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Investigation of Physical Provisions for Education of Children with Disabilities in Inclusive Primary Schools in Sierra Leone

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Abstract

The study probed physical provisions for children with disabilities in inclusive primary schools in Sierra Leone. Several international and national instruments including the National Policy on Radical Inclusion advocated for inclusion of children with disabilities in the regular education classroom in mainstream schools. However, there is anecdotal evidence regarding the inadequacy/adequacy of physical facilities for children with disabilities in inclusive schools. As a result, a gap exists as to whether inclusive schools are well equipped materially to cater to the needs of this cohort. This gap has serious implication for achieving education for all, and needs to be addressed. Therefore, this paper seeks to ascertain the adequacy of physical and administrative provisions in selected inclusive schools from the perspective of the CWDs, their teachers and parents to get a holistic view of the phenomenon. A cross sectional survey design with both quantitative research strategy, accompanied by descriptive analysis was the methodology employed therein. The findings revealed that physical provisions in the areas of structural adaptations for mobility, water, sanitation and hygiene facilities, specialized and adapted learning materials, assistive devices and technologies, and transportation were grossly inadequate. Therefore, the researcher recommends that investment to increase provisions in these areas to ensure of the success of inclusive education in Sierra Leone.

Keywords: *Disability; Inclusive Education; Physical Provision*

1. Introduction

Inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools has been the trend in educating children with disabilities (CWDs) for the past three decades promoted by the World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien, Thailand, 1990, the World Education Forum, Dakar, 2000 (UNESCO, 1990; 1994) and other international instruments such as:

- UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), 2006,
- UNESCO Policy Guidelines on Inclusion in Education, 2009, and
- UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4: ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

These instruments have bolstered the educational, social, and economic rights of individuals with disabilities, ensure inclusive and equitable quality education, and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (UN, 2006; UNESCO, 2009; UN, 2015).

UNESCO (2009) "Guidelines for Inclusion: Ensuring Access to Education for All" defined Inclusion as the means of catering for diversity of all learners and reducing exclusion in education. This includes making the necessary adjustments in content, structures, and strategies to ensure that all children are education in the regular school system. Lynch (2000) stated that inclusion is "associated with the mainstream participation of all learners with impairments" including those having "special education needs" (p. 3); and Aslett-Rydbjerg (2003) stated that inclusive education is "a model of education where all children, regardless of categories, are included and actively participate in regular classrooms within a given education system" (p. 2).

In Sierra Leone, the Child Rights Act, 2007 and the Persons with Disability Act (PDA), 2011 provide for the education of all children, including those with disabilities. The PDA prohibit discrimination against persons with disability (PWDs) and seeks to achieve equal opportunities for PWDs (GoSL, 2011; GoSL, 2007). However, the laws did not place emphasis on establishing an inclusive educational environment and are poorly implemented. The National Policy on Radical Inclusion (NPRI) went further to address inclusion of persons PWDS in education, but there is a lacuna. The policy seems to be more gender focused, particularly, inclusion of pregnant girls in schools, due to an existing ban on admission of pregnant girls and the disparity in attendance and continuity of girls in comparison to boys in schools. In other words, the main thrust of the policy was not inclusion or mainstreaming of CWDs in schools (MBSSE, 2021).

Inclusive education for CWDs in Sierra Leone has been emphasized due to marginalization within the education system that often leads to a lifetime of marginalization and disproportionate representation of PWDs in mainstream society (MBSSE, 2021; Traini, et al., 2010; Nishimuko, 2014). Inclusive education has numerous educational, social, and economic benefits for CWDs and society. It guarantees human rights for everyone, hence, it embrace by the government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) as part of its flagship human capital development as enshrined in the Medium-Term National Development Plan 2019-2023 (GoSL, 2019) and other educational policies (MBSSE, 2021; MEST, 2018; MEST, 2010). However, notwithstanding policy reform and increase budgetary allocation to the education sector, there is disconnect between policy and practice relating to education of CWDs. Implementation is poor, and what occurs on the ground is far-fetch from what is planned as the barriers to education for PWDs is gigantic (Street Child, 2018; Traini, et al., 2010; Nishimuko, 2014).

The Education Sector Plan, NPRI, Street Child acknowledges that physical provisions in inclusive schools is a barrier to education of CWDs and they are critical of the success of inclusion. As important as physical provisions are to the education of CWDs in mainstream schools, there is dearth of information regarding their availability and adequacy in inclusive schools, mindful that inclusion has only gain momentum from the government in recent times. The government emphasis was on special schooling. In fact, the Education Act of 2004 makes provision for special schools for children with physical and mental disabilities (GoSL, 2004) although most are not enrolled therein due to inadequate institutions and facilities. Due to the recent policy development and implementation, mainstream schools might be ill-equip to cater to the educational needs of CWDs in primary schools (Humanity and Inclusion, 2020). Rose et al. (2018) and Nishimuko (2014) have advocated for investment in physical provisions for success of inclusion in education of CWDs in Sierra Leone. Consequently, it is against this backdrop that this study was carried out to determine whether appropriate physical facilities exist in inclusive primary schools from a cross section of stakeholders, bearing in mind that absence of such facilities not only hinders inclusion and makes the whole model infeasible.

The research addresses the following questions:

(a) What are teachers' perspective in relation to physical provisions for education of CWDs in inclusive primary schools?

(b) What are CWDs perspective in relation to physical provisions for education of CWDs in inclusive primary schools?

(c) What are parents' perspective in relation to physical provisions for education of CWDs in inclusive primary schools?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Inclusive Education

Article 24(1) of the Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities enjoin signatories to:

> Ensure the realization of the right of persons with disabilities to education through an inclusive education system at all levels, including pre-schools, primary, secondary and tertiary education, vocational training and lifelong learning, extracurricular and social activities, and for all students, including persons with disabilities, without discrimination and on equal terms with others (UN, 2006).
>
> Meaning of the term "Inclusive Education" vary according to organizations/institutions. However, all such definitions revolved around inclusion of CWDs and marginalized individuals into the regular/mainstream education classroom.

According to the report of the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2016):

> Inclusion involves a process of systemic reform embodying changes and modifications in content, teaching methods, approaches, structures and strategies in education to overcome barriers with a vision serving to provide all students of the relevant age range with an equitable and participatory learning experience and environment that best corresponds to their requirements and preferences (p. 4).

However, the Committee stated that placement of student with disabilities in mainstream schools without the accompany modifications (e.g. organization, curriculum, teaching and learning strategies) could not be taken as inclusion.

UNESCO (2019) calls inclusive education:

> A transformative process that ensures full participation and access to quality learning opportunities for all children, young people and adults, respecting and valuing diversity, and eliminating all forms of discrimination in and through education. (p. 1).
>
> That is ensuring that schools and other educational settings place where every learner is valued, accorded rights and dignity and diversity is respected and enhanced.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) "a stricter sense of inclusion is that all children with disabilities should be educated in regular classrooms with age-appropriate peers" (WHO, 2011, p. 209). WHO further proffered that inclusive education involves recognising barriers, eliminating them, and making available reasonable accommodation to allow every learner partake in a mainstream education setting.

According to the International Disability Alliance, inclusive education is the only means of achieving SDG 4 – quality education for all including CWDs. The organization believes that inclusion is not just a "placement" in regular education classrooms of those that have or would have been excluded; but a transformative process that facilitate "full participation"; not an ad hoc system. It is a process whereby students (disabled or non-disabled) learn alongside their peers in schools and classrooms; being accorded the required support necessary for such integration in all levels of education (International Disability Alliance, 2020, p. 11).

Inclusive education also has benefits. Bui et al. (2010) asserted that no individual should be excluded from education and that every child has a right to education, including those living with disabilities; and that inclusive education practices can improve learning for all children (with or without disabilities), enhance acceptance, and lessen prejudice.

Inclusive education is an entryway to higher education, employment, and socioeconomic freedom and empowerment benefiting individuals, families, and society (Street Child, 2018). In addition, the practice of learning side-by-side (children with and without disabilities) help curb the marginalization, discrimination, and stigma that associated with exclusion of PWDs from education and employment (Rose, et al., 2018).

Inclusive education also bolsters social integration, equip PWDs to contribute towards the socioeconomic development of their communities/nations, and benefits society, families, educators and students (Dolmage, et al., 2009). Furthermore, communities benefit from inclusion of CWDs into mainstream schools as it helps to mitigate barriers and bias. It enables acceptance of differences and promotes an open and affable society (Mag, et al., 2017).

Cost wise, Hallahan et al. (2009) also argued that educating CWDs in special schools is not cost-effective nor sustainable in the long term, and it often leads to inferior education.

Jolley et al. (2018) argued that while the inclusive education model has gained wide prominence in education, it has not been properly implemented in West Africa. This is apparent in implementation and practice. Thus, Jolley et al. contend that more work has to be done for success of inclusion particularly in the area of physical facilities required for facilitating educational mainstreaming of CWDs in primary all levels of schooling. `

It is obvious from the above-mentioned positions on inclusive education that the concept is centered on integration of all learners into a regular classroom in a mainstream school wherein those with disabilities/special educational needs are provided with the necessary modifications, adjustments and tools for teaching and learning. Although there are divergent views in relation to inclusive education, its focal point is the prohibition of discrimination in education in all spheres and groups (students, teachers, parents, government, facilities, curriculum etc.). It accepts, accommodates and respond to diversity of learners working in tandem with communities and society.

2.2 Physical Provisions for CWDs

Sierra Leone has the Persons with Disabilities Act, 2011 that establishes a National Commission for Persons with Disability and a National Development Fund. The law stipulates structural adaptation in educational institutions and learning facilities for PWDs; ensures that PWDs are entitled to a barrier-free environment to access buildings, roads, and other social amenities. It also warrants access to public premises, public services, and access to public sports and recreation facilities; makes provision for sign language; facilitation of learning with braille; and makes provision for access to public transportation (GoSL, 2011).

The NPRI planned to enable marginalized and excluded groups to enter and remain in school until they graduate. The policy seeks to increase enrolment, retention, and successful transition of all students regardless of disability, gender, pregnancy or parenting status, geographic location, and socio-economic background. It also seeks to improve the learning environment for CWDs by eliminating barriers to full inclusion since many schools remain inaccessible to them. Furthermore, the policy states that every child deserves the opportunity to go to school, whether they have disabilities or not (MBSSE, 2021).

In relation to physical provisions, the NPRI makes provision for adaptations to the physical environment of schools, such as ramps, toilets, and training of teachers to enable them to provide education services for CWDs. The GoSL also pledged to provide structural adaptations to educational institutions in order to access buildings easily (MBSSE, 2021).

Irrespective of these promulgations in support of PWDs, they continue to face numerous challenges in areas such as:

- Orthopedic devices e.g. canes, crutches, hearing aids, and eyeglasses.
- Inaccessibility to school facilities in both the rural and urban areas.
- Inaccessibility to buildings and infrastructures since they were designed without disability in mind (Street Child, 2018; Kabia & Tarawally, 2017).

Physical access for inclusion of CWDs includes having easy and free access to school structures such as classrooms, buildings, toilets, recreation facilities etc. Accessibility in this regard implies accessible routes, ramps and curb entrances. Therefore, the unavailability of such disabled-friendly structures could hinder inclusion and exclude CWDs for society, further affecting their daily life (Traini, et al., 2010; Sightsavers, 2020a).

Rose et al. (2018) mentioned that in order to promote inclusive education, it is essential that school environment to be accessible in terms of the buildings, facilities, information, and communications. Moreover, CWDs must be accorded dignity and should have access to administrative provisions such as proper hygiene, specialized and adapted learning materials, individual support, and reasonable accommodations.

Reasonable accommodation as provided for in Article 2 of the CRPD means:

> Necessary and appropriate modification and adjustments not imposing a disproportionate or undue burden, where needed in a particular case, to ensure that persons with disabilities enjoy or exercise on an equal basis with others of all human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Physical accessibility when applied to education means that schools must be within safe physical reach, and they must be accessible to CWDs, both in terms of getting to the school and moving around and within the building (International Disability Alliance, 2020).

The Education Sector Plan noted that CWDs could not attend school if the buildings are not physically accessible. For CWDs to enjoy their fundamental right to education, the issue of accessibility must be addressed in areas such as entryways to buildings and classrooms, seating arrangements, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) including toilet facilities, and transportation to and from school, and specialized and adaptive materials (MEST, 2018).

The PDA, 2011 mandates admission and free tuition for PWDs to educational institutions. However, Part VII of the Act requires a medical board to issue a "Permanent Disability Certificate" to make them eligible for rights and services (GoSL, 2011). Laudable as this might seem, it poses a constraint considering the difficulty in acquiring such documentation.

Rose et al. (2018) have identified "shortcomings in terms of resource provision (teaching materials, assistive technology), school environment (toilet facilities, accessibility)" (p. 9). The education ministry has also recognized that many schools lack physical facilities and remain inaccessible to CWDs (MBSSE, 2021; MEST, 2018).

Evidence abound in reports on disability education, and inclusion in education that highlights the need for numerous physical facilities that encompass: structural adaptations for mobility, WASH facilities, specialized and adapted learning materials, assistive devices and technologies,and transportation to and from schools for inclusive education (Nishimuko, 2014; Sightsavers, 2020a; Street Child, 2018; Traini, et al., 2010; Sesay, 2018).

It is evident that a significant encumbrance to mainstreaming education for CWDs is physical facilities. Specifically, CWDs cannot attend primary schools and be able to learn effective in like manner with their peers if they requisite physical facilities to facilitate learning are not there. Provision of adequate physical facilities and reasonable accommodation is therefore necessary to dismantle physical barriers, mainstream education for all, and guarantee the success of inclusive education for CWDs in primary schools in Sierra Leone.

3. Methodology

The study was a descriptive survey encompassing a cross-section involve in the education of CWDs inclusive primary schooling. The population criteria consist of:

- Teacher of an inclusive primary school with children with disabilities,
- Children with disabilities in inclusive primary schools, and
- Parents of children with disabilities in inclusive primary schools.

Due to the absence of a sampling frame of inclusive schools including the number of CWDs therein; a multi-stage purposive sampling was employed to selected the sample. First one inclusive each in all five (5) regional capitals of Sierra Leone were selected. Next, 20 teachers (4/school); 60 CWDs (12/school) and 15 parents (3/school) were randomly selected for participation in the study. This gives a total sample size of 95 individuals (i.e. 20+60+15=95). The research toos was a structured questionnaire containing a 5-point Likert Scale containing items on (a) structural adaptations for mobility, (b) water, sanitation and hygiene facilities, (c) specialized and adapted learning materials, (d) assistive devices and technologies, and (c) transportation. The tool was administered to all three cohorts as respondents. The

aim was to get differing perspective regarding physical provisions so as to be able to appropriately deduce the findings. Data was collected by the researcher. However, the rules of social distancing, sanitation and face mask were adhered to, and informed consent was sought from all respondents including ethical considerations – voluntary participation and confidentiality. Data analysis involve computation of descriptive statistics mainly relative frequencies to give a percentage of responses in line with the descriptive design.

4. Data Analysis and Interpretation

4.1 Demographic characteristics

Table following table displays the demographic representation of respondents gender and age ranges.

Table 4.1: gender and age proportion of respondents

	Teachers		**CWDs**		**Parents**	
	No. of respondents	***Percent***	***No. of respondents***	***Percent***	***No. of respondents***	***Percent***
Gender						
Male	8	40	33	55	6	40
Female	12	60	27	45	9	60
Total	20	100	60	100	15	100
Age						
Under 10	1	5	45	75	-	-
10 – 20	2	10	15	25	2	13
21 – 30	8	40	-	-	5	33
31 – 40	4	20	-	-	4	27
41 – 50	3	15	-	-	3	20
Over 50	2	10	-	-	1	7
Total	20	100	60	100	15	100

Source: primary data

According to Table 4.1 60% of the teachers were female and male represented 40%. For the CWDs, 33% were male and 27% female; and for the parents, 60 were female and 40% male. Thus, we have more female that male respondents for both teachers and parents, whilst the boys exceeded girls for CWDs. In terms of age, those age 21 to 30 were in the majority for teachers (40%) followed by those in the 31 to 40 age group (20%). Most (75%) of the CWDs were under 10 years and those between 10 upwards constitute 25% (none exceeded that 10-20 year range). Most (33%) of the parents were between 21 – 30 years, which is not surprising considering that the children are young. Next were those age between 31 – 40 years at 27% and those between 41 and 50 at 20%. Respondents between 10 and 20 years (teenage parents) numbered 2(13%). Gender, Age

1.2 Physical Provisions

The findings are consistent with the research questions and based on the responses to the research tool and data analysis. A five-point Likert scale was used to inquire into physical provisions for CWDs in the surveyed inclusive schools in order to probe their adequacy in meeting the needs of CWDs. All respondents (teachers, CWDs, parents) were asked to rate items relating to physical provisions in the schools on a scale ranging from 1 [*Very Inadequate*] to 5 [*Very Adequate*]. Tables 4.2, 4.3, and 4.4 present results generated from the analysis of their responses.

4.2.1 Teachers Perspective

Table 4.2: frequencies of teacher responses on physical provisions

Item	Very Inadequate	Inadequate	Moderate	Adequate	Very Adequate	Total
Structural adaptations for mobility	80%	10%	10%	0%	0%	100%
Water, sanitation and hygiene facilities'	30%	20%	30%	20%	0%	100%
Specialized and adapted learning materials	90%	10%	0%	0%	0%	100%
Assistive devices and technologies	90%	10%	0%	0%	0%	100%
Transportation	20%	30%	50%	0%	0%	100%

Source: primary data

In the area of structural adaptations for mobility (such as easy movement between buildings, ramps, classroom-seating arrangements), none of the teachers consider them adequate. Only one (10%) teacher-rated structural adaptations as moderate. In total, 90% felt they were not adequate. On WASH facilities (toilets, water, sanitation), the majority consider them inadequate – 30% and 20% believe they are very inadequate and adequate, respectively. However, 30% felt such facilities are moderate, and 20% believed them to be adequate. There was overwhelming rejection on the availability of specialized and adapted learning materials (braille, sign language, assistive devices) and assistive devices and technologies (e.g., software apps, assistive technologies). All of the teachers consider them inadequate (Very Inadequate=90%; Inadequate=10%). Transportation (motor vehicle, motorcycle, rickshaw taxis) to school fared better than the rest. Half (50%) believed that the problem with transportation is moderate, whiles the other half disagreed – 30% and 20% felt it is inadequate and very inadequate respectively. None of the teachers considered the physical accessibility items very adequate (Table 4.2).

4.2.2 Children with Disabilities perspective

Table 4.3: Frequencies of CWDs responses on physical provisions

Item	Very Inadequate	Inadequate	Moderate	Adequate	Very Adequate	Total
Structural adaptations for mobility	70%	20%	10%	0%	0%	100%
Water, sanitation and hygiene facilities'	40%	20%	20%	20%	0%	100%
Specialized and adapted learning materials	70%	10%	20%	0%	0%	100%
Assistive devices and technologies	80%	10%	10%	%	0%	100%
Transportation	40%	30%	20%	10%	0%	100%

Source: primary data

Regarding the CWDs views on structural adaptations for mobility, the most significant percentage (70%) of CWDs reported very inadequately, 20% said inadequate, whiles 10% said it neither adequate nor inadequate. None reported adequacy of structural adaptation. WASH facilities had some favorable viewpoints although only 40% of respondents view them as very inadequate, 20% as

inadequate, moderate, and adequate, respectively. Thus, WASH had an equal adequate and moderate percentage of responses. Specialized learning and adapted learning materials had unfavorable responses, with cumulatively 80% (i.e., 70% = Very Inadequate; 10% = Inadequate) of the CWDs reporting their inadequacies. Only 20% selected the moderate response, and none felt they were adequate. The same goes for assistive devices and technologies, with a cumulative 90% subscribing to their inadequacy and 10% considering them neither adequate nor inadequate. Transportation, on the other hand, registered a 10% adequacy response and 20% moderate response. However, the more significant proportion – 40% and 30% respectively - considered them inadequate and adequate. Noteworthy is that none of the children respondents considered the physical provision items very adequate (Table 4.3).

4.2.3 Parents of CWDs Perspective

Table 4.3: Frequencies of parents' responses on physical provisions

Item	Very Inadequate	Inadequate	Moderate	Adequate	Very Adequate	Total
Structural adaptations for mobility	30%	30%	20%	20%	0%	100%
Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Facilities'	20%	30%	30%	20%	0%	100%
Specialized and adapted learning materials	30%	40%	20%	10%	0%	100%
ICT/Assistive Technologies	30%	40%	20%	10%	0%	100%
Transportation to school	30%	30%	20%	20%	0%	100%

Source: primary data

Regarding structural adaptations for mobility items, about 60% (30% each selected very inadequate and inadequate) of parents felt they were adequate, and 20% believed them to be moderate and adequate, respectively. For WASH facilities, half of the parents said they are inadequate, whiles 30% said they are moderate, and 20% viewed them as adequate. Specialized and adapted learning materials and assistive devices and technologies registered similar response patterns. Cumulatively, 70% reported both as inadequate, whiles 20% and 10% considered them moderate and adequate. Cumulatively, 60% reported transportation to be inadequate, and 20% between and adequate, respectively. It should be noted that the parents registered adequacy response for each of the items; however, none of the teachers considered the physical provisions items very adequate (Table 4.4).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

The investigation focuses on examining physical provision in inclusive primary schools through polling three groups: teachers, CWDs and parents; to ascertain the adequacy for meeting the educational needs of CWDs. The findings revealed a gloomy picture for physical provisions in the said institutions, especially structural adaptations for mobility. The parents hold a contrary view based on their some out favourable responses on the physical accessibility themes. On a scale of 1 to 5, none of the three groups of respondents registered a "very adequate" response to all physical provision items. Apart from some minor rating of "adequate" for the items, the prevalence was either "very inadequate or inadequate" for the items, implying dissent to sufficiency of the thematic items for an inclusive learning environment. Overall, the study concludes that physical provisions in terms of structural adaptations for mobility;

water, sanitation, and hygiene; specialized or adapted learning materials; ICT/Assistive Technologies; and school transportation are inadequate.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations for the availability of physical and administrative provisions for children with disabilities in inclusive primary schools are proffered:

- Structural adaptations for mobility: ramps, entrance, stairways, and compound modifications to allow free movement of children with disabilities.
- Accessible toilets, disinfectants, sanitary materials, disposal of dangerous/harmful materials.
- Specialized and adapted learning materials: braille, sign language, alternative scripts, and formats of communication.
- Transportation to and from school: school buses, motorcycles and taxis.

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