



**PEER ACCEPTANCE, AND PERCEPTION OF
ACCEPTANCE OF STUDENTS WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENTS
IN AN INCLUSIVE SETTING IN GHANAⁱ**

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Abstract:

This study explored the level of peer acceptance of students with visual impairments and their perception of acceptance by their sighted peers in an inclusive setting in Ghana using the case study design. Twenty students with visual impairments and two resource teachers were sampled based on census sampling for the study. Interview data were coded and analysed using the thematic approach. The study indicated that students with visual impairments were accepted by their sighted peers, more especially, based on their social skills and academic prowess. The study further revealed that students with visual impairments have a positive perception about their social participation in the school. Although the students were fairly satisfied about their participation, they expressed their frustration on how some teachers' instructions excluded them in class. It was recommended among others in the study that teachers in inclusive schools should organise more counselling or sensitisation programmes for all students to educate them on issues of disabilities and how to ensure friendly relationships between students with and those without disabilities. This would promote better acceptance of the disabled by those without disabilities. Resource persons who are special educators are also encouraged to periodically sensitize teachers on classroom instructions.

Keywords: peer acceptance, self-perception, inclusive education, inclusive setting

ⁱ ACCEPTATION PAR LES PAIRS, ET PERCEPTION DE L'ACCEPTATION DES ÉLÈVES DÉFICIENTS VISUELS DANS UN ENVIRONNEMENT INCLUSIF AU GHANA

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Résumé :

Cette étude a exploré le niveau d'acceptation par les pairs des étudiants ayant de déficiences visuelles et leur perception de l'acceptation par leurs pairs voyants dans un environnement inclusif au Ghana, en utilisant la conception d'étude de cas. Vingt étudiants ayant de déficiences visuelles et deux enseignants-ressources ont été sélectionnés sur la base d'un échantillonnage de recensement pour l'étude. Les données issues de l'entretien ont été codées et analysées à l'aide de l'approche thématique. L'étude indique que les étudiants malvoyants sont acceptés par leurs pairs voyants, plus particulièrement en raison de leurs compétences sociales et de leurs prouesses scolaires. L'étude a également révélé que les étudiants ayant de déficiences visuelles ont une perception positive par rapport à leur participation sociale à l'école. Bien que les étudiants soient assez satisfaits de leur participation, ils ont exprimé leur frustration sur la façon dont certains enseignants les excluent au cours de l'enseignement en classe. L'étude recommande, entre autres, que les enseignants des écoles inclusives organisent davantage de programmes de conseil ou de sensibilisation pour tous les élèves afin de les éduquer sur les questions de handicap et sur la manière d'assurer des relations amicales entre les élèves handicapés et non handicapés. Cela favoriserait l'acceptation des personnes handicapées par les personnes non handicapées. Les personnes ressources qui sont des éducateurs spécialisés sont également encouragées à sensibiliser périodiquement les enseignants sur l'enseignement en classe.

Mots clés : acceptation par les pairs, perception de soi, éducation inclusive, milieu inclusif

1. Introduction

The philosophy underpinning inclusive education is to ensure social inclusion for every individual, especially those with disabilities. In view of this, the social participation of students with special needs is an essential issue in educating all learners, especially those with disabilities. Therefore, the social participation of students with visual impairments cannot be undermined since it facilitates their overall participation and socialization in inclusive societies. The nature of social participation that exists in learning environments may influence students' performance and all domains of their lives. Social participation can exist when students with disabilities are accepted by their sighted peers, and when they again have a positive feeling about their level of acceptance in the inclusive environment.

Sirigu Integrated Senior High School is the only school in the Upper East Region of Ghana that admits both students with visual impairments and sighted students to learn together. Despite increased inclusion initiatives resulting in more students with disabilities being educated alongside their peers without disabilities just like Sirigu Integrated Senior High School, it seems that physical proximity has not resulted in increased social contact with peers. Therefore, maximizing social participation between students with and those without visual impairments may be considered as an important

aspect in placing the former in regular schools. This school began admitting students with visual impairments in the 2006/2007 academic year with two (2) students with visual impairments (Adjai S., personal communication, October 21, 2019). This number has increased over the years to a total of 20 students with visual impairments as of the 2019/2020 academic year; yet, not much is known about the level of acceptance by their sighted peers as well as how they feel about their participation in the school.

Peer acceptance is a measure of social position and it is defined as the degree to which a student is welcomed/accepted by his/her peer group (Awini, 2015). The opportunity and ability to participate in social interaction and develop friendships is an important factor for the general wellbeing of students, especially those with special educational needs. It should be noted that peer group acceptance does not necessarily reflect mutual emotional bonds, which are studied on the relational level of enquiry (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006). Low peer acceptance and peer rejection have been associated with a vast array of concurrent and future indicators of adaptation (Ladd, 2005). Inclusive education is to let learners as well as teachers and the society appreciate the diverse capabilities of one another and learn to accept their strengths and weaknesses; however, it appears that students with visual impairments in Sirigu Senior High School experience some difficulties in being accepted by their peers without visual impairments in the school.

Positive perception may be considered as the intrinsic individual view of the general perspective of his or her environment. The presence of positive perception of peer acceptance, satisfaction at the school learning environment, positive self-esteem or concept, self-perception of self-competence, and the satisfaction of inclusion within the larger group cannot be overlooked when one needs the academic successes of learners as well as their social participation in learning environments. Dyson (2001) supported this argument when he stated that learners may not be considered as socially included if they do not acquire the skills they will need to participate in society or if the skills gap between them and their peers is too wide. Despite the belief that positive self-perception of students with visual impairments increases their level of social participation, the social self-perception of students with visual impairments about their interaction, acceptance, and relationship with their peers which influences their social participation in the school is not known as little is researched into that in the school.

Whilst inclusive education provides a favourable setting for achieving equal opportunities and full participation, their successes require a concerted effort, not only by teachers or school staff, but also by their non-disabled peers. Research that has been undertaken in the social participation of students with disabilities often indicates that the placement of the child with a disability is not an obvious means that the child will automatically make friends (Awini, 2015). Placement of the child in an inclusive classroom for social inclusion is not an end in itself (Pijl, Skaalvik, & Skaalvik, 2010). Students with disabilities often experience difficulties in being accepted by their non-disabled peers (Chamberlain, Kasari, & Rotheram-Fuller, 2007; Smoot, 2004; Symes & Humphrey, 2010) and acquiring friendships (Koster et al., 2010). Having effective and

positive social participation impacts students' success in school, acceptance among peers, sense of belonging, and their overall well-being (Rubin, Bukowski & Laursen, 2009; Wentzel, Donlan & Morrison, 2012). Understanding the perceptions of students with disabilities about their friendships and acceptance may contribute to understanding their social participation, since happy young people are those who may report fulfilling friendships, and this study sought to examine that about students with visual impairments in Sirigu Integrated Senior High School.

2. Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study was to explore the level of acceptance of students with visual impairments, and their perception of acceptance by their sighted peers in inclusive schools in Ghana. This was to determine the level of social participation of students with visual impairments in the learning environment. Two research questions were investigated:

- 1) What is the self-perception of students with visual impairments on their social participation in Sirigu Integrated Senior High School?
- 2) How are students with visual impairments accepted by their sighted peers in Sirigu Integrated Senior High School?

2.1 Delimitation

The scope of this study was delimited to only Senior High School (SHS) students in Sirigu Integrated School in Navrongo in the Upper East Region of Ghana. Hence, generalisation cannot be made about the perception and acceptance of students with visual impairments by their sighted peers from other inclusive education schools.

2.2 Limitation

There are several limitations that need consideration when interpreting the findings in this study. We relied on self-developed interview guides without adapting existing validated instruments. The study setting was only in Sirigu Integrated Senior High School and therefore, the findings cannot be generalised. However, we employed several techniques as stated in the methodology to ensure trustworthiness of the instruments. The instruments were actually developed based on previous relevant literature on the phenomenon. The interview guides were piloted in a school with similar characteristics as the setting of this study.

3. Literature review

3.1 Self-perceptions of students with visual impairments on their acceptance

The social self-perception of the learner is his or her personal satisfaction with his/her situation with peers thus, whether he or she feels lonely, or expresses fulfilment in everyday school activities (Nyberg, et al., 2008). Heslop (2005) stated that learners with

visual impairment report greater levels of loneliness, isolation and interpersonal conflict at school and that they rely less on peers for social support when dealing with an academic or interpersonal problem than learners without visual impairment.

Acceptance of adolescents with visual impairment by their peers without visual impairment is considered to be of primary importance to their successful integration into the senior high school. Hilgenkamp, et al. (2011) stated that Children and adolescents with cognitive and developmental delays show difficulty in social interaction, feelings of rejection, autonomy, social rules and in behavioural and emotional self-regulation. Importantly, they further argued that their subjective well-being is associated with social support and personal factors, such as self-esteem and a positive self-image. For the well-being of students with disabilities, self-awareness may be very essential for their self-perception. Self-awareness is important because it can be the first step in eliminating many of the negative perceptions and expectations students with disabilities develop about themselves. Social-emotional well-being may be seen as the resultant factors of the self-perception or self-image of the student. Learners with disabilities are twice as likely as their peers to be bullied and most bullying takes place in settings that are not monitored by teachers (Dunn, 2004).

The physical presence of learners with disabilities in mainstream classrooms (physical integration) does not by itself ensure a learner's progress and development, unless functional and social integration are also provided (Schmidt & Cagran, 2008). It is only when functional and social integration are realised in a mainstream environment that the learners with disabilities and as far as this study is concerned, those with visual impairments would report satisfaction in school.

Whether or not a learner feels truly included is reliant on their participation beyond physically being included in activity, school, work or relationships. There must be a reciprocity that makes it possible for the individual to be involved (Wager & Bailey, 2005). Mpofo, (2003) opined that learners with disabilities have limited opportunities to interact with their able-bodied classmates, which could result in lower social acceptance. Unfortunately, learners with disabilities are half as likely to report a sense of belonging, feeling safe or accepted, than are learners without disabilities. They are also half as likely to view other learners as kind (Hogan, et al., 2000). Learners with visual impairment experience challenges in school when there are to join in other activities, thus reducing the learner's opportunities to socialise or have a chat whilst waiting for the next activity (MacCuspie as cited in Roe, 2008).

Baumrind (1991, as cited in Griffin-Shirley & Nes, 2005) suggested that the development of self-esteem (including self-regulation and competence) in children and adolescents requires an environment that provides both the freedom to explore and experiment, and protection from danger. Individuals with high self-esteem tend to have confidence in their own abilities to make decisions, expectations for successful outcomes, a willingness to experience new things, and sensitivity to others' needs and to have relationships that are characterized by respect and dignity (Tuttle & Tuttle, 2004). Some young children with disabilities have negative self-images; they may view themselves as

failures, have negative thoughts about themselves, be dependent on their parents and others, and have feelings of loss if the disability was adventitious. They may also have difficulty with social skills, such as reading non-verbal cues from their non-disabled peers and controlling impulsive behaviour (Vernon, 1993, as cited in Griffin-Shirley & Nes, 2005). They further stipulated that to develop a healthy self-concept in students with visual impairments and other disabilities, they need to be provided with interventions, such as counselling, stress-reduction techniques such as meditation and relaxation exercises and help with developing their personal and social skills.

Researchers have suggested that children who are visually impaired are often more socially immature and more egocentric than are sighted children and that since they often have difficulty observing and imitating peers, they may have more difficulty developing positive self-esteem (Tuttle & Tuttle, 2004). According to Tuttle and Tuttle (2004, p. 73), *"the psychological principles involved in the dynamics of the development of one's self-concept and self-esteem among the sighted are equally applicable to persons who are blind."* However, Tuttle and Tuttle (2004) suggested that people with visual impairments may have lower self-esteem due to a disproportionate number of negative reflections they may experience compared with their nondisabled peers. They also identified the problem of dependence that visually impaired children face when they require assistance from others. This feeling of dependence can result in lower self-esteem even when a visually impaired student who has excellent coping and adaptive skills accepts assistance to perform daily living skills.

Loneliness is a prevalent social problem that is experienced universally, regardless of one's gender, age or cultural background (Rokach & Bacanli, 2001). Page (1990, as cited in Hadidi & Al Khateeb, 2013) defined loneliness as the absence or perceived absence of satisfying social relationships. Literature provides evidence suggesting that loneliness is a risk factor for socio-emotional adjustment difficulties among adolescents (Coplan, Closson, & Arbeau, 2007). Loneliness is quite common and especially intense in adolescence (Krause-Parello, 2008; Le Roux, 2009). The quality of one's social relationships is among the several factors that have been shown to be significantly associated with loneliness among adolescents (Whitehouse et al., 2009). A study was conducted by Hadidi Al Khateeb (2013) which was to investigate loneliness among students with blindness and those who are sighted in Jordan and examined whether loneliness levels vary according to gender. The population involved in the study included 90 students with blindness and 79 sighted students selected from high schools and universities in the capital city of Amman. The instrument used to collect information in the study was an Arabic translation and adapted version of the UCLA Loneliness Scale developed by Russell in 1996. The results indicated that students with blindness reported significantly higher degrees of loneliness than sighted students; however, no significant differences were attributable to gender or interaction between visual status and gender. The findings of this study was consistent with that of Frame, (2000) and of Gold, (2002) when their studies also revealed that students with vision impairment exhibit higher levels of loneliness, especially in adolescence.

3.2 Peer acceptance of students with visual impairments in mainstream environments

Every student would more likely see it as important to have a sense of belonging to a peer group; it however appears that becoming accepted as a full member of the group is not easy. The opportunity and ability to participate in social interaction and develop friendships is an important factor for the general wellbeing of students, especially those with special educational needs. Notwithstanding this, for the student with a disability to be accepted by the peer group, he must have adequate social skills, and to practice and refine those skills, interaction with peers is necessary (Roe, 2008).

Researchers have pointed out that children who are visually impaired generally have fewer peer relations than sighted children, both in and outside school, hence fewer opportunities to practice their social skills (Cochrane et al., 2008; Huure & Aro, 2000). In line with these findings, when students do not get the maximum opportunities to interact with their peers and have a mastery of the social skills needed to interact, then they are more likely to be rejected by their sighted or non-disabled peers during interactional or interpersonal relationships. Research undertaken in the social participation of students with disabilities often indicates that the placement of the child with a disability is not an obvious means that the child will automatically make friends. Placement of the child in an inclusive classroom for the purpose of social inclusion is not an end in itself (Pijl et al., 2010). Students with disabilities often experience difficulties in being accepted by their non-disabled peers (Chamberlain et al., 2007; Smoot, 2004; Symes & Humphrey, 2010) and acquiring friendships (Koster et al, 2010). Pijl, et al. (2008) indicated that about 30 percent of students with disabilities have significantly fewer friends and are less accepted by their classmates than their typically developing peers. Several factors have been found to contribute to peer rejection; including aggressive or offensive behaviour, an introverted personality style, and poorly developed social or communication skills (Zhang & Yan 2005 citing Doll, 1993). According to Antonak and Livneh (2000) learners with disabilities will only experience full acceptance by learners without disabilities if some social barriers are eliminated. The researchers further opined that one of such factors inherent in the barriers is the attitudes of teachers, parents, peers and persons with disabilities themselves. Negative attitudes towards learners with disabilities create real obstacles to the fulfilment of their roles and the attainment of their life goals. Knowledge of the attitudes of persons and learners without disabilities towards learners with disabilities helps us to understand the nature of the interaction between the two groups. The perception of being cut off from social groups makes individuals feel vulnerable, triggering a range of cognitive, behavioural and physiological responses geared towards self-protection (Cacioppo et al., 2006). Thus, lonely individuals are inclined to be less trusting, to be more anxious and pessimistic, to perceive others around them more negatively and to approach social interactions in a defensive, hostile manner (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010) Although such cognitive biases and behavioural styles may serve the adaptive purpose of distancing individuals from potential threats, the corollary of this is that lonely individuals may become further isolated by sabotaging their opportunities to develop positive social relationships.

4. Method

The qualitative approach was in response to the research questions. The procedure was informed by the constructivist worldview to explore the phenomenon under study. The case study design was used to ascertain the level of social participation of students with visual impairments through the level of peer acceptance and perception of acceptance. The study was conducted in Ghana, specifically, Sirigu Senior High School. The census sampling was used to engage the participants. A total of twenty (20) students with visual impairments and two (2) resource teachers were sampled for the study.

4.1 Instrumentation

A semi structured interview guide was used for collecting the data from the students with visual and the resource teachers for the study (Yin, 2014; Gall et al., 2007). The instruments were pre-tested at Wa Methodist School for the Blind.

4.2 Trustworthiness

In ensuring credibility of the findings, the researchers familiarised with the school by visiting the participants on two occasions. The researchers again employed iterative questioning during the group interactions in order to compare the responses of the participants of the same question. Secondly, the researchers ensured confirmability of the data by engaging multi participants in the study where they constituted four groups of five participants each to triangulate the responses of the participants. They again engaged the resource teachers in one-on-one interview sessions to confirm the responses of the students as well as the individual interviewee. In terms of the transferability of the findings, although it is not possible to generalize the findings of the study beyond the sample, it is transferable to contexts that share similar characteristics with the study context (Kusi, 2012). Finally, in ensuring the dependability of the data results, Shenton (2004, citing Lincoln and Guba) stressed that there is a close tie between credibility and reliability arguing that a demonstration of credibility ensures dependability.

4.3 Data analysis

Each participant was assigned a code, and the focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim from the digital audio recordings by the researchers. These transcripts were thematically analysed, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines for content analyses. These guidelines included: becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, and finally, defining and naming themes.

5. Results and Discussion

The total sample (N = 22) consisted of 20 students with visual impairments and 2 male resource teachers of which 15 (75%) were male students and 5 (25%) were females. The ages of the students were between 18 and 21 years. The students were from all forms

comprising 10 (50%) from one students, 5 (25%) from two students and 5 (25%) from three students. The teachers were both Bachelor's Degree holders (special education) and have been in the service for 10 and 16 years each and aged 36 and 50 years.

5.1 Self-perception of students with visual impairments on their participation

In eliciting responses from the participants on the perception of students with visual impairments on their participation in school, two themes emerged from this research question. These were satisfaction in school, and perception of self-competence.

A. Satisfaction in school

With regards to the satisfaction of students with visual impairments in school, it was revealed that students with visual impairments are satisfied with their participation in school. They spoke about how they always want to be in school because of their engagements with their peers and the company they enjoy with their peers. They also expressed their experience of boredom at home during vacation because the opportunities to interact with their peers are not felt during holidays. Some of them however spoke of a little dissatisfaction of how some teachers deliver instructions and how the environment and negative attitudes of some peers serve as a challenge to their participation.

One of the students expressed this:

"To me, since I came to this school, I feel like I am at home and anytime I need help, I get it from my colleagues and when I am going somewhere and I miss my way, they will show me a way out and this alone makes me feel comfortable on campus." (A student in group 4)

Another student added:

"To me, when they vacate and I am home, I always feel like coming back to school because most of the times we are at home, we work alone and that is a factor I don't want to be home. Again, I do miss my friends a lot and always feels like returning to school to meet my friends and chat with them." (A student in group 2)

One of the students also commented:

"In fact, there is always a lot of work for you to do and exercise yourself but when you go home, you don't get people to chat with to build your vocabulary and all other things." (A student in group 1)

Another student also had this to say:

"Since I came to this school, I have not regretted being admitted here. It is only inadequate resources in the school but in terms of friendship and interaction, I am satisfied being in this school." (A student in group 3)

One of the students also said:

"The sighted peers move with us, we chat, we learn together, and we even sometimes attend nature's calls together. So, we are well satisfied with that relationship. They do help us to read novels and other story books." (A student in group 3)

Another student noted that:

"It is always boring being at home because in school we interact with our peers, chat and play but when we are home, we only sleep and eat and sit in isolation, so we do miss our friends a lot. Aside the hunger in school, we prefer school to home." (A student in group 2)

Another expressed the views as follows:

"The relationship with community members is not like that of the relationship in school. At home, we virtually sit alone without friends but we have a lot of friends at school to talk with and interact with them." (A student in group 3)

Another student also added that:

"Being in school is more entertaining than being at home; if you are home, everyone will leave for their places of work and you will be left feeling lonely at home but if you are in school, you interact with your colleagues and participate in various activities in the school; be it classroom, assembly grounds, playing fields, etc. So, when you are home, you do miss all those moments in school and would always wish to be in school." (A student in group 1)

Another student also added that:

"Sir, being at home is always boring because you will always be in your room alone but when you are in school, friends do come by and ask for our company to go to places or chat with and that makes us happy." (A student in group 2)

During an interaction with the resource teachers, the response of the teachers was in line with what the students also reported as one of them said:

“You know a lot of them are free and due to the limited accommodation, some of them stay in town and when you see them moving in town, you may not know they are visually impaired. They are conversant with the environment, and you can see the freedom they enjoy by interacting and relating with their peers.” (Teacher B)

Notwithstanding the above satisfactory responses about the satisfaction of students with visual impairments, other students also expressed that the environment is a challenge to them which impedes their free movement and the negative attitudes of students as well. Another student also mentioned the mode of instruction of some teachers as unsatisfactorily.

One student has this to say:

“We are not totally satisfied with all activities in the school because some of our colleagues feel like since we are visually impaired, we cannot do some things forgetting it is only the sight we have lost but not our talent. For instance, when it comes to learning, a sighted student can read for me to listen and that is just help and if they need help, they can also come to me and I will help them in aspects that they don’t understand and that will strengthen our relationship within the campus.” (A student in group 3)

Another student also expressed these views:

“Sir, to me since I came here, the school is good to me but at night, we stumble on objects when coming for preps. There are some heaps of stones around the campus, and we sometimes fall on them.” (A student in group 3)

One other student also had this to comment:

“I think generally, the relationship has been good except some of the teachers and again, when we hear of the challenges some of our visually impaired friends go through in other school, I think this place is good.” (A student in group 3)

The same student added that:

“Notwithstanding, some of the teachers are finding it very difficult accepting the visually impaired because I don’t know whether those few teachers are not well educated on issues of visual impairments or what? They don’t create a very welcoming environment for us to learn and during exams; to get a teacher to come and invigilate becomes a challenge. Again, when those teachers give assignment, they will want you to do it in class and the distraction from our sighted peers makes it very difficult for us to concentrate as we solely depend on our ears and as you know, our ears are our eyes and they normally sometimes insist we sit in class which is always noisy to do our assignments. Again, they will write something on the board and instead of reading it out, they will just say have

you seen this? If you write this, it will lead to this. Sometimes you sit there and feel mocked us; so, I think some of the teachers need education.” (A student in group 3)

The teachers also had something to say about the challenges students with visual impairments encounter in school as one of them said:

“So far, I can say though the environments are impediments, but the moments they come and meet their peers, within a short time they will accommodate to the environment. The challenge is there but not so much.” (Teacher A)

The other teacher commented that:

“There are some challenges, especially we the low vision students. When the sighted see us draw a book closer to our eyes to read, they begin to laugh and make mockery of that, sometimes we feel like abandoning the reading and sit idle.” (Teacher B)

B. Perception on self-competence

In terms of the perception of students with visual impairments on their self-competence, it was revealed from the participants that the visually impaired were as competent as their sighted peers if not more. The students with visual impairments revealed to the researcher the activities they do carry out that revealed their competence among their peers. They indicated that after they are given orientation of the school environment, they can live an independent life and do things by themselves. One of the students however indicated that the perception of some of their sighted peers that they the visually impaired cannot do things as equal as the sighted is what actually lowers their self-esteem.

One of them indicated that:

“Sir, the first thing to do is to take notice of the school environment and after getting yourself acquainted to the environment, we don’t even need any assistance from the sighted; be it fetching water or roaming on campus.” (A student in group 3)

Another also expressed the views as follows:

“Sir, I do walk alone, fetch water and even go to market alone; so, the confidence level is very high.” (A student in group 4)

Another student said:

“In terms of classroom work, I can even say that the visually impaired are better than the sighted and anytime they give group work for presentation, the sighted would usually prefer that I do the presentation for the group.” (A student in group 4)

Another student added that:

“When a teacher asks a question in class, the sighted usually push us to answer the questions and that alone serves as self-motivation for us to do more.” (A student in group 1)

Another student expressed the views as follows:

“We are confident we carry out all classroom exercises on our own and assignments as well. So, we are confident we can carry out activities on our own and we actually do that.” (A student in group 2)

Another student also added:

“We do almost everything by ourselves. For example, washing to bathing and all other daily living activities.” (A student in group 1)

One other student also added that the negative attitudes of some of their sighted peers that they the visually impaired are incompetent are a factor why some of the visually impaired have low self-esteem. He said:

“You sometimes don’t have confidence due to the behaviour of the sighted peers. They sometimes think that the visually impaired cannot do things by themselves and when we don’t become bold and build a stronger self-esteem, we would always not be able to do things by ourselves.” (A group 4 student)

The teachers also asserted to the views expressed by the students. They among other things also added the fact that they do bring in past students of the schools who have excelled academically to serve as role models and to inspire the students to aim high.

One of them said:

“They have great potentials, but the environment is still a bit confusion to them because there are limitations in terms of the physical environment as well as the negative comments from the society, but we keep telling them to push on and never to give up.” (Teacher B)

The other teacher also had this to say:

“You see, as for the visually impaired, the sighted see them outside and sometimes belittle them but when we get to the classroom; the sighted students cannot compete the

competencies of the visually impaired. Anytime we give them class work, some of the sighted do come and copy the work of the visually impaired.” (Teacher A)

He again added that:

“We also bring past students of the school who have excelled academically so as to inspire them to aim higher.” (Teacher A)

The other teacher added:

“The interesting part is that if you care to know, in most of the classes that the visually impaired are, they usually top the class in academic activities.” (Teacher B)

The other teacher again added:

“So many; they carry out independent activities in so many ways. Those who have decided to stay in town or have been compelled to stay in town due to the limited accommodation cook for themselves, they wash by themselves and even if you come here on a weekend, you will see them lined –up washing; so many of them; ironing and in short, all independent self-help skills.” (Teacher A)

He further had this to say:

“When it comes to personality, mostly, it depends on how the individual sees himself that others see him to be. I quite remember some time ago how the visually impaired used to appear shabbily; but fortunately, these students of late look neat and more presentable.” (Teacher A)

5.2 Acceptance of students with visual impairments by their sighted peers

The responses of the respondents showed that they were fairly accepted by their peers without visual impairments in all activities of the school. Two major sub themes emerged from the data; peer preference and peer rejection.

A. Peer preference

The responses from the students revealed that the sighted are always willing to have the visually impaired among their cooperative activities more especially because the sighted benefit much from them. Their responses are as follows:

“The acceptance is not absolute or wholesome. The sighted accept us based on what they think we can do. For example, anytime we have a group presentation and I am in the resource room, they do come to call me because I always do the presentation on behalf of

my group but if you have not displayed your skills in a particular field for them to see that you can do such, they don't always welcome you." (A student of group 4)

Another student commented as:

"Sir, this one is based on interpersonal relationship, so if there is any group work and they see you as a polite person, they would call you to come and join their group but if they know you to be the kind that speaks very harsh to them, they don't even want you to come around." (A student in group 2)

He further added that:

"Again, during the time you are researching answers to your group project, they will ask you for your inputs before the presentation." (A student in group 2)

One other student had this to say:

"Again, anytime we have a group work, the sighted are always willing to have us so that they can have the work done better." (A student in group 3)

Another student also said:

"Anytime a teacher gives us a group assignment, they are ready to have us in their groups because they believe we have relevant contributions to the work." (A student in group 1)

One student added that:

"Sir, the thing is as I was saying before a sighted person can accept you, he or she will have to study your character and know your behaviour before he or she accepts and makes a relationship with you. They study your attitudes and how you do things. So, when we came earlier, they were not actually coming closer to us but for now, they add us in most of the activities that they do." (A student in group 3)

The teachers indicated that the visually impaired serve as a source of resource or knowledge to the sighted and the sighted for that matter always have the willingness to work with them. In their responses, they also had the following to say:

"When it comes to their daily living skills, the visually impaired carry out all those activities independently and when it is about classroom activities, the visually impaired even serve as a source of resource to the sighted." (Teacher A)

The other teacher also added that:

“Whenever we give them a group activity; be it in the classroom or anything that demands a cooperative activity outside the classroom, you do not see the sighted students shying away from the visually impaired. They are always ready to work with each other irrespective of the ability of the person.” (Teacher B).

B. Peer rejection

On the issue of peer rejection, the respondents; both the students and the teachers attested to the fact that there is no isolation and social discrimination between the two groups. The students with visual impairments confessed the satisfactory level of acceptance and companionship they enjoy from their sighted peers. The students had this to say:

“The interaction between us is good; they have been friendly, polite and gentle. Generally, it has been good.” (A student in group 1)

Another student also said:

“Sometimes when you are moving and they are behind you going in the same direction, they will call you to wait for all of us to go together and be chatting.” (A student in group 2)

One of the students also added that:

“The relationship is very cordial; they move with us to so many places and also give us directions. In fact, anytime we are supposed to do things in common, we all come together to do it. They don’t separate themselves from us.” (A student in group 1)

The teachers on their side also had these comments to make:

“The kind of relationship that exists between the two groups of students, I have not observed any activity of isolation and rejection of the visually impaired by the sighted in any activity with the view that the visually impaired cannot undertake such activity or with the view that the visually impaired is a dependency or socially incompetent.” (Teacher A)

The other teacher added:

“Not only are the visually impaired accepted at the academic level, the sighted also accept and do things together with them in co-curricular activities like sports and games. They have a way of including the visually impaired in their playtime. For example, once upon a time, one of my students was once a commentator during football matches in the school

though there were gaps in his commentary and the activity engaged in on the pitch.”
(Teacher B)

He added that:

“Oh great! Very great; to my side and especially this school, their relationship is very good and I have not seen any tendencies of rejection or isolation between the visually impaired and the sighted.” (Teacher B)

6. Discussion

The study explores the self-perception and peer acceptance of students with visual impairments by their sighted peers in inclusive senior high schools in Ghana with Sirigu Integrated Senior High School as the research setting.

A. Self-perception of students with visual impairments on their participation in Sirigu Integrated Senior High School

Two themes emerged from the responses of the participants on the perception of students with visual impairments on their participation in school activities; their satisfaction in the stay in school, and their perception on their self-competence.

On the issue of satisfaction in school, the data revealed that students with visual impairments are satisfied with their stay in school and narrated how they always feel lonely during vacations and would always wish to be back to school because the school affords them the opportunities to always interact with their peers. The comment of one of them says it all:

“It is always boring being at home because in school we interact with our peers, chat and play but when we are home, we only sleep and eat and sit in isolation, so we do miss our friends a lot. Aside from hunger in school, we prefer school to home.”

This means that when students with visual impairments are in school, they enjoy peer companionship, interaction and positive relationships from their sighted peers as well as support from their peers on their learning activities. The assertion by the students gives a contrary revelation to what Heslop (2005) and Human (2010, citing Geisthardt & Munsch, 1996) stated that learners with visual impairment report greater levels of loneliness, isolation and interpersonal conflict at school and that they rely less on peers for social support when dealing with an academic or interpersonal problem than learners without visual impairment.

Similarly, the teachers also affirmed that when they also indicated that the visually impaired are always seen cheerful, and the freedom they have to explore the community within which the school exists tells the manner in which they are satisfied. They also stated that the students enjoy interacting with their peers hence they are satisfied with

the school life. However, a few of the students expressed mixed feelings about the school environment, and that the physical environment impedes their mobility coupled with the negative attitudes of some few students and teachers; especially, their mode of instruction towards them as they mentioned earlier. This affirms what Schmidt and Cagran (2008) said that the physical presence of learners with disabilities in mainstream classrooms (physical integration) does not by itself ensure a learner's progress and development, unless functional and social integration are also provided. It is only when functional and social integration are realised in a mainstream environment that the learners with disabilities and as far as this study is concerned, those with visual impairments would report satisfaction in school. The data also revealed that the instructional modes of some teachers actually exclude the visually impaired. The data therefore revealed that students with visual impairments are fairly satisfied in school taking into consideration their social participation in the learning environment.

Secondly, comments from the visually impaired revealed that they have positive self-image and/or competence about themselves and do not actually see themselves as incapable of doing things. Griffin-Shirley and Nes (2005 citing Vernon, 1993) contradicts these findings as they opined that young children with disabilities have negative self-images; they may view themselves as failures, have negative thoughts about themselves, be dependent on their parents and others. However, students with visual impairments in Sirigu Integrated Senior High School even see themselves as more efficient when it comes to classroom work than their sighted peers, and when it comes to self-help skills, the data revealed that as long as the visually impaired are given orientation about their physical environment, then they can carry out activities independently. These findings disagree with Bakker and Bosman (2003) that the self-image of children with disabilities in general education is more negative than that of their peers without disabilities. It however confirms that of Gans et al. (2003) that learners with disabilities judge their self-image as highly as that of their typically or average-achieving peers. The revelations made by the teachers could also be a factor why the visually impaired have high self-esteem. The teachers stated that they do give the students counselling and in other occasions bring past students with visual impairments who have excelled academically to serve as morale boosters for them to aim and target higher in life. This finding confirms what Griffin-Shirley and Nes (2005, citing Vernon, 1993) noted that to develop a healthy self-concept in students with visual impairments and other disabilities, they need to be provided with interventions, such as counselling, stress-reduction techniques such as meditation and relaxation exercises and help with developing their personal and social skills. The data also revealed that even though some of the sighted students view the visually impaired as incompetent at the social level; they do give them preference when it comes to classroom activities because they are more capable than the sighted in classroom activities.

In conclusion, it is clear from the results that the students with visual impairments have positive self-perception about their participation in social activities in the school. They feel fairly satisfied about the activities in the school and also have a positive

perception about their competence in their engagements in school activities because they do not see themselves as liabilities on their peers and their resource teachers. These findings could be summarized with Nyberg, et al., (2008) definition of positive self-perception as personal satisfaction with their situation with peers thus, they do not feel lonely, and expresses fulfilment in everyday school activities.

B. Acceptance of students with visual impairments by their sighted peers in Sirigu Integrated Senior High School

Data gathered from this research question revealed that the sighted are always willing to have the visually impaired among their cooperative activities more especially because the sighted benefit much from them. This is not in line with the findings of Bauminger et al. (2003); Humphrey and Symes (2010), and Wainscot et al. (2008) which indicate that students with disabilities have been reported to spend significantly more time in solitary activities and less time in cooperative activities at school when compared to their peers without disabilities. This is evident in the response of one of the students as they said:

"The acceptance is not absolute or wholesome. The sighted accept us based on what they think we can do."

This comment shows that students with visual impairments are a resource to their sighted peers in the classroom and that the sighted benefit from them a lot in classroom activities. This confirms what Roe (2008) stated; that for the student with a disability to be accepted by the peer group, he must have adequate social skills, and to practice and refine those skills; interaction with peers is necessary. It is clear in this study that not only do social skills facilitate the acceptance of students with disabilities, but their academic prowess in class also serves as a catalyst for students without disabilities to accept them. Similarly, one of the teachers revealed that the sighted students are always willing to work with the visually impaired because they gain from the visually impaired a lot. It is therefore clear from the findings that students without visual impairments do not segregate against the visually impaired; rather, they work together irrespective of individual differences and abilities. This is in line with the argument of Neary (2010) that the social, emotional and academic lives of learners are greatly impacted by the nature of social interactions that exist between them and their peers. The findings however disagree with that of Hatlen (2004) that most learners who are visually impaired in regular education settings are socially isolated.

Finally, peer rejection was the second theme that emerged from the research question and both the students with visual impairments and the teachers attested to the fact that there is no isolation and social discrimination between the two groups. The students with visual impairments confessed the satisfactory level of acceptance and the companionship they enjoy from their sighted peers. In sum, data from the interview revealed that students with visual impairments are always included in all activities in the classroom and other co-curricular activities. The results from the data show that there is

no discrimination between the sighted and the visually impaired. The teachers clearly stated that the relationship between the sighted and the visually impaired is very good, and that there are no tendencies of social rejection or isolation. These findings are in contradiction to studies of other researchers such as Chamberlain, et al. (2007); Smoot (2004); Symes and Humphrey (2010), and Koster et al. (2010), who stated that Students with disabilities often experience difficulties in being accepted by the non-disabled peers and acquiring friendships.

In conclusion, the responses of both the teachers and the students with visual impairments reveal that there is peer acceptance of the visually impaired by their sighted peers in Sirigu Integrated Senior High School.

7. Recommendations

Based on the findings from this study, the researchers made the following recommendations:

- The school should organise counselling sessions for all students in the school to educate them on disability issues and how to ensure a friendly relationship with persons with disabilities to ensure the acceptance of the visually impaired by their sighted peers.
- Special educators in the school or the resource teachers should periodically sensitize teachers in the school on how to modify instructions to embrace students with visual impairments to improve their perception of acceptance.
- Finally, management of the school should ensure the school's physical environment is well structured to ensure the safe mobility of the students with disabilities to ensure their participation.

The study drew the conclusions that students with visual impairments had a positive perception about their participation in the school activities. They felt satisfied about their interaction patterns, relationship, and acceptance level with their sighted peers. However, other respondents also expressed their dissatisfaction with the attitudes of some of their peers as well as how some teachers deliver their lessons in the classroom. They lamented on how they do feel excluded as some of those teachers do not always take into consideration their visual impairments hence making them handicapped during those lessons. The visually impaired saw themselves as socially competent in social activities.

The study again concluded that students with visual impairments were accepted by their sighted peers in school activities and were prepared to work together in classroom activities.

7.1 Suggestions for further research

The researcher suggested the need for future research in relation to this study, the following:

- A study that compares the social participation between students with low vision and students with blindness in Senior High Schools in Ghana.
- A study that explores the level of participation of students with visual impairments on co-curricular activities.

Disclosure statement

There is no potential conflict of interest reported by the authors.

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