum, especially with regard to natural sciences and mathematics. At the School for the Deaf, participants explained that it is difficult for teachers with limited sign language skills to teach mathematics. This was considered disadvantageous for their educational trajectories, because it would reinforce the difference between them and their non-disabled peers and generate challenges in competing for higher education admission and securing employment in the future. The additional time students needed to learn either sign language or Braille in special schools was also considered detrimental to their educational and personal trajectories.

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Integrated education

Six of the visually impaired participants of this study were enrolled in an 'integrated' secondary school, where blind and low-vision students are taught in the same class as their sighted peers. Integration is often considered an interim step towards inclusion by providing additional adaption and support to enable the impaired student to 'fit in with social and academic life of the school' (Rieser 2002, 132). The boundary between integration and inclusion is often blurred. For visually impaired participants who had previously attended special education, their transition to the 'integrated' school marked a significant change in their educational trajectories. Although the school is meant to be an 'integrated' institution, participants highlighted that there was very limited additional support and adaptation for blind and low-vision students. Visually impaired students lamented the nearly complete absence of books and other teaching materials in Braille. Similar to experiences in mainstream schools, this increased their dependence on sighted students, as Joseph noted during a focus group discussion: 'We [visually impaired students] have to look for a sighted colleague to read for us … but at times, the person will feel reluctant to come … you will find it difficult to get someone to assist you'.

Further discussions revealed that teachers were generally not trained to work with visually impaired students and therefore had little capacity to respond adequately to these students' needs. Visually impaired students noted that teachers generally listened to their concerns and issues relating to the absence of adequate teaching materials, but were unable to help due to the school's lack of resources. The lack of appropriate teaching materials and the increased dependence on sighted peers were also perceived as the main reasons why visually impaired students generally needed longer to complete their education than their non-disabled peers. This affected visually impaired students' educational and personal development in negative terms, as Joseph highlighted:

> If not because of this impairment, I should have also been where they [non-disabled students] are. Because of this [impairment] … it has caused something negative in my life … When I see them [non-disabled peers], it makes me feel very, very bad.

Furthermore, the participants' experiences at the 'integrated' school were significantly influenced by inaccessible and disabling physical environments. This restricted the mobility of these students and increased their dependence on their sighted peers for assistance. Finding someone who can guide a visually impaired student was a difficult task. Participants reported that this was due to the relatively high level of disability-related stigmatisation and discrimination by non-disabled students, as James (male, aged 21, visually impaired) experienced:

> We live with them [students without visual impairments] in the school here, but some of them are still, some are even completing next year, but they still don't want to come closer to us [visually impaired students], because they think it [disability] is contagious … Even in this school, we call this school 'integrated' school. But the integrated school is not integrated.

This segregation was also noted by the author, as the following field work diary excerpt demonstrates:

> Each time I have been there [at the integrated school], I felt that there was an invisible boundary between sighted and visually impaired students. Visually impaired students seem to be together most of the time, but I haven't seen them interact much with their sighted peers. However, teachers and visually impaired students seem to interact more. (Field diary entry, 15 March 2012)

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Similarly to participants' narratives of mainstream education, these examples suggest that experiences within the 'integrated' school environment are not free from discrimination and segregation. Being enrolled at the 'integrated' school constituted a significant change from the special school environment where visually impaired students felt included and accepted. However, the common experiences of disability-related exclusion and marginalisation within the 'integrated' school environment brought about feelings of togetherness and support among the visually impaired students. Participants reported spending most of their time together with visually impaired students, learning from each other, providing emotional support and trying to remove the social barriers that existed within the school. A number of visually impaired students even formed an 'advocacy group' that aimed at removing disabling barriers within the 'integrated' school and beyond, as Faustina (female, aged 17, visually impaired) and James explained during a focus group discussion:

> [We formed an] advocating group for blind education. […]. And the short-term aim is creating awareness about our capabilities. … We want the sighted colleagues to believe in our objectives and that they are willing to help, they should also be absorbed in our association, so they will also help us in the education.

Forming such a group based on a common disability identity highlights these students' agency and their own approach for destabilising disabling practices and barriers to integration and inclusion within the school grounds and beyond. It also suggests that the interaction between disabled peers and their mutual support, which differed from participants' narratives of mainstream education, can promote feelings of inclusion and togetherness, which is crucial for disabled students' learning and personal development. The effect of a common disability identity on the emotional well-being and confidence of the students was also reflected upon in the author's observations, as the following field diary excerpt demonstrates:

> The students were very engaged in the focus group discussion, especially when they told me about their own advocacy group. The students felt a high degree of ownership over this project. The prospect of changing perceptions about the abilities of disabled people seemed one of the biggest motivations to continue with this project. Students felt very confident that their advocacy group will bring about attitude change within their school environment and beyond. (Field diary entry, 22 March 2012)

Conclusion

This article explored current and retrospective educational narratives of students with different impairment types at mainstream, special and 'integrated' schools in Ghana. Combining multiple qualitative methods that respond to the varying abilities and preferences of the participants yielded a rich amount of data about the varying educational trajectories of disabled young people in different education institutions. While this research lays no claim to being quantitatively representative and the shortcomings of a rather small study are recognised, its findings have the potential to inform discourses of the educational needs and 'appropriate' education for disabled students in Ghana, and the Global South more generally.

The study has shown that access to education is determined by complex interrelations between socio-economic, socio-cultural and socio-spatial factors. Decisions about education were generally made by parents or carers with little inclusion of the disabled child in the

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decision-making process. Parents often lacked access to information about educational options for their disabled children or had misconceptions about different education types.

The educational narratives of the participants significantly varied across education types. The level of discrimination and stigmatisation was particularly high within mainstream schools and was informed largely by misconceptions about the abilities of disabled students. The narratives of disabled young people also revealed the heterogeneous character of significant educational experiences at mainstream schools depending on impairment types. The accounts of physically impaired students largely revolved around the disabling social environment and its predominantly negative effect on their personal development (e.g. low self-esteem and little faith in their own abilities). These students highlighted the importance of supportive teachers and the belief in God in helping to restore self-belief and achieve positive educational outcomes, including completing secondary education. The theme that dominated the narratives of visually impaired students at mainstream schools was their increased dependence on sighted colleagues to follow the curriculum and the lack of appropriate teaching materials. Inevitably, this situation generated negative educational outcomes. Hearing-impaired participants highlighted communication challenges as major barrier to interact with peers and teachers and achieve positive educational outcomes. Participants used a variety of strategies to escape the disabling social and physical environments, including limiting their social interactions, changing schools or even dropping out of schools. The effects of these strategies on the participants' educational development varied depending on their levels of self-esteem and the support they received within the schools and beyond. Furthermore, the common experience of being the only impaired student in a mainstream school made it difficult to challenge misconceptions revolving around disability, as many impaired students tended to internalise their stigmatised identity. However, disabling attitudes could be changed by those participants with comparatively strong beliefs in their abilities. Overall, disabled educational experiences at mainstream schools demonstrate that inclusive education can only be achieved when both disabling social and physical structures are removed. There is also the need for non-disabled students and teachers to offer emotional support and assistance in order to promote inclusive practices, as similarly noted elsewhere (Vlachou and Papananou 2015).

Contrary to mainstream education, the participants' experiences of special education were dominated by feelings of inclusion, acceptance and positive educational outcomes. This was due to an enabling environment with supportive social interactions and some provision of adequate teaching materials, as similarly reported elsewhere (Kristensen et al. 2006). The enrolment in special schools constituted a significant change from the social environment at mainstreams schools and in their home environments, where participants were often the only disabled person and experienced disability-related discrimination and stigmatisation. For most impaired students, being enrolled in a special school was the first time they interacted with other disabled people. This was a unique opportunity, generating feelings of togetherness and faith in one's abilities, which disabled young people perceived crucial in becoming independent and achieving positive educational outcomes. Hence, this article argues that special schools, despite being commonly criticised in the Global North for maintaining segregation and disability-related prejudices (Thomas 1997; Thomas and Loxley 2007), can constitute crucial spaces where positive identity formations take place. This finding contributes to the very limited body of research on special schools in the Global South (Kristensen et al. 2006; Lang and Murangira 2009; Lynch and Lund 2011). Although

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these studies highlight the importance of special school for the educational development of disabled students, their main focus on the perspective of educationalists, disability experts and carers fails to capture the experiences of disabled children and young people themselves.

Similar to mainstream education, experiences at the 'integrated' school were characterised by disabling social and physical environments. These disabling environments increased the participants' dependence on non-disabled peers. However, the increased interaction and feeling of togetherness among disabled students, which significantly differed from their narratives of mainstream education, made it easier for them to challenge processes of disablement. Although feelings of being 'different' from their non-disabled peers persisted within the integrated school, the strong mutual support and forming an advocacy group based on a common identity enabled participants to achieve positive educational outcomes. Generally, participants' experiences of 'integrated' education in Ghana reinforced concerns that the western concepts of 'integration' and 'inclusion' are often uncritically exported to the Global South without considering that interpretations and implementations vary across different contexts (Armstrong, Armstrong, and Spandagou 2011; Armstrong and Barton 2007).

To achieve inclusion of disabled students, there is a need to adopt a different education model in a Ghanaian context, and potentially more broadly in the Global South, which takes account of different types of impairments, cultural understandings of disability, the more limited access to resources for education, and the specific issues of poverty within which disability is constituted. In addition to exploring educational challenges, this article suggests that future research should focus on the agency of disabled young people and explore the enablers that shape their educational trajectories to effect positive educational outcomes. This can generate valuable information on how inclusion can take place.

Note

1. In line with the Ghanaian official definition of youth.

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