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Factors That Affect Learning of Children with Disabilities in Selected Inclusive Primary Schools in the Northern Region of Sierra Leone

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Abstract

The study centered on the factors affecting learning of children with disabilities in the Northern Region of Sierra Leone through ascertaining teachers and CWDs perspectives on school and teacher based factors. The study employed a quantitative survey approach involving the administering of questionnaire and conducting interviews. Data analysis involved descriptive statistics. The study revealed that the schools lacked the necessary resources such as disabled friendly structures, assistive devices and teaching and learning materials that could enhance learning for CWDs. Most of the teachers have problems in relation to meeting the education needs of CWDs due to inadequacies in skills and training. There is also need for curriculum content reform to meet the needs of learners with special needs. It is recommended that capacity gaps of teachers be addressed through pre and in service training; barrier free and disabled friendly environment; physical infrastructures be improved to attain the government educational goals and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Keywords: *Inclusive Education; Disability; Competence*

Introduction

The study investigated the challenges children with disabilities (CWDs) face in accessing education in inclusive primary schools in the Northwest Region of Sierra Leone. Education is an important investment that a country can make thus enhancing accessibility to educational services is significant for the development of a nation (Farrant, 2009). UNICEF (2015) reported that education has positive effects on socio-economic development such as productivity, living standards and health of the population. It also opens infinite possibilities for advancement of society and is a solid foundation for progress and sustainable development. Therefore, governments should make it accessible to the entire nation.

The right to education for all is enshrined in international treaties, such as the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action, Dakar Framework for Action on Education for All (EFA) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). At the national level, there is the Education Act of 2004, Education Sector Plan 2018-2020 and the 2020 National Policy on Radical Inclusion. The government ratified the CRPD in 2004 and enacted the Persons with Disability Act, 2011 (GoSL, 2011); a stride in strengthening the legal framework for protecting and promoting the rights of PWDs referred to in Article 4 of the CRPD. In addition, the 1991 Constitution of Sierra Leone has provision prohibiting discrimination in areas such as care, welfare, and educational opportunities. However, the Constitution does not specifically mention disability as a prohibited ground for discrimination, implicitly allowing for violations of this key principle of the CRPD).

Irrespective of all these treaties, laws and policies, CWDs continue to encounter barriers in areas such as education, health and physical provisions. UNESCO (2013) reported that a large number of CWDs are not in school in the global south, and even if they are, they are not reported within the current school populations. Moreover, as enrolment increases, CWDs progress through educational phases is inadequately apparent in the global south.

Every child deserves the opportunity to go to school alongside their peers irrespective of his/her socioeconomic condition; and every child living with disability has the right to inclusive education. Inclusive education is a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures, and reducing exclusion from education (Conway, 2012). This means that CWDs should be educated in the regular education classrooms in conventional schools as opposed to specials schools especially for those with physical disabilities, which for long has been the trend in Sierra Leone.

It is a major stride to champion issues relating to Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) in Sierra Leone and to promote inclusive education for children with special needs. It is pertinent to point out that CWDs in Sierra Leone are often denied their right to education because families keep them out of school, and those who are enrolled continue to face structural and attitudinal barriers. Hence, discourse relating to the inclusion of CWDs in mainstream/inclusive schools needs to be explored.

Research Problem

UNICEF (2013) State of the World's Children Report indicated that CWDs encounter marginalization and stigmatization that affect them until adulthood, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. It also echoed that CWDs are less likely to be in school, and even when they do, are less likely to complete their primary education and then make a successful transition to secondary school.

The Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) and UNICEF revealed that 21% of primary school aged children, do not attend school and many of them are CWDs. They have never had the opportunity to go to school, making them disproportionately 'out of school' or excluded from inclusive schools. The GoSL in collaboration with UNICEF on the 'National Assessment of the Situation of Out of School Children in Sierra Leone" reported that 5.4% of children who are out of school is due to some kind of disability.

Irrespective of promising moves by the government to adopt rights-based legislation and policies, CWDs have issues relating to education. There is anecdotal evidence regarding specific hindrances, numerous as they may be, that pose barriers to successful inclusive education for CWDs in rural Sierra Leone. Moreover, successful implementation of NPRI could be impeded by unavailability of data on CWDs diverse educational challenges. Research on CWDs is limited and the little information garnered

thus far are only recorded at the national level and are not desegregated according to regions. This shortfall in data has serious implications especially in planning for the education of CWDs. Thus, this study seeks to address the aforementioned challenges by providing credible data that will be desegregated to the various regions regarding the specific challenges CWDs face in inclusive schools in the Northern Region of Sierra Leone.

Research Questions

The study addresses the following questions:

I. Are there school-based challenges that CWDs face in inclusive schools in Northern Region of Sierra Leone?

II. Are there teacher-based challenges that CWDs face in inclusive schools in the Northern Region of Sierra Leone?

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

Disability can better be understood by using several theoretical models drawn from different disciplines of social sciences. Cunningham and Fleming (2009) social inclusion theoretical model guided this study. The social inclusion model, as proposed, is an amalgam of social inclusion and social exclusion concepts. Although there is no universally agreed benchmark for exclusion, lack of participation in society is at the heart of nearly all definitions put forth by scholars, government bodies, non-governmental organizations and others. Overall, exclusion describes a state in which individuals with disabilities are unable to participate fully in economic, social, political and cultural life and the process leading to and sustaining such a state (Peter & Beasley, 2014). According to the social exclusion model, PWDs are often present but not part of the community (Ngulube, 2016). In this research, exclusion mostly refers to when CWDs are not allowed to register to attend a school, or register but not encouraged coming to school, or when there are, conditions placed on their attendance. The social inclusion model arose from concerns over social exclusion. Social inclusion means improving the terms of participation in society for people who are disadvantaged based on disability (UN, 2016). Thus, inclusion is both a process and a goal. Promoting inclusion requires removing barriers to disabled people's participation in society and taking active inclusionary steps to facilitate such participation.

The rationale for selecting the social inclusion model rests on the assumption that access to and participation in education for learners with disabilities can be improved if exclusionary mechanisms are identified and removed. This requires both addressing the drivers of exclusion, including educational policies and educational institutions as well as discriminatory attitudes and behaviors, and actively 'bringing disabled people' (UN, 2016). The nature of education policies and practices in educational settings currently define the nature of education for learners with disabilities, thus driving educational exclusion (Peters & Beasley, 2014). The low enrollment and school completion levels show that educational institutions may be systematically denying pupils with disabilities the recognition that would enable them to participate fully in education and society. Discriminatory attitudes and behaviors towards the person with disabilities further drive exclusion.

Inclusive Education

Various people and agencies use inclusive education to mean different things. The Salamanca Statement from the World's Conference on Special Needs Education of 1994 is the most significant global agreement on inclusive education. The aim of the conference was to foster the objectives of EFA. It articulated the need to promote inclusive education practice worldwide and recommended that "mainstream schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social emotional, linguistic and other impairments" (UNESCO, 1994). In that regard, the guidelines put forward to support inclusive education worldwide include: (a) education systems should be designed and educational programmes implemented to take into account the wide diversity of character and needs; and (b) those who have special needs must have access to regular schools which should accommodate them with a child-centered pedagogy capable of meeting these needs. Inclusive education, for Duke and Lamar (2006), implies all students (if they have a disability or not) being educated (i.e., in age-appropriated general education classes in schools) with necessary supports provided to students by educators. Stout and Katie (2006) added that placing CWDs in the general regular education classroom means that accommodations should are provided for them. Thus, inclusive education implies universal education and ensures that schools serve all children in their communities. According to Booth (1999) inclusion in education is about accessing participation within, and reducing exclusion from schools and centers of learning; and about creating inclusive cultures, policies, curricula and approaches to teaching and learning.

School-Based Challenges

Although primary education in Sierra Leone targets CWDs as one of the priority groups, there are different views regarding the inclusion of this cohort in the mainstream schools especially in terms of whether the level of training and qualification of teachers is adequate to meet the education needs of CWDs in inclusive schools. In addition, there is serious concern regarding administrative and physical provisions for them in inclusive schools such as assistive devices accommodations, class size and even structures that are disabled friendly (Sesay, 2018). Against this backdrop, Clark and Farooq (2012) asserted that it is unrealistic to integrate children with special needs in large classes.

Lamin (2018) averred that the GoSL has not produced a teacher curriculum and materials for teachers containing appropriate information on education of PWDs for pre- and in-service trainings. The author is of the view that current curriculum and examination systems are not flexible enough to cater to SNE in Sierra Leone. Since assessment of CWDs is not standardized, there is less focus in developing curriculum and examination system for inclusive education. Lamin noted further that although CWDs are in inclusive primary schools, very few of them complete primary education due to curriculum, infrastructures and assistive device issues.

Oketch (2013) stressed that for successful inclusive education practice, instructional materials for CWDs must be available. Mutisya et al (2019) observed that since most inclusive schools in sub-Saharan Africa are not disabled- friendly because they lack physical provisions such as ramps, rails and staircases poses mobility implications. Failing to make school infrastructures disabled-friendly in itself excludes them from full participation which contravenes the Salamanca Statement of 1994 which re-affirms that "mainstream schools should accommodate all children, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic and other conditions".

Graham and Prock (2017) affirmed that when CWDs experience unacceptable relationship with their peers or unsatisfactory relationship with their teachers, life in school becomes a punishing

experience for them. Without positive relationship with peers and teachers, many of the activities undertaken for them will turn out to be meaningless and they will become more vulnerable.

Teacher-Based Challenges

Teachers are the central elements in the classrooms. They are a major quality-enhancing input into education systems and processes and their performance (Thompson, 2014). Any programme quality depends on how the teacher manages the learning environment. Quality is determined further by the teacher's personal attitude about the children and themselves and by their own philosophy of education (Allen, 2008). Therefore, it can be inferred that the need for quality teaching is crucial in inclusive schools, so serious efforts is required to meet the education needs of CWDs.

It goes without saying that to create an inclusive and enabling environment, teachers need to have a clear understanding of inclusive education and at the same time be committed to teach all children irrespective of their conditions. However, this has not been the case because in most cases teachers do not have the resources and appropriate training and support to work in this area (UNICEF, 2013).

The implementation of inclusive curriculum has considerably pressured many individual teachers (Florien, 2018). Many teachers philosophically accepted the notion but resented the student with significant problems like intellectual disability, emotional and behavioral disorders (Conway, 2012). Goodley (2017) indicated that the impact of students with severe emotional and behavioral disorders on classrooms contributed to resignation trainee teachers in schools.

Bowman (2016) conducted a survey of 14 countries found that teachers welcomed students with medical and physical disabilities, but resisted the inclusion of special need students with more severe disabilities in their classrooms. The study also revealed that the teacher's integration attitude was favorable. Hallahan and Kauffman (2011) found that majority of British teachers reported a negative attitude towards integration of special need students. A meta-analysis study examining the attitude of over 10,500 teachers found two-third ready to integrate students requiring no significant additional skills or time (Stanley & Porte, 2012).

The view of most of the teachers regarding inclusion is that the policy makers are not in touch with the realities of the classroom. The pull-out model was favored by many teachers who reported that special needs education department should be responsible for students with disabilities (Berryman, 2019).

Khrais (2015) echoed that few teachers (21%) believed that it was their responsibility to modify the curriculum for learners with special needs education. Those who are not teachers maintained that children with special needs are more demanding and have the tendency of neglecting their academic work.

There are many factors responsible for teachers' resistance to inclusion of CWDs in mainstream schools. Center and Ward (2017) indicated that the resistance is due to lack of confidence in their own instructional methodologies and also the quality and kinds of support that they receive. As a result, they consider CWDs in the classroom is an extra burden on them.

Nabasa (2014) noted that majority of the teacher trainings conducted lacked mandatory special or disabilities education units in the pre-service training. Teachers have argued that they are not trained on how to instruct CWDs. Many of them lack the necessary skills to meet the education needs of CWDS in inclusive schools.

It is pertinent to point out that even teachers with some training on special needs education realized that the pre-service courses offered in colleges are not enough to meet the realities of CWDs in the classroom. In line with the teachers, Oketch (2013) concurred that a one-semester course only raises the awareness and introduces prospective teachers to strategies that expand a teachers repertoire. The author is of the view that these courses rarely result in high levels of teacher confidence and expertise. Oketch indicated a similar view by saying that teachers feel inadequate in handling learners with special educational needs.

Few teachers have adequate knowledge in managing behaviors of CWDs. Bartak and Fry (2014) asserted that such behaviors are key causative factors in the failure of inclusion programs. Bartak and Fry averred that many teachers reported that pre-service and in-service courses that are meant to address their skills and attitudes are insufficient. Eraclides (2011) maintained that there are significant information gaps between teaching practice and the stated policies of educational bodies.

Many teachers who are struggling to meet the needs of CWDs realized that they disadvantaging those children without disabilities because too much time is spent on the former. Some of them believe that making accommodations for CWDs is unfair to the others (Kavale, 2012).

In conclusion, poor school infrastructures and inadequate teaching and learning materials pose serious challenges to the education of CWDs in inclusive schools and at the same time, non-committed teachers view it as an extra burden on them.

Methodology

The study was a descriptive survey research design that involved gathering quantifiable data from cross-section (sample) of the population, and quantitative methods - dispensing questionnaire and statistical analysis. The study area is the city of Port Loko, the capital of Northwest province. It is one of the least developed of five provincial capitals, and has diverse school populations. The descriptive survey encompassed a cross section involved in the education of CWDs inclusive primary schooling. The population criteria consist of: (a) child with disability attending a public primary school and a teacher in inclusive public primary school in the domain. A table of random numbers was used to select 10 schools, and snowball sampling used to reach participants (due to population criteria). The sample represents 10% of both groups, i.e., 20 CWDs and 10 teachers totaling sample size of 30. The data collection tools are two sets of questionnaires: one for either of the groups. Cronbach alpha coefficient test with a value of 0.78 was the measure of the tool reliability. The tool was also piloted in the nearby town of Lunsar. The researcher collected data from the respondents in-person to mitigate non-response rate and clarify meanings on hand. Data analysis was descriptive involving the computed descriptive statistics, namely, relative frequencies and measures of central tendencies. Informed consent was sought from all the respondents including ethical considerations - voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity and honesty.

Findings

This section contains the findings garnered from analysis of the data collected. It achieved a 100% response rate. The school-based challenges from the CWDs perspective are presented followed by the teacher-based challenges from their perspectives. In relation to their demographic profile, half (50%) of the respondents were male and the other half (50%) are female. Their average age is 25 years and all of them have higher education qualification: Technical Vocational Institute (20%), Teacher Training College

(50%), and University degree (30%). All of them consented to participate in the study resulting in a response rate of 100%.

School-Based Challenges

School-based challenges were measured from the perspectives of CWDs. The CWDs were questioned in relation to sufficient or insufficient learning materials. As indicated in Table 1, a large representation i.e., 80% of participants said they do not have or receive sufficient learning materials and the remaining 20% said they do have sufficient materials.

Table 1: Frequency on sufficiency of learning materials

Category	No. of Participants	Percent
Sufficient learning materials	4	20
Insufficient learning materials	16	80
Total	20	100

In line with the above, the majority of CWDs participants said equipment/assistive devices for them are unaffordable, that is they are expensive to acquire.

Table 2: Frequency on availability of assistive devices

Category	No. of Participants	Percent
Assistive devices for CWDs unaffordable	12	80
Assistive devices for CWDs affordable	8	20
Total	20	100

The study also probed provisions that are disabled-friendly or SNE infrastructure/facilities that are in place for learners with special needs. As indicated in Table 3, majority of the CWDs participants (40%) rated their school facilities as in '**Bad'** condition. The next highest rating was '**Average'** at 30%. Those who rated the facilities as '**Good**,' '**Very Good'** and '**Very Bad'** represented 15%, 10 and 5% respectively. Cumulatively we see that a quarter of them do not consider the facilities as good or very good.

Table 3: Frequency on availability of disabled-friendly infrastructure/facilities

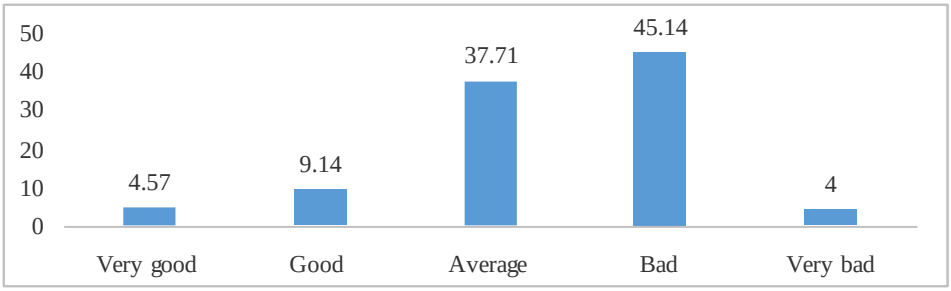
Category	Very Bad	Bad	Average	Good	Very Good	Total
No. of Participants	1	8	6	3	2	20
Percent	5	40	30	15	10	100

On the matter of whether the children have access to disability-related information that could aid their learning in the inclusive schools, Table 4 shows that 70% do not have such access; whiles 30% of the CWD participants said they do.

Table 4.5: Result on disability-related information

Category	No. of Respondents	Percent
Access to disability related information	6	30
No Access to disability related information	14	70
Total	20	100

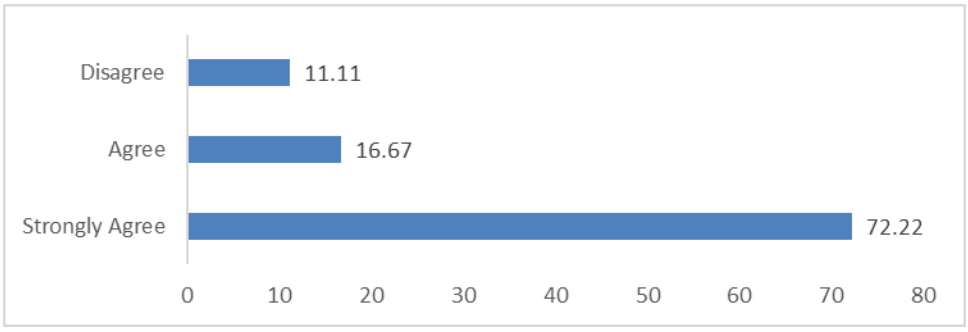
On the degree of school caring for CWDs, Figure 1 shows that half (50.29%) of the CWDs rated the care received as '**Average**.' Those who rated the care received as '**Good'** were 20.57% and 13.14% reported receiving '**Very Good***'* care. On the contrary, 12% viewed the care received in school as '**Bad'** and 4% believed to be '**Very Bad**.'



Source: primary data
Figure 1: Frequency on care received in school

Teacher-Based Challenges

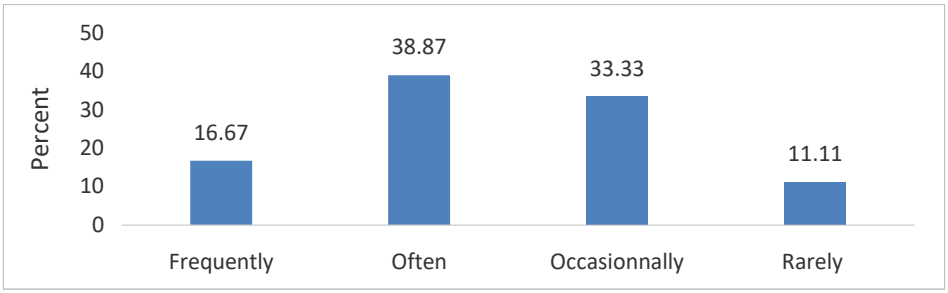
The tool also ascertained teacher-based challenges based on the research questions. It probed challenges related to the curriculum and teaching style for CWDs learning. Figure 2, shows that 72.22% of the teachers '**Agreed'** to having curriculum and teaching challenges regarding disability and SNE, whiles 16.67% '**Strongly Agreed***'* on curriculum challenges in relation to CWDs. However, 11.11% of the teachers '**Disagree'** with those viewpoints.



Source: primary data
Figure 2: Result on curriculum and teaching style for SNE

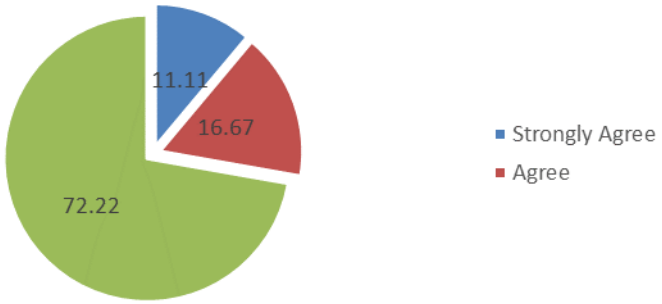
Teacher respondents were questioned on the use of cooperative learning activities in the classroom as shown in Figure 3. Majority of the teachers (38.87%) used co-operative learning activities often, 33.33% used it occasionally, and 16.67% used it frequently while 11.11% of the teachers used it

rarely. Time management and availability of resources were a major constraint in using this method of learning.



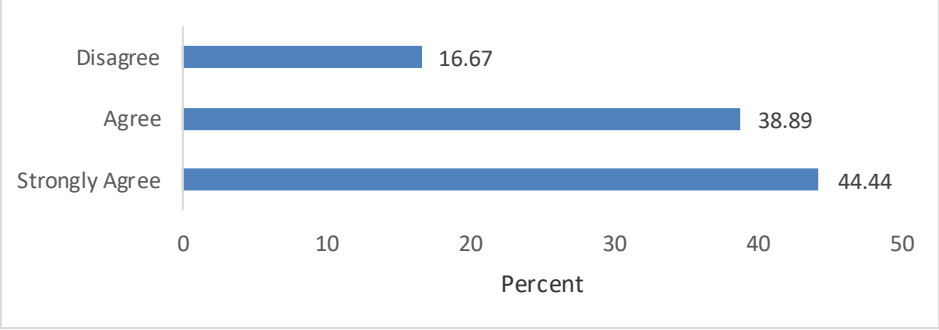
Source: primary data
Figure 3: Result on use of cooperative learning

Regarding integrated learning systems, Figure 4 indicates that the majority of teachers (72.22%) '**Disagreed'** that integrated learning was benefitting CWDs, 16.67% '**Agreed'** and 11.11% '**Strongly Agreed**' that integrated learning was helping them in the regular classroom in inclusive schools.



Source: primary data
Figure 4: Result on use of integrated learning systems

For inclusive education to be successful, teachers should be committed to disability/SNE. As shown in Figure 5, the majority of teacher participants (44.44%) '**Strongly Agreed**' that they are not committed to disability/SNE. The teachers who stated that they '**Agreed**' were 38.89%. However, 16.67% '**Disagreed'** they are committed to disability/SNE.



Source: primary data
Figure 5: Result on lack of commitment to disability/SNE education

On the issue relating to instructional materials for CWDs, the majority of teacher participants (61.11%) '**Agreed'** that there were inadequate instructional materials for their learning. Those who '**Strongly Agreed**' were 38.89%. In short, all of the teacher participants agreed that they do not have instructional materials to meet the education needs of CWDs in their respective schools.

Implications, Conclusion and Recommendations

Implications of the Findings

The findings revealed several constraints regarding the education of CWDs stemming from school-based and teacher-based challenges. The responses from the both groups present a negative view regarding the placing of CWDs in an inclusive educational environment due to materials, infrastructures and inhuman capital deficiencies. CWDs do not have the resources and support required for them to be placed in the inclusive schools with those without disabilities.

School-Based Challenges: Most schools do not have adequate infrastructures, facilities and teaching and learning materials for this cohort in the inclusive schools as a result disadvantaging them the CWDs. One should have in mind that quality education is crucial in equipping learners with disabilities in order for them to acquire life skills. Though attempts have been made to incorporate special needs/inclusive education in teacher education curriculum in some colleges, yet more needs to be done.

Teacher-Based Challenges: The teachers' perspectives regarding placing CWDs alongside those without disabilities is not favorable. They would rather prefer them in special schools especially those with severe disabilities such as the blind, deaf and dumb. They lack the requisite training and qualification to meet the education needs of CWDs in an inclusive educational environment. A significant number of them commented that the curriculum does not make provisions for CWDs. It is worrisome for them because it fails in terms of education for all.

Conclusion

The study focuses on the factors that affect CWDs learning in inclusive schools in the Northern Region of Sierra Leone through polling two groups; teachers and CWDs to ascertain the difficulties in placing CWDs and those without disabilities in the same learning environment. The teachers lacked the necessary skills and training to meet the education needs of CWDs in this setting. The findings revealed that the schools lacked essential physical provisions such as ramps, stairways and assistive devices and also teaching and learning materials that are required to enhance learning for children with special needs. Another issue captured is teachers' commitment to work with this cohort of children. The challenges identified in study could impede accessing education. Thus, it is incumbent that inclusive education be given top priority and cascaded from top right to down – from policy makers to schools and communities.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations to address the factors that affect CWDs in inclusive primary schools are proffered:

- Teacher training both pre-service and in-service are essential to develop the skills necessary to teach successfully in inclusive settings. This can be done in collaboration with the MBSSE, teacher training institutions, and universities.

- Awareness and sensitization programs on inclusive education should be launched to sensitize all stakeholders. This will help to dispel the negative attitudes and lack of commitment some teachers have towards CWDs.
- The MBSSE in partnership with international organizations should also enable provision of barrier-free and disabled-friendly infrastructures, assistive devices, specific teaching and learning materials for CWDs.
- Accessible and flexible curriculum can be a key to creating schools that meet the needs of all learners. Thus, curriculum must take into consideration the different abilities and needs of all learners.

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