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## Centering Inclusive Education of the African Continent: Special Issue Editorial Introduction

Jen Rinaldi PhD  
Legal Studies, Ontario Tech University  
Jen.Rinaldi@ontariotechu.ca

Evelyn Kissi, PhD  
Department of Teacher Education, University of Ghana

Marilyn Marbell, MD, MSc  
Mission Pediatrics

Anita Ewan, PhD, RECE, RSW, CD, CBE  
Early Child Care and Education, Capilano University

Christina Joseph, BA  
Osgoode Hall Law School

### **Abstract**

This paper introduces the special issue *Centering Inclusive Education of the African Continent*. The articles featured in this special issue were first presented at the transnational academic conference *Disability in Education: Sustaining and Inclusive Africa*, which took place in October 2023 at the University of Ghana. The conference was funded with a SSHRC Connection Grant to gather key stakeholders in disability rights advocacy and service provision, disability studies research, and government and institutional policy to consider how to centre disability education in sustainable development goals. This editorial introduction explains the conference backstory, the formation of a special issue designed to advance disability studies via perspectives inspired and primarily penned by scholars from the Global South, and the content of the special issue itself.

### **Keynotes**

Inclusive Education, Disability in Education, Ghana, Nigeria, Africa

## ***Akwaaba: A Welcome into the Special Issue***

A soft, sticky ball of boiled cassava root sat at the base of an aromatic peanut stew that had been ladled into the bowls of conference attendees. This meal, fufu (or fofoo, or fofou, a Twi word meaning mashed), has long been a staple in West African cuisine, predating colonization and cutting across ethnic groups (Williams-Forson, 2014). Preparation traditionally entails one person pounding the dough with a pestle in a large wooden mortar, a second cook folding the starchy substance over, adding water at each turn – which is all arduous, rhythmic, communal work (Ayensu, 1972; Osseo-Asare, 2002). Consumption happens in community, at weddings and festivals, and in this case, an academic gathering. Locals collected their lunch trays with all the requisite knowledge and appreciation, and they taught the fly-ins how to pull away portions of the ball, soak up the soup, and take in the swallow food (or food that should not be chewed). Through our three days together, it was particularly over meals that conference-goers bonded, illustrating through praxis how sharing food involves reciprocal exchange, nourishes the body to make intellectual pursuit possible, and serves as a bedrock for community building (Keevers & Sykes, 2016).

We start with fufu to signal how this special issue, and the conference that served as its catalyst, came together through collective work, local knowledge, and a centering of Pan-African values when constructing distinctly African disability theories and imagining the unique, geopolitically grounded dimensions, facilitators, and challenges to inclusive education. Much like fufu, this project – and the work of providing inclusive education – is communal and patiently labour-intensive. Our editorial introduction offers an accounting

of key lessons drawn from the conference *Disability in Education: Sustaining an Inclusive Africa*, and its throughline to this special issue, *Centering Inclusive Education of the African Continent*. In what follows, we welcome readers to this special issue by first describing the background organizing that made our conference possible, the field of research to which our conference and special issue were meant to contribute, and the contents of the special issue itself, organized around key aphorisms and symbols associated with West African cultures.

## **Our Gathering in Ghana**

The conference *Disability in Education: Sustaining an Inclusive Africa*, held October 18-20, 2023, brought together disability rights advocates, service providers, disability studies researchers and students, and institutional policymakers, all sharing their efforts to centre disability education in sustainable development goals. Of particular interest were the questions: 1) how does disability in education factor into sustainable development on the African continent; and 2) what can Canadian research on disability in education learn from African disability theory? Key conference objectives included identifying the scope and impact of intersectional, geopolitically situated, disability-based discrimination; increasing the multi-disciplinary knowledge and reach of a Pan-African, disability-centered approach to sustainable development; recommending improvements upon the socio-economic inclusion of disabled Africans in education systems; and mobilizing research from the African continent and Global South.

With Social Science and Humanities Research Council funding from a Connection Grant, the conference was held at the University of Ghana in the Ghanaian coastal capital

of Accra. Dr. Evelyn Kissi of the University of Ghana oversaw conference organization, supported by graduate and undergraduate students, and Canadian colleagues Drs. Anita Ewan (at Capilano University), Gillian Parekh (York University), Jen Rinaldi (Ontario Tech University), and Kathryn Underwood (Toronto Metropolitan University). The hybrid event reached an attendance count of over 500 people, with over 100 people attending in person, flying in from the surrounding region and around the world.

Each day had a different keynote speaker, all community leaders with lived experience of disability. Mr. Edmund Asiedu, who served the National Disability Rights Network, the Ghana Society of the Physically Disabled, and the Columbia University Medical Center's Disability Access and Accommodations Committee, presented on the violences of colonial and imperial histories that shape current systems on the African continent. He specifically described an international campaign for inclusive public transit infrastructure. Ms. Farida Nana Efu Bedwei, a software engineer and comic book author with cerebral palsy, shared her knowledge of accessible technology and its social stratification. She highlighted the importance of building an accessible job market and underscored the need for systemic change and equal opportunity, starting with but also reaching beyond the educational sphere. Finally, Ms. Gertrude Oforiwa Fefoame, an expert in gender and disability rights advocacy who lives with a visual impairment, consulted with the United Nations in drafting the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, for which she earned the Ghana National Excellence Grant. Ms. Fefoame called on the conference audience to ensure that disabled Ghanaian children are not denied equal

learning opportunities – a collective responsibility she imagined local and international actors could all shoulder.

Collectively, event presenters for keynote events and across the conference program worked out tangible, policy- and community-based calls to action designed by and for disabled students. Presenters sought to reshape the landscape of education for disabled Africans and to achieve meaningfully sustainable development on the continent. Critical takeaways from the conference included the need to create justice from the ground up and the expectation that Canadian actors support and learn from local and Pan-African organizing.

## **Contribution to Disability Studies Research**

This conference was meant to advance disability studies, to open up a field that has been described as narrowly focused on reductive narratives of disablement that discount experiences of disabled persons in the Global South (Connell, 2007; 2011; Grech & Soldatic, 2016; Kissi, 2018, 2020; Meekosha & Soldatic, 2011; Nguyen, 2018). Such restrictive conceptual framings have implications for policy, human rights instruments, and sustainability initiatives that fail to achieve disability justice, given their lack of regional specificity. Disability scholars therefore have a responsibility to decolonize their studies by shifting away from Eurocentric accounts and ways of knowing (Gorman, 2010, 2016; Grech, 2011, 2015; Meekosha, 2011; Soldatic & Brech, 2014). Critical theorists have further probed how the problem of scope in disability theorizing is not just geopolitical but also deeply racialized (Erevelles, 2011; Erevelles & Minear, 2010; Hinton, 2011; Schalk, 2022). Chris Bell (2011) wrote that the field has historically failed “to engage issues of race

and ethnicity in a substantive capacity, thereby entrenching whiteness as its constitutive underpinning” (p. 275). This project, encapsulating our conference and special issue exclusively focused on African disability theory and its evidence-based applications, is therefore poised to offer a crucial contribution to advancing the field of disability studies.

Scholarship in the area of disability studies in education has challenged the idea that inclusion – conceptualized within curriculum, pedagogy, and the institutional organization of classrooms (Eilers, 2020) – is solely about placement and has focused on the contributions of disabled students to understandings of belonging, participation, and equity in educational spaces (Slee, Corcoran & Best, 2019). Disability studies in education seeks to disrupt the inclusion discourses that simply move special education into so-called regular classrooms. Instead, critical disability studies in education aims to re-envision classrooms as places where disability is normalized and disabled people are valued and respected. This means that the underlying socio-political contexts that contribute to disablement – including poverty, colonization, capitalism, and environmental harm – are foregrounded while caring for and educating disabled students (Kissi, 2018, 2020; Liasidou, 2023).

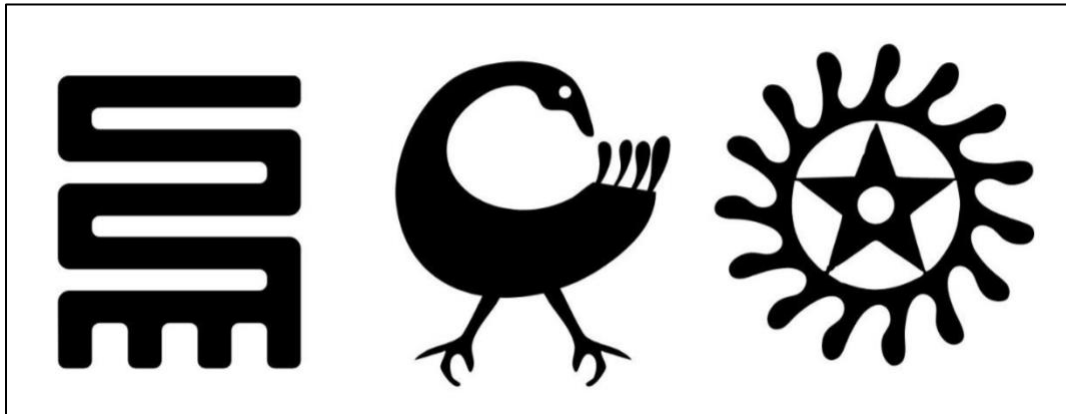
This foregrounding can contribute to sustainable development goals (UN, 2018). Granted, there is no unanimity in scholarly fields on framing either political or human development as the objective of inclusion (Douglas & Santinele Martino 2020). Disability studies in education, along with childhood studies and inclusive education, have all congregated around a critique of normative development. Certainly, the construction of a “normal” child in early childhood and school-based education is rooted in ableist,

colonial, and Eurocentric views of childhood. However, the rejection of developmentalism leaves a gap in how to engage with differences in children as they grow and learn. There is an opportunity to engage with African theories and worldviews as a model for inclusive education. Drawing on Indigenous scholarships from Ghana and Canada, we know that the valuing of human differences is conceptualized as a gift celebrated, with recognition of human development as natural and social (Underwood et al., 2017; Kissi 2020).

## **Special Issue Outline**

In an effort to extend the work accomplished at the conference in Accra and to contribute perspectives on and of the Global South to the advancement of scholarship on disability and inclusive education, members of the conference organizing committee offered presenters the opportunity to submit their work for consideration in a *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies* special issue. The call was released following the conference, at the start of 2024. Like the two-person job of working the wooden pestle and folding in the water in the creation of fufu, the peer review process paired one peer reviewer from the North American continent (i.e., experts familiar with the journal's mandate), with one peer reviewer from the African continent (i.e., experts familiar with inclusive education in West Africa). This process was overseen by a cross-continental editorial team: Drs. Evelyn Kissi, Anita Ewan, Marilyn Marbell (a Ghanaian-based Neurodevelopmental Pediatrician with MSc in Psychology), and Jen Rinaldi. After delays that reflect how a project developed by a global team of (at least some) disabled people tends to operate on crip time (Kafer, 2013; McRuer, 2006), the special issue came to constitute nine articles.

In what follows, we explain how the articles selected and prepared for publication were organized into three sections. Our sections draw inspiration from a collection of nearly 70 Adinkra symbols associated with the Akan peoples located in Ghana and the Ivory Coast, symbols found in the pattern-work of textiles, jewelry, and architecture (Dzokoto et al., 2018). Each symbol is associated with a name or phrase, related to Akan philosophical principles. We organized our special issue around three such symbols in acknowledgment that Afrocentric customs have significantly contributed to the reframing of West African education. Educators and education experts have drawn on these symbols, not necessarily by presuming monolithic culture, but by utilizing pre-colonial traditions in acts of reclaiming education systems (Adom et al., 2018; Amponsah, 2023; Jackson et al., 2021; Kissi, 2020; Vazquez-Brust et al., 2024).



*Figure 1. Three Adinkra symbols, from left to right: Nkyinkyim for twisting (a line bending, winding down, its bottom line resting on four legs), Sankofa for returning to the source (a bird with its neck bending back), Sesa Wo Suban for transformation (a five-point star in the centre of a wheel). Images generated on Canva.*

### ***Nkyinkyim: Finding the Underlying and Connecting Ableisms***

We begin the special issue with the Adinkra symbol that depicts a line with several bends, winding down, its bottom line resting on four table-like legs (Dzokoto et al., 2018). The *Nkyinkyim* translates to *twisting*, representing “the tortuous nature of life’s journey and, also, the toughness, versatility, and dynamism required to thrive in it” (Adinkra Symbols and Meanings, 2025, unpaginated). The image is meant to evoke “often hidden or subtle connections between seemingly unrelated phenomena” (Vazquez-Brust et al., 2024, p. 8). We reference *Nkyinkyim* in connection to the structural and interactional ableisms that scholars uncovered in their studies, and the ways teachers and students endured and adapted. Some studies focused on schools explicitly designed to be architecturally inclusive or programs designed to implement inclusive education, but primary data shows that the lived experience of inclusive education comes with a few twists.

Stephen Oluwaseun Emmanuel opens this section with *Improving Efficacy of Elementary Education Teachers in Teaching Students with Learning Disabilities in Southwestern Nigeria*. In this mixed-methods study, Emmanuel collected quantitative data from 50 teachers. He ran interviews with 20% of his sample to investigate whether a particular training program for teachers in Southwestern Nigeria improved their efficacy in meeting the needs of disabled students. Teachers stressed the importance of training to provide guidance, support, and resources; and identified feelings of being overwhelmed and under-equipped to address disabled students’ classroom needs – meaning training will prove insufficient if not paired with mechanisms to redress the structural inequalities endemic to Nigeria’s colonial history.

*In Assessing Teachers' Knowledge and Competence in Supporting Neurodivergent Studies in Ghana's Inclusive Education Schools*, Valda Deide Commey, Mabel Oti-Boadi, Benjamin Amponsah, and Kenneth Owusu Ansah present findings from a quantitative research project. The writers conducted a cross-sectional survey of 150 teachers across 46 Ghanaian inclusive education schools. The teachers who participated had experience supporting children with neurodivergent conditions, in particular autism, learning disabilities, and cerebral palsy. This article uses statistical analysis to find that teachers' knowledge of disability is improving to better serve students' classroom needs. However, increased knowledge did not correlate with improvements in attitude about disability. This study shows the importance of comprehensive and ongoing teacher training, resource provisions, and effective broader collaboration.

*Understanding the Experiences of Learners with Dyslexia From the Lens of an Ecological System and Force Field Analysis* by Georgina Nnamani utilizes Kurt Lewin's force field analysis and Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to argue that the interactions between dyslexic students and their environment influence their learning experiences. Nnamani argues that the broader forces that impact students' experiences of themselves and their personal interactions must be considered when schools develop interventions. Her conceptual model accounts for economic and technological disparities in Sub-Saharan African countries at the macrosystem (i.e., social blueprints) and chronosystem (i.e., lifespan) levels.

### ***Sankofa: Learning from History***

This section presents papers that honour *Sankofa*, represented by a bird looking backwards with its long neck bending back on itself, while its planted feet face forwards. In some image versions, the bird is holding an egg in its beak. *Sankofa* in Twi means returning to the source, retrieving what we can learn from the past (Kissi, 2018, 2020), literally *go back and get it* (Adinkra Symbols and Meanings, 2025). The call “encourages people not to discard traditional practices, in particular those benefitting society” (Vazquez-Brust, 2024, p. 5). This means that finding the traditions lost to histories of colonialism, imperialism, and enslavement can facilitate building a better-working future.

In *Including African Disability History in Disability Studies Education: Reflections from a Non-Expert*, Geoffrey Reaume provides an honest account of how disability history aligns with Anglo-American narratives. To resist these reductive, white-centered narratives, the author traces disability history through African-sourced scholarship pre- and post-colonization and at points of interaction with colonial forces. This article offers a reorientation of disability education to promote an explicitly African disability history.

In *“If We Had an Option, We Wouldn’t Be Here”*: *Revisiting Inclusive Education for Learners with Visual Disabilities in Ghana*, Abigail Adubea Mills, Anthony Oduro, and Andrews Berchie present qualitative interviews that showcase the barriers that 21 visually impaired students experienced in purportedly inclusive education environments. Challenges include teachers’ disregard for accommodations and inadequate training, physical layout like gutters and uneven ground, and unfair treatment by teachers and sighted peers. Mills et al. trace Ghana’s history of education to show the throughline for student experience.

Wrapping up this section is *Intersectional Identities and Inclusive Education:*

*Exploring the Experiences of Students with Disabilities from Diverse Marginalized Groups at the University of Ghana.* In this article, Simon-Peter Kafui Aheto and Joseph Sasu Kwame conducted qualitative interviews with nine students and staff to analyze the lived experience of socio-political, economic, and historical factors that compound ableist oppression at the University of Ghana. Findings point to complex forms of discrimination that impact disabled postsecondary students’ access, affordability, social relationships, and inclusion. The authors’ analysis shows the strengths of an Afrocentrist and hyper-localized articulation of intersectional feminist theory to challenge discriminatory conditions.

### ***Sesa Wo Suban: Targeting and Transforming Policy***

We conclude this special issue with the Adinkra symbol of transformation: a five-point morning star at the centre of a spoked wheel (Dzokoto et al., 2018). Traditionally accompanying this symbol is the phrase *Sesa Wo Suban* – or *change your character* (Vazquez-Brust et al., 2024). The call “draws special attention to the transformative power of people and how they can re-shape themselves and their communities through their action” (p. 6). In that spirit, this section showcases three papers wherein the authors are committed to policy review and reform, in an effort to transform their educational systems. Where the principle *Sesa Wo Suban* tends to focus on improving the self to become a better civic actor, we invoke it here to encapsulate papers focused on the inner policy frameworks of a nation or educational institution to serve disabled citizens.

In *An Evaluation of the University of Ghana’s Disability Policy from Staff and Student Perspectives*, Isaac Kyere evaluated the University of Ghana’s accommodation policy. He presents a staff-sourced history of the development of university service provision and students’ experiences of barriers related to architecture, alternative materials, and information technology infrastructure.

Chinyere Usen authored *Digital Education of Children with Disabilities in the Context of COVID-19: Challenges of Online Education in Lagos State*, wherein she examines the regulatory framework in Lagos State to ensure provisions for digital learning benefit, or at least don’t leave out disabled children during macro and micro emergencies. Usen recommends policy amendments to address the technology necessary in a post-COVID world and policy commitments to training and financial support (for example, broadband internet connection in rural regions).

We end with *How User-Led and Policy-Level Approaches Complement Each Other: Lessons from Ghana*, wherein Vivan F. Sarpomaa Fiscian, Alice Tilton, and Lyla Adwan-Kamara share lessons from a remarkably productive four-year disability programme. Ghana Somubi Dwaumadie, which translates to Ghana Participation Programme, advocated for people with mental health conditions to achieve active political participation, improved well-being, and recognition of socio-economic rights and outcomes. The authors provide examples that took a twinned approach of being user-led, directed by the needs and priorities of disabled service users and the organizations they lead, and policy-level, driven by a political economy analysis of power differentials.

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