Chapter 7
Inclusive Education for Deaf Learners in Ghana: Contestation Between Social and Linguistic Values

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education is a key policy priority in Ghana and across the globe giving equitable access to education for many learners with disabilities. However, for deaf learners, there is often a tension between the social model of disability which underpins inclusive education and the linguistic human rights perspective which sees Deaf communities as cultural and linguistic minorities with strong emphasis on sign language. This chapter explores this tension conceptualised as a contestation between social and linguistic values by analysing Ghana's inclusive education policy and the country's sociolinguistic environment. Both international and national documents were reviewed to highlight inherent challenges in the implementation of inclusive deaf education in the regular classroom. It is proposed that in Ghana, the bilingual-bicultural framework that uses Ghanaian Sign Language (GhSL) as a primary language accessible to deaf learners while training them in English literacy is best to prepare deaf learners to participate fully in society.

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3373-4317-4.ch007

INTRODUCTION

The principles of inclusive education gained global momentum after the World Conference on Special Needs Education was held in Salamanca, Spain, in 1994. This landmark event, guided by the social model of disability, emphasized that every child, whether with or without a disability has the right and the moral justification to learn in regular schools. From this perspective, inclusion became, not simply a service, but a human right, aimed at celebrating diversity, respecting the dignity of learners with disabilities, and actively challenging discrimination (Mittler, 2000; Felder, 2019).

Building on this foundation, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006) strengthened the call for inclusive education worldwide, leading to significant policy shifts across Africa. In Ghana, these changes were reflected in education reforms that began positioning regular schools as the default option for learners with disabilities.

The Education Strategic Plan (ESP) 2003-2015 marked a major turning point, framing inclusive education as the enrolment of children with mild to moderate disabilities, special educational needs (SEN), and other disadvantaged groups into regular schools (Ministry of Education, 2003). Consequently, Ghana launched its first inclusive education pilot project in the 2003/2004 academic year, starting with 35 schools across three of the then ten regions. Over time, this initiative expanded substantially, and by the mid-2010s, more than 3,000 schools in nearly 50 districts were practising inclusive education (Deku & Vanderpuye, 2017). These efforts climaxed in the adoption of Ghana's national Inclusive Education Policy in 2015. The policy recognizes that learners have diverse needs and requires the education system to address those differences. Its first objective emphasizes equitable access to quality education, not just in terms of enrolment but also in participation, friendships, and meaningful interaction in the classrooms (Ministry of Education, 2015).

Research consistently shows the benefits of inclusive education for both children with and without SEN (Saepova, & Reymova, 2025; Mdikana & Malahlela, 2025). Learners with special needs in inclusive settings demonstrate stronger literacy and numeracy growth compared to their peers in segregated schools (Cosier et al., 2013; Cole et al., 2004). For example, students with intellectual disabilities often achieve greater literacy progress when taught alongside their peers in mainstream settings (Dessemontet et al., 2012). At the same time, pupils without SEN also tend to do better in inclusive environments, particularly in literacy and numeracy (Cole et al., 2004). These gains are frequently linked to collaborative strategies such as peer tutoring, cooperative learning, differentiated learning and frameworks such as universal design for learning which allow the unique learning needs of the students to be met in the regular classroom (Cushing & Kennedy, 1997; Catama, 2025). However, the