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IRIS Award Post-Fieldwork Research Report

Thanks to the generous support of the IRIS Grant for Incoming Graduate Students, I had the opportunity to travel to my home country, Ghana, in Fall 2024 to conduct fieldwork for my qualitative research project. The focus of this study was to explore the challenges that students with disabilities in Ghana face in pursuing education and meaningful employment. This is an issue that is both personally meaningful and central to my doctoral research interest in Rehabilitation Counselor Education, which focuses on employment outcomes and quality of life (QOL) for people with disabilities (PWDs). The trip also offered a special opportunity to reconnect with my family while advancing my academic interests.

In Ghana, people with disabilities face significant challenges that impact their overall QOL. While countries like the United States have made meaningful progress in alleviating such challenges, the situation in Ghana remains concerning, particularly for students with disabilities. With employment being a strong predictor of wellbeing, and education a primary pathway to employment, barriers in education severely limit the aspirations and opportunities of students with disabilities. To better understand these dynamics, my research was guided by questions such as: “What supports are there for PWDs in selecting the schools/programs they want to pursue towards their desired careers?” and “What impact do institutional structures [government, schools, and policies] have on their ability to access and excel in society?”

With the support of this grant, I was able to conduct interviews with key stakeholders, including educators, parents, and government representatives. Prior to travelling to Ghana, I sent introductory letters to local government and educational institutions outlining the study and its purpose. Over the course of the fieldwork, I visited three schools serving students with disabilities and three district government offices across different parts of the Ashanti region.

Although the initial plan was to interview 6–7 participants, I ended up conducting 9 interviews, with a diverse group of government officials, special educators, and people with disabilities. More interviews might have been possible if not for the geographic and travel limitations. Nonetheless, these visits and interviews provided diverse perspectives and rich insights on how educational and policy barriers are experienced on the ground. The IRIS grant

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was instrumental in covering travel-related expenses, including transportation, lodging, meals, and incidentals, which made the fieldwork possible.

While data analysis is still ongoing, the collection process has already revealed compelling insights into the psychosocial, cultural, and political factors influencing education and employment access. A recurring concern was limited government support for disability-related advocacy and services, coupled with persistent stigma and stereotyping. One interviewee questioned whether Ghana's educational system is well-equipped to accommodate students with disabilities, citing an apparent disconnect between the country's inclusive education policy and the realities on the ground. Another expressed disappointment over the reluctance of some special educators to accept postings to schools serving students with disabilities, noting that many seek transfers shortly after their assignments.

At one institution, reopening was postponed multiple times due to a lack of funds to feed the students. As one interviewee put it, "As I speak to you. Now, school should have been reopened, but we have no money [from the government] to feed the students." With a daily food allowance of just 5.3 GHS (0.35 USD), the school's operations relied heavily on donor support.

An unexpected highlight of this fieldwork was the great networking that occurred. Several participants expressed a deep interest in the research and shared hopes that it might influence future policy or practice. The moment of happenstance sparked new research questions and strengthened my resolve to continue this work. The connections I formed during the study also lay the foundation for future collaboration.

I am deeply grateful to IRIS for making this experience possible. And I am proud to represent the University of Wisconsin, Madison. This support ensured that an initial spark of interest could grow into a sustained and impactful research path.