

## **Considering Inclusive Education Through International Research Partnerships Involving Organizations From Ghana and Canada**

**Steve Sider and Jeff Grischow**  
**Wilfrid Laurier University**

**Kimberly Maich**  
**Memorial University**

**Magnus Mfoafo-M'Carthy**  
**Wilfrid Laurier University**

**Wisdom Mprah**  
**Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology**

**Jacqueline Specht**  
**Western University**

### **Abstract**

*This article responds to the question, In what ways can an international research partnership involving partners from Canada and Ghana contribute to efforts to foster inclusive education in schools? We describe a research partnership that involved universities in Canada and Ghana, civil-society organizations, schools, and government departments. We examine opportunities and learning experiences that were facilitated by the partnership. Key lessons from the partnership are articulated. A framework is proposed, the 4R Model for International Research Partnership that prioritizes reciprocity, responsiveness, relationships, and resources to ensure that international research partnerships are best positioned to accomplish their goals.*

Inclusive education has been at the forefront of global efforts to ensure that every child is authentically included in their neighbourhood school. Despite significant policy development at the international, national, and local level to codify inclusive education in

legislation, there is a significant gap between these policy directions and the realities on the ground. Many children with disabilities continue to be restricted from their local schools. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), nearly 240 million children living with disabilities are being denied basic rights to education (UNICEF Kosovo Program, 2021). The challenges to fulfilling the policy directions related to inclusive education are significant.

Collaboration between the various parties involved in inclusive education, including students and their families, teachers, school principals, system leaders, and government officials, is important in moving from policy to practice. Often, collaboration involves people and organizations from the same or a similar sector. Another form of collaboration involves people from different sectors and groups. In this article, we describe a research partnership for inclusive education that involved universities in Canada and Ghana, civil-society organizations, schools, and government departments. Thus, the article responds to the question, In what ways can an international research partnership involving partners from Canada and Ghana contribute to efforts to foster inclusive education in schools?

## Literature Review

### Inclusive Education in Ghana

Prior to the 1990s, very few students with disabilities in Ghana were included in neighbourhood schools. The few specialized, segregated schools that did exist did not have the capacity to meet the needs of all disabled children in Ghana (Kuyini & Desai, 2007). In the 1990s, the Government of Ghana signalled a commitment to inclusive education by participating in the 1990 World Conference on Education for All conference (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 1990) and signing the *Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education* (UNESCO and Spain Ministry of Education and Science, 1994). Ghana acted on this commitment with a systematic inclusive education program between 2003 and 2015 as part of the Ministry of Education's National Action Plan on Education for All (Kuyini et al., 2016; Lamptey et al., 2015). Under this program, the number of schools in Ghana that implemented inclusive education programs and supports increased from 35 in 2003 to 3,022 in 2015 (Deku & Vanderpuye, 2017).

The 2010 Ghanaian census documented that as many as 280,000 disabled Ghanaians are children (Lamptey et al., 2015). Using the commonly accepted estimate of a 70% exclusion rate, it has been estimated that almost 200,000 disabled children did not attend school in Ghana (Mprah et al., 2015). Of the disabled students who were able to access education, most were in segregated schools where they receive substandard education services that fall well below standards for non-disabled Ghanaians (Gregorius, 2016).

Despite the effort to implement inclusive education programs and supports in Ghana, the majority of disabled children continue to be excluded from education, and researchers have found many problems in inclusive education programs. Most of the literature on the failure of inclusive education in Ghana focuses on barriers that exclude disabled Ghanaian children from school completely or push them into segregated institutions. These barriers

include stigma, poverty, poor teacher training, and a lack of resources (Agbenyega, 2007; Kuyini et al., 2016; Mamah et al., 2011). For many researchers, the most important barrier is stigma rooted in superstitions about the causes of disability (Ocloo & Subbey, 2008). Disabled children are stigmatized because they are considered cursed or non-human. They are ostracized because of the belief that disabilities are contagious. Their parents are blamed for causing children’s disabilities as a result of spiritual transgressions (Adera & Asimeng-Boahene, 2011; Agbenyega, 2007; Ametepee & Anastasiou, 2015; Gregorius, 2016; Nketsia, 2017). Negative social attitudes and prejudices are held by teachers, as well as by classmates and communities (Gyimah et al., 2008; Mamah et al., 2011; Ocloo & Subbey, 2008). In some cases, teachers’ prejudices are worst toward students with sensory disabilities such as deafness or blindness (Gyimah et al., 2008). Teachers and school administrators face other obstacles as well, including large class sizes, lack of resources, lack of teacher knowledge and/or training in special or inclusive education, and lack of funding for schools. As well, there has been poor implementation of inclusive education policy by the government (Adera & Asimeng-Boahene, 2011; Kuyini et al., 2016; Lamptey et al., 2015). This research acknowledged the critical importance of providing professional learning in inclusive education for educators and other stakeholders in Ghana. The research partnership that frames this article and that developed from 2019 to 2023 was in response to this need.

## **Partnerships to Foster Development**

Sustainable Development Goal 17 speaks to the importance of partnerships to “strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development” (United Nations, 2022). In our case, a research partnership had been formed to support Sustainable Development Goal 4: “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (United Nations, 2022). We were specifically interested in education that includes students with disabilities and in how partnerships can ensure that all children have access to equitable and inclusive education. Targets established by the United Nations that were relevant to the partnership included Target 17.9: “Enhance international support for implementing effective and targeted capacity-building in developing countries to support national plans to implement all the sustainable development goals, including through North–South, South–South and triangular cooperation” and Target 17.17: “Encourage and promote effective public, public-private and civil society partnerships, building on the experience and resourcing strategies of partnerships” (United Nations, 2022).

Partnerships involve peer-to-peer collaborations for sharing knowledge and growing expertise between researchers and organizations toward a common goal (Heffernan & Poole, 2005; Larkan et al., 2016). Partnerships between invested parties can lead to improved educational practices (Coburn & Penuel, 2016; Sider et al., 2023), provide opportunities for sharing limited resources (Sider & Jean-Marie, 2014), and foster innovative practices (Kolk & Lenfant, 2015). A key aspect of equitable partnerships is that they must involve local colleagues, and time needs to be invested in understanding local contexts (Mwangi, 2017; Rose & Doveston, 2015).

## **Partnerships in Higher Education**

The academic literature provides ample examples of how partnerships can foster research, faculty and student exchanges, and capacity-building; however, much of the literature focuses on partnerships in higher education, particularly related to global health (Aldersey et al., 2019; Bordogna, 2018; Godoy-Ruiz et al., 2016; Larkan et al., 2016). There is less attention in the scholarly literature to partnerships involving higher education and primary and secondary school institutions (Sider et al., 2023). As well, our review of the literature demonstrated that partnerships between post-secondary institutions and primary and secondary schools specifically to address inclusive education have been even more limited.

Although there may be benefits, international research partnerships can have challenges. For example, research partnerships between countries in the Global North and Global South may have inequities in roles, responsibilities, and access to research funds (Larkan et al., 2016; Mfoafo-M'Carthy & Grischow, 2022; Munung et al., 2017). Key to overcoming these challenges and maximizing the positive effects of international partnerships are clear communication and accountability structures (Spencer-Oatey, 2013).

In this article, we use examples from our research-partnership experience to address how challenges that might be part of international research partnerships can be minimized and how these partnerships can support effective research collaboration. Ultimately, the goal of such research partnerships is to support improved inclusive education policies and practices.

## **Methodology**

The partnership centred on how to support inclusive and equitable quality education in Ghana. Canadian partners included universities and research centres, and Ghanaian partners included universities, schools, disability-rights organizations, and government departments. The partnership was initiated with the support of a Canadian federal government grant in 2019. Multiple research-team meetings and activities were held between 2019 and 2023. These activities took place during research trips to Ghana by the Canadian members of the research team. Data sources from these activities included field notes, focus-group notes, questionnaires, and artifacts (e.g., chart paper from meetings, photos, and video segments). This article does not describe the research activities that were carried out as part of this research project, but rather the ways in which the partnership supported the study and what lessons might be learned for other international research partnerships focused on inclusive education. Thus, the noted data sources inform the subsequent Findings and Discussion sections, but we report on our observations and insights through the activities involved in the research, rather than by using typical data analysis and reporting methods.

The partnership evolved out of disparate and diverse previous partnerships in which members of the research team had been involved. For example, one of the co-authors had worked with a school in Ghana on a partnership to support teacher professional learning. Others had engaged in previous research projects with disability-rights organizations in Ghana. The research team from Ghana included university faculty

members, civil-society–organization leaders, and school leaders. The research team from Canada included university faculty members who had engaged in research on inclusive education in Canada. The team included university faculty members from the disciplines of education, disability studies, social work, and history, reflecting a multidisciplinary approach that was best suited to consider the diverse contributing factors to barriers to inclusive education in Ghana. These various relationships and previous projects helped frame the new research partnership that brought together universities, schools, community organizations, and government departments.

The relationships that had helped foster the previous partnerships were important contributors to the early successes of the new partnership. For example, members of the research team had a strong connection with the principal of a school in Accra, Ghana, who was able to provide access to key members of the Ghana Educational Service, the government department that gives direction to education in Ghana. The director of the special education unit of the Ghana Educational Service commented that, without this access, the research team would not have been able to connect with her office as quickly as we did. Access to this department enhanced the research partnership with the provision of additional resources that were new to the team and provided novel, additional project work.

## Findings

Through our research partnership, we identified two key aspects that reflect how international research partnerships can support inclusive education research: opportunities and learning. These findings serve to provide insights into how an international research partnership can be fostered to enhance the studies that are the focus of the partnership.

### Opportunities

Opportunities abound for research partnerships to support inclusive education. One participant noted that there seemed to be a multitude of partnerships in Ghana focused on health but few that were focused on inclusive education. Many educators with whom we engaged in our research commented that they had only peripheral knowledge of inclusion and were lacking in resources to support inclusive education. Although these issues could be seen as potential barriers, educators seemed to be eager to engage in learning about how to support inclusive education practices, which could be viewed through the lens of opportunity.

Partnerships might develop *organically* rather than strategically, and this process can often mean that aspects of the partnership are not clearly delineated or defined at the outset. As one president of a university stated, “We have no idea what we’re getting ourselves into.... We’re going to figure it out as we go along.” Having open-ended partnerships—with a common purpose—can lead to opportunities that might not be as easily availed of through a very precise, strategic, and focused partnership.

Similarly, reciprocity is important in research opportunities. As one participant stated, “It is important for engagement to be beneficial for all.” One focus-group participant recognized the efforts made to engage in mutually beneficial research but noted the history

of other research partnerships in which “there is no comprehensive approach. When people leave, others don’t continue projects. There are always disjointed activities.” Partnerships that value and prioritize the benefits of the focus area for all involved are key to long-term, sustainable relationships.

Partnerships can provide access to key people who would otherwise not have been available. As noted earlier, the research team was able to have multiple meetings with a high-level director in the Ghana Educational Service as a result of the strength of previous partnerships. Another member of the research team had extensive contacts with disability-rights organizations and schools in Ghana. This facilitated visits to school sites for the research team. The team was able to meet with principals, teachers, family members, students, and leaders of organizations in diverse parts of Ghana, including urban and rural communities. Access to key stakeholders enabled the research team to expedite research activities since trust had previously been built with the stakeholders.

It is important to acknowledge that the research partnership also provided reciprocal benefit for schools and disability-rights organizations. The access that members of the research team had to government officials enabled the flow of communication from those working “on the ground” to government officials whom they may not have normally had access to. For example, in a focus-group meeting, one of the participants asked the research team to communicate back to government officials their input and their request for enhanced inclusive education policies and resources. Thus, the research team served as a conduit for communication and requests for resource distribution. This is one of the significant benefits of international research partnerships to support inclusive education: opportunities for all parties involved to engage in research activities for the ultimate benefit of enabling all children to authentically be included in schools.

## Learning

Research partnerships can benefit all parties to convey what is known about inclusive education through shared learning. For example, the comment of one focus-group participant in Ghana resonated with both the Canadian and Ghanaian research team members: “We have a long way to go. Teachers need to know about disabilities and limitations but also what children *can do*.” The research partnership led to an acknowledgement that there are shared issues that researchers on inclusive education face that transcend geopolitical borders. These issues include challenges in pre-service and in-service teacher education, stigma, parental advocacy, and the policy–practice gap that often exists in education.

As well, a fundamental issue that arose early in the partnership’s development was identifying how each partner defined “inclusive education.” Schools in Ghana, as well as organizations that supported people with disabilities, seemed to equate inclusion with integrating students with disabilities into specialized schools or classes (*physical inclusion*) but not authentically integrating students with disabilities into classes with their same-age neighbourhood peers (*social inclusion*). This practice can be seen as exclusion, but context is important to how such practices are interpreted, including geopolitical location and time frame. Thus, members of the research team learned more about the context, which helped us each better understand the barriers—and enablers—to inclusive education in Ghana.

Similarly, educators in Ghana often commented that segregated classrooms might be best for students with disabilities. One teacher in a focus group in Ghana stated, “The more you keep them [students with disabilities] in the regular school, the more they fall behind.... The child needs to be in the special school where there are people that know how to teach them.” Another focus-group participant noted, “Adaptation is a problem. Teachers expect the child to adapt to the school rather than adapting the school to the children.” These types of experiences are not that different from what Canadian members of the research team have encountered in Canada, where not every teacher acknowledges or recognizes the value of inclusive environments that can support all students.

While the meetings that were held as a result of the partnership sometimes highlighted the deficit thinking and stigma attached with disability, other examples demonstrated aspects of advocacy and asset-based thinking. One parent in a focus group stated, “People in society say she [their child with a disability] is not even a child. But as a parent, my child is a gift from God and people can speak callously, but I have not abandoned my daughter.” Through the partnership discussions, we learned about the stigma that is often associated with children with disabilities in Ghana and how teachers often perpetuate these attitudes. Learning through an international and comparative lens can provide valuable lessons for Canada’s journey to inclusive education as we consider the experiences of other contexts.

Thus, opportunities that were fostered through the partnership and learning experiences, particularly from an international and comparative perspective, provided insights into the value that international research partnerships can provide, particularly in enhancing inclusive education.

## **Discussion**

International research partnerships can certainly inform research in—and on—inclusive education. Here, we raise both issues of awareness and potential action steps to solidify healthy, mutually beneficial partnerships that ensure opportunities and learning experiences for the ultimate benefit of all children. We begin by providing four lessons that we learned during our partnership, before turning to a model that we have developed that we believe can be helpful in fostering international research partnerships.

First, in our research partnership, the collaborative effort enabled the research team to develop cultural and process knowledge that might otherwise not have been easily gained. For example, social networks were important for contacting key people, who then enabled aspects of the research study (Dhillon, 2009). This process was reflected in meetings such as with the high-level director within a government department. Other knowledge brokers, often activists from the disability community, were able to help gain access to specific people and programs, which might not otherwise have occurred. Reciprocity, authenticity, and mutual benefit are key to successful partnerships. Nakabugo et al. (2010) spoke to the importance of partnerships being “genuine” (p. 89). This is not surprising, but it is still an important reminder for all partnership efforts.

Second, healthy international research partnerships can be fostered through ongoing communication that seeks the mutual benefit of all. International partnership communication can be supported through regular touchpoints that occur both virtually and in person. It is through ongoing discussions that trust can be built (Teufel-Shone et al., 2019).

Communication also ensures that research is being aligned with, and not duplicating, what other researchers and stakeholders are engaged with (Gallwey & Wilgus, 2014; Kolk & Lenfant, 2015). By not duplicating research approaches, and by keeping key government officials informed, the research partnership helped ensure that the research that we were engaged with was both novel and important to the stakeholders.

Third, international partnership research projects help us understand commonalities in our experiences as educators and researchers. Partnerships can help us develop a better understanding of common issues in research and program implementation (Sider et al., 2021). For example, the research team noted commonalities in how educators in Canada and Ghana voice both deficit- and strengths-based perspectives on disability. For Canadian scholars involved in research on inclusive education, developing a comparative and international perspective on this subject can help frame the work we do in Canada and beyond.

Finally, the partnership between Canadian and Ghanaian institutions highlighted some challenges in partnership development. Here we share two illustrations of these challenges. The first had to do with research ethics. The Canadian researchers experienced significant roadblocks caused by institutional research ethics committees that had some expectations that were not aligned with practices in Ghana. An example of this was the expectation of western institutions for signed informed-consent forms, which are neither common nor trusted in Ghana.

A second illustration had to do with who controlled the research process. Funding for the research that the team was engaged with was from a Canadian federal agency; thus, budgeting and monitoring elements were controlled by the Canadian researchers. Significant effort was made to ensure a mutually beneficial process, but there remained a fundamental challenge that the organization that controls the finances also ultimately controls the interventions and their outcomes. One way that the team attempted to minimize this concern was by providing funds to members of the team who were based in Ghana, so that they recruited research assistants and participants and cared for logistical issues such as coordinating interviews, focus groups, and transcription services.

So how might we move forward in international research partnerships to foster inclusive education? To this end, we propose here an emerging conceptual framework, the 4R Model for International Research Partnerships, focused on reciprocity, responsiveness, relationships, and resources to guide future international research partnerships (see Figure 1).

## **Reciprocity**

Partnerships should be for the common good and formed in a way so that all parties can learn and benefit from the partnership. Reciprocity is particularly important in North–South partnerships. Mutuality in partnership development leads to “benefits [that] may include the generation of skills, rewarding experiences, knowledge exchange, etc.” (Larkan et al., 2016, p. 6). Cultural humility is a critical aspect to ensure that all partners are seeking mutual benefit for all and are not considering their approaches or backgrounds to be superior to those of others (Hockett et al., 2013). This humility also limits the possibility of exploitation by researchers of those being researched in the Global South and



the non-sustainability of research capacity-building efforts (Munung et al., 2017). Mutual capacity-building should be the end goal of all partnership efforts (Nakabugo et al., 2010).

**Figure 1: 4R Model for International Research Partnerships**



### **Responsiveness**

Partnerships should be responsive to local needs. In the case of our partnership development, we regularly reminded ourselves of the importance of responding to local requests instead of identifying or “creating” a need ourselves. Being responsive to local needs also ensures equity in engaging local partners in addressing local needs, including during implementation and dissemination phases (Gallwey & Wilgus, 2014).

### **Relationships**

Partnerships that nurture relationships and trust have more effective outcomes. Regular and transparent communication is key to this. One way to set the foundation for strong relationships is to have a “transparent, open, honest and unambiguous communication strategy laid out before the commencement of research [activities]” (Larkan et al., 2016, p. 7). In our research team partnership, inviting key people from the local community onto the research team was important to fostering healthy, trusting relationships. It is important to note that these relationships were fostered over months and years, a significant length of time, a factor which is not often discussed in our efforts toward rapid research and knowledge mobilization.

## Resources

Effective partnerships enable, involve, and build the resources of all parties. Resources need to be shared and developed with equitable opportunity for involvement; this builds the capacity of all stakeholders. In our case, the partnership brought public and private schools together. Private schools might not have had access to the same resources and training as public schools, but the partnership provided a pathway for communication and sharing of resources. It is important to note that “although North/South collaborative linkages will not alone ensure democratization of knowledge generation, they are undoubtedly indispensable to this mission” (Nakabugo et al., 2010, p. 96). Equitable resource-sharing contributes to reciprocity and relationships in the partnership.

We trust that this framework may help universities and other organizations as they consider mutually beneficial, healthy research partnerships.

## Conclusion

As we work collaboratively to foster inclusive education globally, international research partnerships, such as the one described in this article involving partners from Ghana and Canada, hold significant potential in helping to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. Sustainable Development Goal 4, with a focus on equitable and inclusive education, will remain a distant target unless collective efforts that harness effective practices for inclusive education are examined and mobilized. This article has provided an overview of one such partnership and the lessons we learned as we worked to foster inclusive education in Ghana and beyond. However, many questions remain around partnership development that this article has not fully addressed. For example, What is the role of leadership in partnership formation or implementation? Further, What is the role of power in partnership development, and How is it authentically shared, particularly if funding is controlled by the partner from the North? Finally, we are curious about examples of effective international research partnerships that have involved scholars from Canada and how these partnerships have been mobilized to scale efforts to foster inclusive education globally.

In many ways, Canadian researchers have been at the forefront of inclusive education efforts. The opportunity to consider the research that has been done in Canada and to learn from the experiences of others—in Ghana and elsewhere—provides a compelling litmus test for what are the next steps for researchers engaged in inclusive education both in Canada and beyond. As international research partnerships are formed to further examine inclusive education globally, the 4R Model for International Research Partnership, which prioritizes reciprocity, responsiveness, relationships, and resources, can serve as a framework to ensure that these partnerships are indeed best positioned to accomplish their goals.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Steve Sider, 75 University Avenue West, Waterloo, ON, N2L3C5, Canada. Email: [ssider@wlu.ca](mailto:ssider@wlu.ca)