

Breaking down Barriers

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Key Roles of School Leaders in the Implementation of Inclusive Education at Primary School Level in Sierra Leone

What makes leadership successful?

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Executive summary

In Sierra Leone, children with disabilities suffer from exclusion in many areas including education. Good school leadership, provided by school leaders, especially headteachers, can contribute to changes in existing norms and beliefs that marginalize children with disabilities. Such leadership is also crucial in addressing factors limiting children's access to, admission, and retention in school. Unfortunately, the role of the headteachers who provide leadership in the successful implementation of inclusive education remains poorly understood. Using the experiences of 5 headteachers in the implementation of inclusive education in 5 primary schools in Sierra Leone, this policy brief examines (1) the roles that school leaders, especially headteachers, need to play in order for inclusive education to be successful and, (2) the skills/competencies that substantiate these roles. The focus on headteachers is because they play a quintessential role in school administration and have total autonomy in deciding on enrolment and innovations within the schools they head. Five interconnected roles were identified among the headteachers who made their inclusive education efforts successful: **role models** by possessing high level of integrity as well as admirable and inspiring character; **effective "spiders in the web"** by possessing interpersonal and networking skills; **powerful advocates** by possessing persuasion and communication skills; **local knowledge brokers** by possessing facilitation and training skills and; **passionate visionary** by possessing clear vision and sense of direction and acting based on high personal conviction and intrinsic motivation.

Introduction

Generally, good school leadership is seen as crucial to addressing issues related to stigmatization, lack of access, low enrollment, and retention that undermine achievement of inclusive educationⁱⁱ. Research has revealed that many children with disabilities lack the opportunity to access education that is appropriate to their individual needsⁱⁱⁱ. Several international conventions^{iv} urge states to promote and protect the child’s right to education and to put all the necessary efforts toward achieving this right, based on equal opportunity. They demand that governments adopt laws, policies and budgetary provisions for compulsory, available, fully accessible and free primary education for all children based on the principle of non-discrimination.

In Sierra Leone, section 9 (1b) of the 1991 constitution provides for every citizen to be given the opportunity to be educated to the best of their aptitude and inclination through the provision of financial and educational facilities at all levels of education. The Persons with Disabilities Act of 2011 emphasizes persons with disabilities’ access to educational institutions and facilities. Section 15 (1) of the Act criminalizes the refusal of admission to or expelled from an educational institution because of one’s disability. The National Policy on Radical Inclusion also seeks to ensure that schools in Sierra Leone are accessible to and inclusive of all children, including children with disabilities. The emphasis of these laws/policies is based on an education system that is free from legal, physical, communication, social, financial, and attitudinal barriers to accessing education.

In spite of having a comprehensive policy framework in Sierra Leone, inclusive education is not fully implemented in practice. This paper argues that transformative school leadership is an important requirement in successfully implementing inclusive education. The questions are: (1) what kind of roles do headteachers need to play in order to achieve such leadership? and (2) what skills/competencies are substantiating these roles? Drawing from a case study of the implementation of inclusive



Interviewing Mrs. Sesay a Senior Teacher and inclusive education champion at RC Primary School, Binkolo, Northern Sierra Leone.

education in primary schools in Sierra Leone, this paper identifies five roles that headteachers embody which in combination with one another make their leadership successful in implementing inclusive education.

Methodology

The study focuses on the roles that headteachers play and the qualities they embody that enabled them run successful inclusive education programs. The study was conducted in Bombali and Kailahun districts, targeting 5 schools over a seven-month period from September 2021-March-2022. An assessment by One Family People and reports from Sightsavers and Humanity and Inclusion suggest that these 5 schools lead in the successful implementation of inclusive education. Using a semi-structured interview guide, 58 participants were interviewed, including headteachers (5), teachers (15), abled (10) and disabled children (15), parents (10), and, three Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education staff including the Director of Special Needs Education, a Deputy Director at district level and a quality assurance officer. Participant observation of class during learning sessions was also employed.

A cross-section of SMC members at the Methodist Primary School, Kailahun, Eastern Sierra Leone.



Context of Disability-Inclusive Education in Sierra Leone

In Sierra Leone, people with disabilities account for 93,129 (1.3 percent) of the total population^v. According to the Sierra Leone 2015 Population and Housing Census, of the 92,076 children with disabilities above the age of 3 years, 57,794 (63 percent) never went to school, while 34,282 (37 percent) attended school^{vi}. This group of people faces unprecedented marginalization in society. The stigma surrounding disability is rooted in beliefs that it is a punishment for a sacrilege committed by a parent or is the devil's work. These myths, superstitions, and negative labels attached to people with disabilities contribute significantly to their social exclusion, particularly in accessing education^{vii}. Even where families decide to enroll their children in school, the absence of school staff with the expertise to accommodate the needs of these children becomes a problem.

In the quest to reach inclusive education, the government has made significant strides through legislation and policies to heighten inclusive education. However, in order for these laws

aligning their institutions' core values and principles with the values and principles of inclusive education laws and policies. The study revealed that the actions of the headteachers showed that they fully own and lead the campaign for tolerance, equality, non-discrimination and the recognition of diversity in and outside the school. The study also found that all the 5 headteachers led by example. They instituted proactive and reactive school and classroom management as a strategy for peaceful coexistence among staff and learners of varying physical status. They also showed reverence for organizational and national laws and policies on inclusive education as a guide in their implementation of inclusive education. These headteachers show compassion and care for all the children in their schools, they were accepting and fully respecting children with disabilities regardless of their background and identity.

In order to successfully put core values into practice, the headteachers needed to have high levels of self-esteem. The study showed that this strongly shaped their appearance and performance as school leaders. The study found that all the headteachers demonstrated a reverence for the position they occupy while modestly admitting how challenging such a critical role can be. One of the headteachers noted, *"As a leader, you have to be strong, have faith in yourself, ensure you set your priorities right, have a clear vision and a plan; pair that vision with great passion, then see the result."* The headteachers embody the values of inclusion and equality in their daily life and work and are highly convinced about the moral rightness of what they do.

The second role is **effective "spiders in the web"** by possessing excellent interpersonal and networking skills. A good leader believes in collaboration and understands the importance of building a community. The study revealed that the headteachers proved to be effective "spiders in the web" for a number of reasons. First, they were able



Interviewing MR. Yamba Sesay, head of Inclusive Education Champions at Wesleyan Church of Sierra Leone, Primary School, Kamabai, Northern Sierra Leone.

and policies to be implemented successfully, a transformative school leadership that is responsive to inclusive education legal frameworks and policies is crucial. Regardless of the minimal support these headteachers get from the government, the portrayed leadership embarked on a number of initiatives such as collaborating with non-governmental organizations such as Sightsavers and Humanity and Inclusion to help them successfully implement IE.

Transformative leadership as a major contributor for successful inclusive education

Transformative leadership is crucial for making sure that inclusive education policies are implemented successfully in practice. What constitutes transformative leadership? This study identifies five essential roles that have, in this context, determined quality leadership and that the headteachers embody and substantiate with skills/competencies.

The first role is being **role models**, by possessing admirable and inspiring character and high levels of integrity and self-esteem. By integrity we mean, that the headteachers "walk the talk" by

to build and sustain reciprocal family and community partnerships, which can be seen in the establishing of mothers' clubs for purposes of reducing negative stereotypes about disability and enhancing the enrollment of children with disabilities in schools. With the help of these engaged mothers, the headteachers succeeded in popularizing the social inclusion of children with disabilities; inculcating community trust of inclusive education and increasing school admission and retention of these children in the schools.

Second, the study revealed instances where headteachers worked with the children by allowing them to hold leadership roles like class monitors and school prefects and encouraged them to participate in extra-curricular activities. The involvement of these children in their learning trajectories enhanced learning outcomes, social inclusion, and self-esteem. Third, the headteachers established strong relationships with a number of NGOs and local councils who have the expertise and resources needed to implement IE in their schools. For example, headteachers collaborated with Sightsavers and Humanity and Inclusion to train school leaders and teachers on inclusive

education best practices in order to act as inclusion champions in their schools and communities.

The third role is **powerful advocates** by possessing solid persuasion and communication skills. Before the inception of inclusive education, discrimination against children with disabilities was prevalent in the schools and communities because of myths, superstitions, and negative labels about disability. This has contributed significantly to social exclusion and poor school enrollment of children with disabilities. The resonating messages from the headteachers were instrumental in sensitizing pupils, parents, other teachers and broader community members on tolerance and social inclusion to promote a culture of attitudinal change and recognition of diversity in school. The messages of the headteachers resonated because they were seen as role models who are genuine and with high integrity.

On the one hand, the headteachers were able to raise awareness among parents about the rights and the urgent need of their children to be enrolled in schools, thereby increasing enrollment and On the other, they were able to contribute to changes in perceptions about disability among the teachers by explaining that disability is not inability and that these children have the potential to develop and become independent adults. The study also revealed that the growth of the culture of inclusion in the schools and communities was due to inclusive education structures created within the school system by the headteachers.



Mr. Kanu, an Inclusive Education teacher at Wesleyan Church of Sierra Leone, Kamabai, Northern Sierra Leone, filling questionnaire on inclusive education.

The fourth role is **local knowledge brokers** by possessing the requisite knowledge and expertise on inclusive education in a country where only few people have this. This can be witnessed in the provision of inclusive education training (Capacity Building) for Teachers and other community members. Understanding the limitations of teachers in handling inclusive classes, these headteachers built the capacity of teachers in order to provide the required instructional, pedagogical, and related inclusive education skills for their learners.

Furthermore, the headteachers in all the 5 schools recommend, appoint and support the training of community members. The study found that headteachers, with the support of Sightsavers (for schools in the northern region) and Humanity and Inclusion (in the south) established and provided training for mothers' Clubs on girls' hygiene and sexual and reproductive health education. The mothers' clubs have been instrumental to the enrolment and retention of disabled girls and gaining the trust of mothers to send their daughters to school. Also, the Center for Democracy and Human Rights (CDHR), in collaboration with school leaders trained community members as Human Rights Volunteers to help look into issues of child rights abuses in schools and communities.

The fifth role is **passionate visionary** by possessing clear vision and sense of direction based on high personal conviction and intrinsic motivation. The study revealed that successful school leaders have S.M.A.R.T goals and a clear message for individuals and organizations who want to implement IE successfully; the message is, leaders must have a philosophical understanding of what they want to achieve. Their vision is to create a school environment that provides equal access, participation and safety for all learners. One headteacher stated, "As a mission school, giving vulnerable children the opportunity to learn alongside and compete with nondisabled children has been one of our goals. So for me, creating a level playing field for every child is something that's really important." The study also revealed that, the growth of the culture of tolerance in the 5 schools and their respective communities was due to structures such as inclusive education champions/program volunteers, buddy-friends and Mothers' clubs created by school leaders within the school system. These leaders demonstrated their vision to challenging myths, superstitions and negative labels to disabilities by training teachers on basic IE and some core competencies, and



Fatmata Susan Kamara, Sierra Leone

organizing disability and IE awareness sessions in the community. To ensure that more children with disabilities enrolled in school, headteachers led Child Find exercises to enhance high enrolment.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The study in Sierra Leone clearly shows that transformative leadership is a crucial contributor towards successful implementation of inclusive education. It was evident that all the headteachers performed five keys roles that enhanced their leadership. These leaders are role models by possessing admirable and inspiring character and high levels of integrity and self-esteem; effective “spiders in the web”; powerful advocates; local knowledge brokers and passionate visionaries. Although these roles often times came naturally for the headteachers because of their passion for the work they do, the

study finds it important to explicitly highlight them for purposes of further structural capacity development of headteachers who can advance the implementation of inclusive education in schools and make a difference in the lives of children with disabilities in Sierra Leone, if they are able to play out those roles effectively. Furthermore, decision-makers in governments and NGOs can use this knowledge about the leadership roles in promoting and advancing inclusive education by:

- Making school leadership an integral part of inclusive education policies and strategies;
- Developing and implementing inclusive education interventions that pay attention to strengthening the ability of school leaders to fulfill these identified roles;
- Stimulating inclusive education in schools that already have committed leadership who can advance the inclusive education agenda.



PHOTOS: BEYOND BORDERS

Sheku M. Dumbuya, Sierra Leone.

Editors

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For further reading

Kamara E.A, (2022). The role of successful school leaders in the implementation of inclusive education in primary school in Sierra Leone. MPhil-thesis. Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone.

Notes

- ⁱ Aisha Ibrahim is Assistant deputy vice-chancellor, at Fourah Bay College (Sierra Leone). Sofka Trajcevska is Policy Advisor at Liliane Foundation.
- ⁱⁱ Lipsky, D. K., & Gartner, A. (1998). International perspectives on special education reform. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 13(1), 128-133. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0885625980130113>. See also; (Ainscow, 1999; Leo & Barton, 2006; Kugelmass & Ainscow, 2003).
- ⁱⁱⁱ Accessibility and relevance of education for children with disabilities in Uganda. (2003, p 24-25, 45-47).
- ^{iv} United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), article 23 and United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), article 7.
- ^v Sierra Leone 2015 Population and Housing Census Summary of Final Results, p16.
- ^{vi} Sierra Leone 2015 Population and Housing Census Thematic Report on Disability, 13-15
- ^{vii} Baffoe. (2013). Stigma, Discrimination & Marginalization: Gateways to Oppression of Persons with Disabilities in Ghana, West Africa. *Journal of Educational and Social Research*, 3(1), 194-195.