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Educational Experiences of Children with Disability in The Gambia

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

There is pressing concern about the injustice and discrimination faced by people with disability in The Gambia. The last survey, done in 1998 by the Gambian Government, revealed that the population had a disability prevalence rate of 16%. Reports by the Gambian Federation of the Disabled (GFD), show that more than 10% of the population is with a disability, with widespread cases of stigma and discrimination due to shame and cultural beliefs across various fronts in society (United Nations Population Fund, 2023).

According to (Gambia Bureau of Statistics, 2023), people with disability were defined as those who were unable to perform or were restricted in the performance of specific tasks or activities due to a loss of function of any part of the body or mind, because of impairment or malformation. When this disability is physical it includes individuals that are affected in one or more of the following: cerebral palsy, stroke, spina bifida, arthritis, spinal cord injury, epilepsy, and muscular dystrophy. People can develop physical disabilities from an inheritance, injury, illness, accident, or as a medical condition's side effect (Association of Physically Disabled Kenya, 2017). Mental disability refers to any condition that affects an individual's mental reasoning, involving significant disturbances in thinking, emotional regulation, or behavior. The forms of mental disability or disorder includes anxiety disorders, depression, bipolar disorder, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), schizophrenia, eating disorders, disruptive behaviors and dissocial disorders, and neurodevelopmental disorders. Those at the intersection of adverse circumstances including poverty, violence, disability, and inequality are at higher risk.

In 2023 it was reported that the rate of prevalence of disability was 13% among men, and 12% among women. Among women the incidence of disability is highest among those aged 30 to 34 years, followed by those aged 40 to 44, 25 to 29, and 15 to 19 (National Disability Survey, 1998).

The Gambia ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and its Optional Protocol on 7th July 2015 but since then, there have not been reports on the status of people with disability. As of April 2018, the CRPD had not yet been domesticated in The Gambia, although the government has noted its plans to domesticate it into law (a Disability Bill). The Persons with Disabilities Bill was enacted by the Gambia National Assembly on July 6, 2021, and President Adama Barrow subsequently gave his assent to the bill on August 4. The objective of the draft Bill is to ensure the full and effective, social and political participation of people with disabilities. By granting them the legal right to employment, healthcare, and education, the law gives the Gambian government a vital tool for the advancement of people with disability in the country. Once enacted, the law will also establish a National Council for people with disabilities.

Historically, people with disabilities in The Gambia have faced systemic challenges in accessing fundamental rights and opportunities. The societal stigma surrounding physical disabilities has contributed to the exclusion of this demographic from public and social activities. Limited infrastructure and insufficient accommodations further exacerbate the struggles faced by people with disability, hindering their mobility and access to public spaces. The Gambian government raised concerns about the fact that women and children with disabilities have limited access to inclusive education, employment, health care and participation in political and public life (National Disability Survey, 1998). This condition is aggravated by cultural beliefs about disabled people in society. For instance, people with physical disabilities in The Gambia frequently face discrimination in the job market. Prejudices and misconceptions about their capabilities lead to limited employment opportunities, perpetuating economic disparities. Additionally, workplaces often lack the necessary accommodations including accessible toilets, chairs etc. to ensure inclusivity, hindering the full utilization of the skills and potential of people with physical disability.

Societal attitudes and stereotypes surrounding disability contribute to the social marginalization of individuals with physical disability. Negative perceptions can lead to isolation, hindering their ability to engage in community activities and form meaningful connections. Addressing the deep-rooted stigma requires a multifaceted approach involving community awareness, advocacy, and policy changes.

As highlighted by the National Disability Survey (1998) and the UNICEF/Government of The Gambia Disabled Children in Mainstream Schools Survey (2000), the situation for children with disabilities is particularly concerning. These surveys revealed alarming rates of disabilities among children, including significant mobility problems (15.6%), speech impairments (18.4%), and hearing impairments (6.5%). Moreover, a substantial proportion of children experienced multiple disabilities. The educational landscape for these children is equally challenging, with a dearth of specialized facilities, trained teachers, and accessible infrastructure (National Disability Report, 2013). This lack of support has severe implications for their educational outcomes and overall life opportunities.

The educational system grapples with a lack of inclusive policies and resources, exemplified by insufficient numbers of specialized educators and lack of accessible learning material. Resultantly, this has seriously affected the quality of education that most people with disability can experience. The consequences of such exclusion extend beyond the classroom, affecting their future employment prospects and overall socioeconomic well-being. Of all people with disability over six years old, those who work for pay make up around 25.3% of the total population of people with disability. According to the National Disability Survey (1998) fully employed individuals make up 16.4% of the population, while part-timers make up 8.9%. Male employment rates are greater than female employment rates across all age categories. In the Gambia, only three formal institutions provide educational services to children with disabilities in seeing, hearing and learning. However, these institutions are in

the urban and semi-urban areas and are only able to cater for a small demographic of children who need specialized education.

As the concern for people with physical disability increases and is a matter of national attention, a comprehensive analysis of the multifaceted injustice faced by individuals with physical disability in The Gambia is needed. This research delved into the specific dimensions of children with disability and their educational experiences, particularly in schools for specialized needs. This research aimed to provide a solid foundation for informed policy changes, community initiatives, and advocacy efforts, to ensure the rights and well-being of children with disability are satisfied.

1.2 Objectives of Study

1. To assess the educational experiences of children within the age range of 13-22, with disabilities.
2. To evaluate the awareness and effectiveness of government Policies for students with disability.

1.3 Scope of the Study

This research focuses on assessing the effectiveness of government policies in addressing the needs of young students with disability in the Greater Banjul Area of the Gambia, specifically the Kanifing Municipality and Banjul.

2. Literature Review

This chapter discusses the relevant literature on disability rights and disability justice issues. In general, there has not been much literature on disability justice in The Gambia. So, the study heavily relies on literature from other countries in Africa and extends to students enrolled in higher education.

Mapepa & Magano (2018) investigated the support services required to alleviate learning challenges for deaf students in South Africa. The data, gathered using qualitative approaches from 11 educators, indicated substantial issues such as limited curricular support, insufficient instructional resources, overcrowding, and insufficient interdisciplinary professional assistance. These findings highlight the crucial need to implement the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) paradigm to improve educational support services. The study's findings not only add to the current body of research, but also provide practical recommendations for policymakers and educators seeking to enhance educational results for deaf students. The emphasis on UDL reflects a trend toward more inclusive educational techniques, which might assist a wider range of learners with varying needs.

Ngobeni, Maimane, & Rankhumise (2020) investigated the impact of sign language obstacles on Deaf students at special schools for the deaf and blind in Motheo District, Free State Province, South Africa. Semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted with seven

instructors and ten Grade 8 students, all of whom communicated in South African Sign Language (SASL) as their native language. Similarly to Mapepa and Magano's study, this study showed substantial concerns, such as a lack of in-service SASL training for instructors, students predominantly learning language at school rather than at home, and insufficient physical resources, all of which led to poor learning performance. These findings emphasize the crucial need for greater training and resources to assist deaf students. The proposal that colleges teach SASL as a common topic, especially for education students, emphasizes the necessity of integrating specialist language training into a larger educational curriculum. This is to better equip future instructors and enhance educational results for Deaf students.

Using information from 408 respondents in fifteen primary schools, Ndhlovu & Mtonga, (2015) explored how students with hearing and vision impairments might attend primary school education in Zambia's rural and urban settings. According to the report, between 2006 and 2012, there were more first-graders with disabilities enrolled in rural regions than in metropolitan ones. Nonetheless, urban students' advancement rates to grade seven were higher, indicating a notable dropout rate in rural regions. Gender differences were also found in the survey; 44% of female students in rural regions and 21% in urban areas dropped out. Long commutes to school, the incapacity of parents or guardians to cover the cost of attendance, unfavorable attitudes toward learning, subpar academic achievement, and early marriages were all contributing causes to this high dropout rate.

In light of the rise of rates of impaired students pursuing higher education worldwide over the previous three decades, Mantsha (2016) examined the assistance offered to students with disability at the University of Venda (UNIVEN) in South Africa. The study used a qualitative technique to gather data from 10 students with disabilities using focus groups, document analysis, and classroom observations. The results showed that although UNIVEN provides certain support services, there are still a lot of gaps. These include a general lack of disability awareness among staff and students, physical infrastructure limitations, and inadequate information about services that are offered. This study is in line with others that suggest that lack of familiarity with disability experiences, and poor supportive infrastructure are a great hindrance to the educational experience of children with disabilities.

Simui et al., (2019) investigated the obstacles to academic performance for visually impaired students at the University of Zambia, where less than 0.1% of the student body lives with a physical disability. Thirteen major obstacles were found in the study, and similarly to Mantsha's (2016) findings the obstacles included inaccessible facilities, inflexible curriculum, staff unpreparedness and lack of preparation, unfavorable attitudes toward students with disabilities, and a gap between policy and practice.

According to Kiyaga & Moores (2003), deaf education in sub-Saharan Africa dates back to the 19th century, when it was first introduced by European missionaries. Years later, American native Andrew Foster, founded 31 schools and promoted 'Total Communication,' a multi-sensory approach that combines various forms of communication to ensure that deaf

individuals have access to language and information. This approach, which includes sign language, oralism, written language, and augmented and alternative communication, was largely responsible for the movement's notable 20th-century spread. Kiyaga and Moores (2003) note that significant strides have been achieved in nations like South Africa, Kenya, Uganda, and Nigeria, where sign language is becoming more widely accepted and there are more educational options for the deaf. These developments have received backing from international organizations such as the World Federation of the Deaf and national constitutions.

A study in Tanzania about the lack of human and technological resources for students with disability in educational institutions was covered by NSIMBILA (2014). This study used a mixed-methods approach, including questionnaires and focus groups with 37 participants from four universities to evaluate the support services offered to visually impaired students in Tanzanian higher education institutions. Although it was found that 50% of people with disability used human resources and 36.4% used technical resources, the results showed severe shortages and unequal resource distribution. Many volunteers were underqualified, and many service providers lacked the abilities needed to give meaningful assistance. Furthermore, most technical materials were of poor quality. Another study in Tanzania by Sudy (2013) evaluated The Primary Education Development Program (PEDP), and noticed poor efficacy in fostering inclusive education for kids with visual and hearing impairments. The report, just as the last one also noted issues such a shortage of qualified instructors, poor school facilities, and insufficient instructional resources as reasons why PEDP had little to no effect on raising these kids' enrolment rates.

J Andrew (2015) investigated how the Special Needs school Policy affected students with hearing impairments' access to secondary school in Nandi County, Kenya. According to the research, most respondents were aware of the policy and agreed with it, noting that it had a beneficial impact on enrolment in schools and that there had been some improvements in the transfer of elementary to secondary education. But obstacles including lack of funds, low desire, and cultural differences persisted in impeding these students' access to and memory of the material. Unlike other literature referenced, this study cited cultural difference as a crucial factor in the educational experiences of children with disability.

At a secondary school in Eastern Ghana, Asamoah et al (2018) investigated how visually impaired pupils, their peers without disabilities, and teachers perceived inclusive education. Semi-structured interviews with 19 instructors, 27 pupils without impairments, and 23 visually impaired students were used in the study. The results showed that opinions on inclusive education were divided: many classmates without disabilities were against it, while visually impaired pupils and some teachers supported it. They argued that when visually impaired students are joined with students without disability, they slow down the learning pace and the academic progress of students without disability. The study concludes that while

some people value inclusive education, more must be done to ensure that Ghanaian instructors have the advanced training they need to accommodate students with disabilities. This will help to create a more welcoming and encouraging learning environment for all students.

Dube (2015) assessed the success of South Africa's government initiatives to increase disabled people's access to services through inclusive laws and policies, emphasizing the absence of specific disability legislation. Samaita Associates carried out an intensive literature analysis and conducted interviews with government officials in four provinces as part of the Disability Knowledge & Research (KaR) Programme. The statistical data on the prevalence of disabilities in South Africa showed inconsistent patterns, with estimates varying from 5.9% to 12%. The research also saw a decline in the number of disabilities reported between 1996 and 2001, which may have resulted from changes in sampling strategies or problems with definitions. The research found that even though policies and programs created between 1994 and 2004 sought to improve equity and service accessibility, there were still difficulties in effectively meeting the needs of people with disabilities.

3. Methodology

This research aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of educational accommodations provided to students with disabilities at Saint John's School for the Deaf and GOVI School for the Visually Impaired. The methodology employed a qualitative approach to gather detailed and nuanced data.

3.1 Participants

The study involved students from Saint John's School for the Deaf and GOVI. A total of 25 students participated, with 18 students from Saint John's and 7 from GOVI. The participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique to ensure a diverse representation in terms of age and gender of students with the two forms of disability.

3.2 Data Collection

Interviews:

- In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with all 25 participants to gather detailed qualitative data.
- The interviews focused on understanding the personal experiences of students, the challenges they faced, and their perspectives on the adequacy and effectiveness of the support provided by educators.
- The interviews were transcribed verbatim for analysis.

3.3 Data Analysis

3.3.1 Thematic Analysis:

- The qualitative data from the interviews and focus groups was analyzed using thematic analysis.
- The transcriptions were coded and categorized into themes pulled from the literature review, in order to identify common patterns and unique insights related to the effectiveness of educational accommodations. The themes were as follows:
 1. Communication barriers,
 2. Lack of Resources,
 3. Institutional Support and Incentives,
 4. Awareness of Government Policies,
 5. Educator Support and Inclusivity

Direct quotes from students were used to support the identified themes and provide rich, contextual evidence of their experiences.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

- Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they were aware of the study's purpose and their right to withdraw at any time.
- Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by assigning codes to participants' responses and ensuring that no identifying information was included in the reports.

4. Findings

4.1 Demographic Characteristics

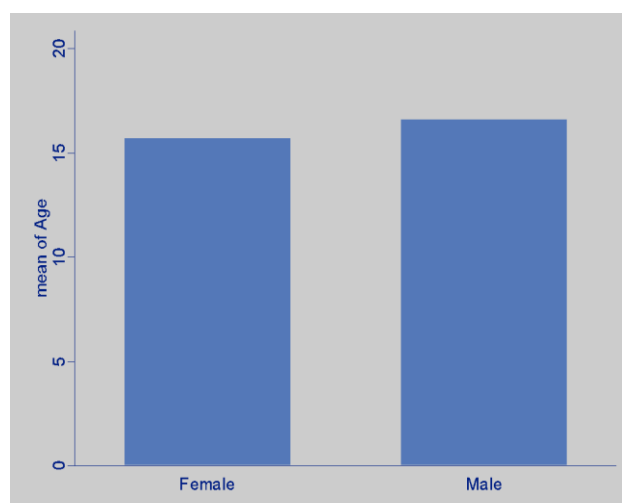


Figure 1

Figure 1 above shows the age distribution of the respondents by gender. It shows that female respondents have a lower average age of about 15 years as compared to about 17 years in male respondents.

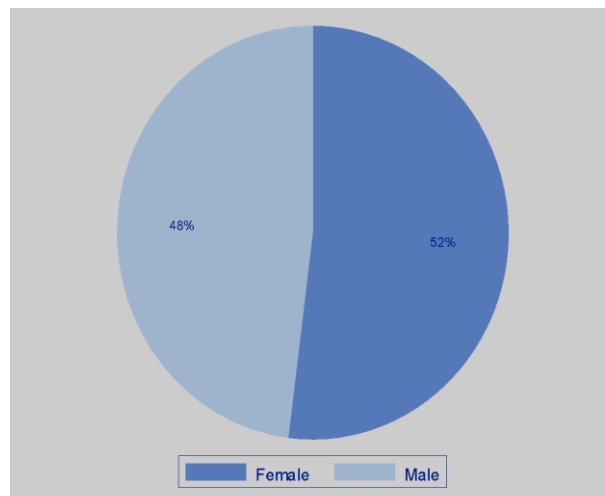


Figure 2

The pie chart above shows the distribution of the respondents by gender. The distribution is fairly even with male respondents of about 52% and female respondents about 48%. At Saint John's School for the Deaf, the sample included 8 males and 10 females. The respondents' ages ranged from 13 to 22 years old, with many students being 13 or 17 years old. At the GOVI School for the Visually Impaired, the sample included 4 males and 3 females. The respondents' ages ranged from 10 to 19 years old, with a more evenly spread age distribution.

4.2 Barriers to Education

4.2.1 Communication Barriers

At Saint John's School for the Deaf, about 61% of the students interviewed reported significant difficulties in communication due to the lack of sufficient sign language skills among their teachers.

Student [code VI1]: *"sometimes the teachers don't understand us, and it makes learning very hard."*

This issue highlights the critical need for better training and proficiency in sign language among educators. Conversely, students from the GOVI School for the Visually Impaired reported a mixed experience with communication barriers. While about 43% of students interviewed did not face major communication obstacles, about 57% struggled due to the absence of adequate braille resources and trained teachers who they can communicate with.

Student [code VI1], *“it’s hard when we don’t have enough braille papers, or the teachers don’t know how to help us properly.”*

The disparity in the percentage of students facing communication barriers between the two schools can be attributed to the nature of the disabilities. For deaf students, sign language proficiency is a critical skill for teachers, and its absence can severely impact learning. In contrast, visually impaired students at GOVI might rely on auditory communication, which can be less resource-intensive to address compared to sign language training.

Have you encountered barriers accessing education due to your disability?				
	GOVI school for the visually impaired		Saint John’s school for the deaf	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	4	57%	11	61%
No	3	43%	7	39%
Total	7	100%	18	100%

Figure 3

4.2.2 Lack of Resources

About 61% of students from Saint John’s School for the Deaf emphasized the pressing need for more qualified sign language teachers and improved learning materials.

Student [code D3] articulated this need by stating, *“We need more books and teachers who can sign well.”*

Similarly, at GOVI, about 57% of the students highlighted the necessity for more braille machines, IT support, and better physical resources. The lack of resources was exemplified by a Student [code VI3] who noted, *“We need an IT teacher to help us learn computers,”* underscoring the gaps in technological support.

The reason why more students at Saint John’s reported a lack of resources could be due to the additional challenges posed by deafness, which requires more specialized materials and teachers proficient in sign language. In contrast, visually impaired students might require different, though equally critical, resources like braille machines and IT support. The slight difference in percentages might be expected given the unique needs of each group.

Do you lack access to any educational resources?				
	GOVI school for the visually impaired		Saint John's school for the deaf	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	4	57%	11	61%
No	3	43%	7	39%
Total	7	100%	18	100%

Figure 4

4.3 Institutional Support and Incentives

4.3.1 Educational Incentives and Resources

At Saint John's School for the Deaf, students receive various forms of support, including food, communication support through sign language classes, and school materials like books and stationary. Despite these efforts, there remains a significant need for more qualified sign language teachers, as highlighted by a student who mentioned, Student [code D3] *"We get food and books, but we need more teachers who can sign well."* At GOVI, students generally felt well-supported with provisions such as education, music classes, meals, writing materials, uniforms, and occasionally transportation fare. However, the students expressed a need for an IT teacher and better security for their equipment. One student commented, Student [code VI7], *"The school helps a lot, but we need an IT teacher to learn computers,"* indicating areas that require further attention.

The disparities in the type of teachers needed between the two schools reflect differing priorities and challenges specific to each disability group. For Saint John's School for the Deaf, the emphasis on sign language proficiency and tailored educational materials underscores the critical need for specialized resources. Conversely, GOVI's focus on braille machines, IT support, and physical amenities highlights the unique requirements of visually impaired students.

4.3.2 Financial Assistance

Both Saint John's School for the Deaf and GOVI reported a unanimous lack of financial assistance from government programs. All respondents indicated that they had not received any financial support, highlighting a significant gap in governmental aid for students with

disabilities. The absence of financial assistance negatively impacts the ability of these schools to provide comprehensive support and resources to their students. This systemic issue underscores the need for policy reforms and increased advocacy to secure adequate funding and support for students with disabilities.

Are you aware of any financial support package available for individuals with disabilities?				
	GOVI School for the Visually Impaired		Saint John's School for the Deaf	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	0	-	0	-
No	7	100%	18	100%
Total	7	100%	18	100%

Figure 5

4.3.3 Assistive Technologies

The availability of assistive technologies was notably lacking at Saint John's School for the Deaf. Most students (about 72%) reported that their school does not provide assistive technologies, with some support in assistive technologies coming from external donors. A student remarked, Student [code D5], *"We don't get much help from the school; donors sometimes give us what we need."* At GOVI, there were some provisions such as braille machines and braille papers, but these were inconsistent and insufficient. Students also noted the absence of IT teachers, which hindered their ability to learn information technology. One student explained, Student [code VI7], *"We have braille machines, but not all the time, and we need someone to teach us computers."*

The disparities in the availability of assistive technologies highlight significant gaps in resource allocation and support for students with disabilities. For Saint John's School for the Deaf, the reliance on external donors for assistive technology indicates a reliance on unpredictable sources of support, which may not always meet the school's needs. In contrast, GOVI's inconsistent provision of braille machines and IT support reflects challenges in maintaining and integrating assistive technologies into the curriculum effectively.

Do educational institutions offer assistive technologies specifically designed for individuals with disabilities?				
	GOVI School for the Visually Impaired		Saint John's School for the Deaf	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	1	15%	5	27%
No	6	85%	18	73%
Total	7	100%	18	100%

Figure 6

4.4 Awareness and Effectiveness of Government Policies

4.4.1 Awareness of Government Policies

At Saint John's School for the Deaf, 100% of respondents were not aware of any government initiatives to assist students with disabilities in the educational environment. This lack of awareness suggests either insufficient communication from the government or a gap in policy implementation and outreach. In contrast, responses from GOVI were mixed; some students, about 57%, were aware of government policies, while others, about 43%, were not. This suggests a slightly better communication or policy implementation compared to the Deaf school but still shows room for improvement. However, it is important to note that students who claimed to have been aware of policies aimed at assisting people living disability were not able to clearly state the given policies or how they affected them.

The lack of awareness of government policies at Saint John's School for the Deaf highlights a critical gap in communication and information dissemination.

Are you aware of any government policy set to support disabilities in The Gambia especially in the educational sector?				
	GOVI School for the Visually Impaired		Saint John's School for the Deaf	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	4	57%	0	-

No	3	43%	18	100%
Total	7	100%	18	100%

Figure 7

4.4.2 Effectiveness of Government Policies

Students at Saint John’s School for the Deaf were generally skeptical about the effectiveness of government policies. Most students believed the policies were either non-existent or ineffective, with only one response noting that the policies are effective. This skepticism was echoed by a student who mentioned, Student [code D13] *"I don't think there are any policies that really help us."* In comparison, opinions at GOVI varied. Some students, about 57%, believed the policies were very effective, citing the provision of learning materials, braille machines, and infrastructure improvements. Others, about 43% felt the policies were not that effective, indicating inconsistent experiences or varying degrees of support.

The skepticism about government policies at Saint John’s School for the Deaf may stem from perceived gaps between policy intent and actual implementation. This discrepancy underscores the importance of evaluating policy outcomes and soliciting feedback from stakeholders to ensure that policies effectively meet the needs of students with disabilities. The varied opinions at GOVI reflect differing experiences and expectations regarding policy effectiveness, highlighting the complexity of policy impact in diverse educational settings.

	GOVI School for the Visually Impaired		Saint John’s School for the Deaf	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	4	57%	1	5%
No	3	43%	17	95%
Total	7	100%	18	100%

Figure 8

4.5 Educator Support and Inclusivity

4.5.1 Educator Accommodation

The evaluation of how well educators meet the needs of students with disabilities at Saint John’s School for the Deaf varied. About 72% of students mentioned how educators assist them with textbooks and sign language, suggesting a degree of cooperation and

understanding among teachers. However, about 27% of students expressed discontent with the quality of accommodations, stating that the assistance provided is inadequate, ineffective, or of poor quality and hence one of the students in Saint John’s School for the Deaf emphasized that availability of sign language interpreters is very bad because some teachers do not have enough training. This discrepancy indicates that while some students feel supported, others believe teachers are not giving them the attention they require. At GOVI, about 85% students overwhelmingly indicated that educators effectively accommodate their needs as students with disabilities. They expressed appreciation for educators providing quality education, notes, papers for writing, and responding to their needs. This positive feedback largely stems from the sense of support and understanding that students experience at school. Despite existing gaps, educators strive to create an environment where students feel valued, heard, and understood, often more so than they do at home. This suggests that educators make considerable efforts to ensure that visually impaired students have access to necessary resources and support.

How effectively do you think educators accommodate your needs as a student with a disability?				
	GOVI School for the Visually Impaired		Saint John’s School for the Deaf	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	6	85%	13	72%
No	1	15%	5	27%
Total	7	100%	18	100%

Figure 9

4.5.2 Overall Inclusivity

Responses from Saint John’s School for the Deaf gave varying opinions about how inclusive the educational environment is for children with disabilities. About 39% of the students perceived the environment as fair, excellent, or conducive, indicating a positive perception of inclusion. However, 61% of the students expressed dissatisfaction, rating the inclusivity as poor or very bad, and noting that persons with disabilities are not adequately included in the environment. This mixed perception highlights the need for a more consistent and inclusive approach within the school. At GOVI, about 57% of the students generally rated the overall inclusivity of the educational environment more positively. Most students rated the environment as good or inclusive, mentioning positive experiences of inclusion and collaboration. However, 43% of the students highlighted negative experiences of

discrimination and unfriendliness from peers, indicating that challenges still exist within the environment.

How would you rate the overall inclusivity of the educational environment for individuals with disability? Please describe your experience				
	GOVI School for the Visually Impaired		Saint John’s School for the Deaf	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	4	57%	7	39%
No	3	43%	11	61%
Total	7	100%	18	100%

Figure 10

4.6 Additional Comments and Suggestions

Students at Saint John’s School for the Deaf emphasized the critical need for government support. They pointed out areas requiring immediate attention, such as the provision of better transport facilities, special needs teachers, and more qualified sign language teachers. One student mentioned, Student [code D18] *"The government should recognize our rights and needs better,"* reflecting a broader desire for more recognition and rights for individuals with disabilities. At GOVI, students stressed the importance of societal encouragement and support. They called for a shift in societal attitudes to abandon negative beliefs about their capabilities. Expressing gratitude towards their helpers, the students highlighted the need for greater inclusion and encouragement in their educational journey. One student Student [code VI6] , *"We need more people to believe in us and help us reach our potential,"* underscoring the need for continued societal and governmental support to empower students with disabilities.

5. Observations

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the educational experiences of students with disabilities in The Gambia, focusing on the Deaf and Visually Impaired populations at Saint John’s School for the Deaf and the GOVI School for the Visually Impaired. Several key themes emerged: barriers to accessing education, the effectiveness of

institutional and governmental support, the inclusivity of educational environments, and the availability of assistive technologies and resources.

Firstly, students from both schools face significant barriers in accessing education due to their disabilities. Deaf students reported challenges such as communication difficulties, a lack of proficient sign language teachers, and parental reluctance to prioritize education over household chores. One student Student [code D5] highlighted this issue by saying, "My parents think I should help at home instead of going to school." This reflects a broader societal issue where the value of education for children with disabilities is often undervalued. Visually impaired students faced obstacles including limited resources, lack of community support, and practical challenges like navigating to the bus stop. As one student noted, "It's difficult to get to the bus stop, and sometimes I can't find my way around the school." These findings align with existing literature on the barriers faced by students with disabilities, underscoring the need for targeted interventions to remove these obstacles.

Support systems for students with disabilities also appeared inconsistent. At Saint John's School for the Deaf, the primary source of support was from donors and sponsors, with no mention of government or institutional programs designed to further their education. This reliance on external donors highlights a potential gap in sustainable, structured support systems within the country's educational framework. In contrast, students at GOVI reported mixed levels of community support and limited awareness of formal educational support packages, suggesting a need for better communication and promotion of these programs.

Regarding educator support, students at GOVI felt more supported by their teachers, who provided quality education, notes, and materials, and were responsive to their needs. One student expressed gratitude, saying, "The teachers here understand our needs better than at home." This suggests that educators at GOVI make considerable efforts to ensure that visually impaired students have access to necessary resources. Meanwhile, students at Saint John's School for the Deaf had mixed experiences with the availability of sign language interpreters and communication support, indicating a need for ongoing training and support to ensure effective communication.

Inclusivity within the educational environment varied between the two schools. Visually impaired students generally felt more integrated and valued within their academic community, whereas deaf students reported mixed feelings. While some deaf students felt a sense of belonging, others faced communication barriers and limitations in continuing their education in hearing schools, highlighting the need for more inclusive practices. This aligns with the literature on the importance of creating supportive educational environments that cater to the diverse needs of students with disabilities.

The study also examined the awareness and effectiveness of government policies supporting students with disabilities. Most deaf students were unaware of any such policies, and those who were aware expressed doubts about their effectiveness. In contrast, Visually Impaired students showed more awareness and some acknowledgment of effective policies, such as

the provision of braille machines and improvements in school facilities. However, both groups indicated the need for better communication and implementation of these policies, reinforcing findings from the literature on the significance of policy awareness in supporting students with disabilities.

Lastly, there was a notable disparity in the availability of assistive technologies. Visually Impaired students had access to braille machines and other assistive materials, while Deaf students largely lacked similar technological support, relying on external donations instead. This gap suggests the need for educational institutions to invest in and provide consistent access to assistive technologies tailored to the needs of students with different disabilities. Existing literature highlights the crucial role of such technologies in improving educational outcomes for students with disabilities.

Overall, the study's findings align with the literature review, emphasizing the importance of accessible education, adequate support systems, and inclusive environments for students with disabilities. The responses from students underscore the persistent challenges they face and highlight areas where improvements are needed. To address these issues, it is crucial for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders to collaborate in creating a more inclusive and supportive educational landscape in The Gambia. This includes enhancing the availability and quality of assistive technologies, ensuring consistent and comprehensive support from educational institutions, and improving awareness and effectiveness of government policies aimed at supporting students with disabilities. By addressing these key areas, The Gambia can move towards a more equitable educational system that empowers all students, regardless of their disabilities, to succeed and thrive.

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