



## An Assessment of Teachers' Competence in Meeting the Education Needs of Children with Disabilities in Selected Inclusive Primary Schools in Sierra Leone

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### **Abstract**

The study is based on assessing the competence of teachers in inclusive schools as part of the inclusive piloting initiative in Sierra Leone. However, there is a research gap regarding their competence to meet the educational needs of CWDs. Therefore, the objectives of the study were to ascertain teachers competence in relation to delivering instruction, methods of teaching and evaluating students. A cross-sectional survey design with both quantitative and qualitative strategy accompanied by descriptive analysis was employed in the research. The findings revealed deficiencies in teachers' competence in relation to developing lesson plans and setting priority for students with special needs. In addition, gaps were identified in terms of evaluating them. Accordingly, the study suggested initiatives could be designed to enable adequate pre-service training and professional development for mainstream school teachers on inclusive education. It will contribute to the better practice of inclusive education in Sierra Leone.

**Keywords:** *Mapalus; Gotong Royong; Ceremony; Party*

### **1.0 Introduction**

Disability education is an important issue for Sierra Leone, a nation with very low literacy rate for individuals with disabilities (Stats SL, 2018), and at the bottom of the human development index (UNDP, 2021). The country faces enormous development challenges such as widespread poverty, unemployment, health pandemics, natural disasters, and abysmal socio-economic development (SLIHS, 2018) As a result; little attention is paid to disability issues. In Sierra Leone, traditional and cultural beliefs associate disabilities with curses of the parents/family. There is little or no specific reference to disability in government legislation or development policy.

The National Radical Inclusion Policy (NPRI) of 2020 (MBSSE, 2020) and Medium-Term National Development Plan 2019-2023 (MOPED, 2019) sought to address the issue of inclusion across a broad-based spectrum of society. Prior to that, legislation on education and policy tools such as the Education Act, 2004 (GoSL, 2004) and Education Sector Plan 2018-2020 (MEST, 2018) did not specifically address inclusive education or how to implement education of children with disabilities or special educational needs in inclusive classrooms, rather vague reference to universal education are

contain therein. There are still special schools in Sierra Leone that depend on government support to carry out the huge workload of providing education to CWDs.

Sierra Leone has signed many international disability treaties such as the CRPD (Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities); therefore, it has an obligation to follow these agreements. Ensuing education for individuals with disabilities in an inclusive environment should not just be a priority of the GoSL, which is in line with its human development agenda, but failing to do so is a dereliction of duty and violation of the rights to education consistent with several international rights tools. It also inhibits the national development aspirations of the country.

Lamin (2022) echoed that teachers in mainstream schools face constraints in providing education for CWDs and that has the potential to make it difficult to implement inclusive education in Sierra Leone. Being a recent phenomenon in this part of the world, it is imperative that investigations be conducted around the human and non-human resource capacities to meet the educational needs of CWDs in inclusive school. As it stands now, there is a research gap on teachers' competences to cater for the educational needs of this cohort in inclusive schools. As a result, this study fills this gap by probing the teachers' capacities to deliver inclusive education in regular classes from a cross-section of integral players in their education. The deliberate inclusion of this cohort is to obtain a comprehensive scope from stakeholders on their CWDs education in inclusive schools. Teachers competence in this study refer to the delivering of instruction, teaching methods and evaluating students.

This study will contribute immensely to literature on education of CWDs in Sierra Leone, since it is an area that has been neglected. It can provide insight that will prompt the government to develop policies to implement inclusive educational plans to improve teacher training and school curriculum.

The objectives of the study are as follows:

- I. Are the teachers competent in delivering instruction to CWDs in the selected inclusive schools?
- II. Are the teachers competent in using different teaching methods to meet the education needs of CWDs in the selected inclusive schools?
- III. Are the teachers competent in evaluating CWDs in the selected inclusive schools?

## 2.0 Literature Review

### 2.1 Inclusive Education for CWDs

The fact remains that CWDs are one of the leading groups that are widely excluded from quality education and disability is one of the least visible yet most potent factors in educational marginalization (Atkan, 2020). Therefore, to address this issue, global initiatives have been developed and key international instruments on inclusive education for CWDs enacted.

Rule 6 of the 1993 UN Standard Rules on Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities:

*States should recognize the principle of equal primary, secondary, and tertiary educational opportunities for children, youth, and adults with disabilities in integrated settings. They should ensure that the education of persons with disabilities is an integral part of the educational system.*

The 1994 Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education:

*Schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic, or other conditions. They should include disabled and gifted children, street and working children, children from remote or nomadic populations, linguistic, ethnic, or cultural minorities, and children from other disadvantaged or marginalized areas or groups.*

The 2000 World Education Forum for Action, Dakar stated that:

*All nations recognize that the universal right to education extends to individuals with disabilities. All nations act upon their obligation to establish or reform public education systems that are accessible to and meet the needs of individuals with disabilities.*

Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2007) which states:

*States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning directed to the full development of human potential and sense of dignity and self-worth, and the strengthening of respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms, and human diversity; the development by persons with disabilities of their personality, talents, and creativity, as well as their mental and physical abilities, to their fullest potential; and enabling persons with disabilities to participate effectively in a free society.*

Educating CWDs is a good investment because it reduces welfare costs and future dependence. It also increases their potential in productivity and wealth creation thereby alleviating poverty (Deku & Vanderpuye, 2017). They authors are of the view that CWDs have low educational attainment compared to those without disabilities which can lead to socio-economic disparity. Chitiyo et al. (2019) asserted that CWDs are more likely to drop out of school and without the requisite qualifications cannot find gainful employment. The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE) maintained that one of the essential exit routes of poverty is through formal education. However, discrimination and exclusionary practices have denied persons with disabilities access to education (EASNIE, 2015). Mattingly and McInerney (2010) averred that Inclusive Education can reduce discrimination by enabling children with and without disabilities to grow up together. It addition, it provides CWDs skills that enable them to become positive role models. They can also have employment opportunities which can result in poverty reduction. To improve education for CWDs, it is crucial to invest in the education sector as a whole especially in the training of teachers in Special Needs and Inclusive Education.

## **2.2 Teachers' Competence to meet the education needs of Children with Disabilities in Inclusive Schools**

Teachers are the central elements in the classrooms and they have a major input into the education systems and processes. Therefore, their effectiveness to enhance quality education should be under the purview. Any education program's quality depends on how the teacher manages the learning environment (Alquraini, 2012). Quality education is also determined by the teacher's knowledge and attitude towards the students and their philosophy of education (*Ibid*). Therefore, serious efforts must be geared towards making them more competent to work with CWDs and those without disabilities in inclusive education environments (Nguyet & Ha, 2010).

Rieser (2013) argued that in order to create an inclusive and enabling learning environment, teachers must not only have a clear understanding of inclusive education practice but should also commit themselves to teach all learners irrespective of their conditions. However, the author acknowledged that this is not the case since teachers do not have the appropriate training, resources and support that are necessary for them to work with CWDs.

The common practice in inclusive schools is to educate CWDs alongside those without disabilities. Therefore, teachers in these schools should be knowledgeable in Special Needs and inclusive education especially in developing lesson plans, Individual Education Plans (IEP) and teaching methodologies (Nguyet & Ha, 2010). Mattingly and McInerney (2010) averred that promoting Inclusive Education remains a serious challenge in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Teachers are considered to be all those who actively facilitate the (formal) learning of students. The discourse about teaching and teacher educators has led to specific definitions of teachers' competencies (Mattingly & McInerney, 2010, p.3). As such, identifying essential competencies for teachers is deemed necessary, as they can serve as indicators to monitor and evaluate teaching practice.

Atkan (2010) defined competence as a complex combination of knowledge, skills, understanding, values, attitudes and desires, which lead to effective embodied human action in the world, in a particular domain. Chitiyo et al. (2019) characterized the acquisition and development of competencies as a career-long endeavor that requires a reflexive, purposeful practice and high quality feedback. According to the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, the core capacity requirements for all teachers are as follows (EASNE, 2015):

- Sound knowledge frameworks (e.g., about school curricula, education theories, assessment), supported by effective knowledge management strategies;
- A deep knowledge of how to teach specific subjects, connected with digital competencies and students' learning;
- Classroom teaching and management skills and strategies;
- Critical attitudes towards their professional actions, based on sources of different kinds – students' outcomes, theory, and professional dialogue – to engage in innovation; positive attitudes to continuous professional development, collaboration, diversity, and inclusion; the capability of adapting plans and practices to contexts and students' needs

It is worth noting that the most critical areas of teacher competences are associated with the values related to teaching and learning (Mattingly & McInerney, 2010). The development of inclusive practice is an essential feature of professional learning for all teachers. The authors described it as an apprenticeship of the head (knowledge), hand (skill or doing), and heart (attitudes and values).

Effective pedagogy must be inclusive and should consider the diverse needs of all learners and matters of student equity (Chitiyo et al., 2019). Nguyet and Ha (2010) reechoed the need for a shift in pedagogical thinking from an approach that works for most learners to one that involves everyone. Shifting the gaze from 'most' and 'some' learners to 'everybody' requires collective learning experiences to be taken into account in order to encourage teachers to develop appropriate approaches for all children.

EASNIE (2015) pointed out that teaching heterogeneous groups is not just a matter of understanding individual children's capabilities and educational needs in order to integrate them with more typical others of the same age. What is crucial is the construction of educational differences in different contexts and at different points in time. It requires fundamental changes in thinking about children, curriculum, pedagogy and school organization (*Ibid*).

One of the most vital skills that teachers should possess to work in inclusive schools is to manage the teaching and learning environment for all. They should be able to work with CWDs, understand their abilities and have skills relating to social interaction (Atkan, 2020).

Another critical issue relating to the placing children with disabilities in inclusive schools is teachers' attitude. Alquraini (2012) conducted a study regarding teachers' perspectives towards children with severe learning difficulties in the regular education classroom. Findings revealed that the teachers were not too enthusiastic about inclusive education. Perhaps, it might be due to the fact that they had already worked with children with mild disabilities in the public schools and they hoped not to deal with this cohort of children again in an inclusive educational environment.

To make Inclusive Education a success, teachers' competencies and their appropriate beliefs should align with their values in order to meet the needs of diverse learners Atkan (2020). On the need for a more inclusive orientation, Riser (2013) maintained that educating teachers to meet the needs of CWDS

in inclusive schools means re-conceptualizing teachers' roles, attitudes, competencies, diversify their teaching methods, redefine the relationship between teachers and students, and empower teachers as co-developers of the curriculum.

### 3.0 Methodology

The study design is cross-sectional with both quantitative and qualitative research strategy. It examined specifically the competence of teachers in mainstream schools. The study population comprised teachers in inclusive schools. It employed purposive sampling. It arrived at two teachers from five schools (4 from each school) in the capital city of Freetown. The research tool was a questionnaire. It measured teachers' competence by using the following construct: methodology competencies; instructional process competencies; and teaching evaluation competencies. Data were collected via face-to-face questionnaires. Questionnaires were administered individually to the teachers. Data analysis, presentation and interpretation were descriptive and involved calculation of descriptive statistics such as relative frequencies and measures of central tendencies.

### 4.0 Findings

In order for teachers to meet the education needs of CWDs in inclusive schools, they should be able to demonstrate certain competencies. For data collection, questionnaires were administered to ascertain their competencies. Table 1, 2, and 3 illustrate the findings of all the competencies of teachers considered in the study

#### 4.1 Competence in Delivering Instruction

For inclusive education to be successful, teachers have to be competent in delivering instruction to all learners in the classroom. It must be noted that that is quite challenging to teach a variety of children especially those with special needs. Therefore, the question that the researcher must pose is: What skills should teachers possess in order for them to be able to teach in inclusive schools? In responding to this question, the researcher designed a tool that will identify the skills that they need to deliver instruction an inclusive educational environment. Table 3 indicate the findings on competencies in delivering instruction. Skills relating to delivery of instruction were ranked in order of Item 3, Item 1, Item 4, Item 2, Item 6, and Item 5. The findings revealed that 52.5 % of participants have had competencies relating to delivering instruction, whereas 47.5 % did not. Among the participants, 16% of them can develop lesson plan adequately for students with special educational needs. It is pertinent to point out that teachers must be competent in developing lesson plans to meet the needs of all learners and those with learning disabilities are no exception. Out of the six themes relating to instructional delivery competence, the ability to use appropriate language techniques (Item 5) and the ability to use develop lessons plans for children with special needs (Item 2) proved to be the lowest instructional process competence acquired by the participants. This means that the provisions relating to the instructional practices of teachers are very evident.

Table 1: Instructional Process Competencies

Item	Instructional Process	No. of Participants	
		Yes	No
1	Ability to interact with students professionally	13	7
2	Ability to use appropriate questioning skills	16	4
3	Ability to develop lesson plans well for CWDs	9	11
4	Ability to ensure effective time management	10	10
5	Ability to use appropriate language techniques	7	13
6	Ability to show sufficient mastery of subject matter.	8	12
<b>Total</b>		<b>63</b>	<b>57</b>

Source: Primary data

#### 4.2 Methodology Competence

Teachers should be able to use variety of methods to meet the needs of all learners. In order for them to be able to teach in an inclusive educational environment, they should be able to perform certain skills. Like the former, the researcher developed a tool to identify the skills that are related to teaching methods. Table 4 highlights competencies this area. Skills were (ranked in order) of Item 6, Item 3, Item 4, Item 1, Item 5, and Item 2. The findings revealed that 58.33% of participants have had competencies in teaching methods strategies, whereas 41.66% did not. Among the participants, 7 of them have had knowledge relating to content and goal. In an inclusive educational setting, the teacher must not only be able to define content and goal based on the syllabus but must also be able to modify them in order to meet the needs of all learners especially for CWDs. Out of six skills related to methodology, the ability to communicate contents specific to a target group (Item 5) and the ability to define content and goal of the student with disabilities (Item 2) were proved to be the lowest skill acquired by the participants.

Table 2: Methodological Competencies

Item	Methodology	No. of Participants	
		Yes	No
1	Ability to analyze difficulties and issues	11	9
2	Ability to define content and goal	7	13
3	Ability to conduct lesson using varieties of methods	14	6
4	Ability to devise possible solutions	12	8
5	Ability to communicate contents specific to a target group	9	11
6	Ability to set priorities for special needs students	17	3
<b>Total</b>		<b>70</b>	<b>50</b>

Source: Primary data

#### 4.4 Evaluation Competence

For success of inclusive education, teachers should be able to evaluate all learners. It is pertinent to point out that well designed assessment methods provide valuable information about student learning. In addition, they tell what students have learned and how well they learned and the struggles encountered during the process. Therefore, the research tool sought to identify the skills relating to evaluation in order to ascertain teachers' competence in this area. Table 4 highlights the list of skills relating to teachers' competence. The skills were ranked in order of Item 1, Item 6, Item 3, Item 2, Item 4, and Item 5. Findings revealed that 16% can construct various evaluation instruments for student learning skills (Item 1). However, only 6% participants are able to set formative evaluation for students with special needs (Item 5). Overall, 58.33% participants have skills relating to evaluation of students. On the contrary, 41.66% lack skills in this area.

Table 3: Teaching Evaluation Competence

Item	Evaluation	No. of Participants	
		Yes	No
1	Ability to construct various evaluation instruments	16	4
2	Ability to employ various evaluation techniques	11	9
3	Ability to assess students' behaviors	13	7
4	Ability to assess special needs	9	11
5	Ability to set formative evaluation during lesson	6	14
6	Ability to be fair in conducting examination	15	5
<b>Total</b>		<b>70</b>	<b>50</b>

Source: Primary data

## Conclusions

The study examined teachers' competence in relation to how they deliver instruction, the various methods of teaching that they use in the classroom and how they evaluate students in an inclusive educational setting. To make inclusive education successful for learners with different kinds of learning disabilities, teachers will need to modify the inclusive education paradigm in order to satisfy the student's requirements. There are deficiencies in relation to delivering of instruction in terms of setting priority, teaching methods, evaluating of CWDs. Successful inclusive education also requires the teachers to work with school administrators, parents and colleagues to officially and informally meet student requirements.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations.

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