

# Breaking down Barriers

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## Strategies for home pre-schooling in Cameroon

# The missing link in Inclusive Education

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### Executive summary

Home pre-schooling involves learning by children with disabilities (CWDs) in their homes or specialized centres to prepare them for inclusion into mainstream schools. Home pre-schooling for CWDs is an approach that is quite new and has not received significant attention from policy makers, educators, researchers and educational communities in Cameroon. The current general trend in Cameroon is that all learners of all categories are taught in centres or in regular schools together. As a result, the phenomenon has not been studied by researchers in Cameroon and there is no documented information and statistics on its prevalence, successes, challenges and prospects in the Cameroonian context. The purpose of this study was to investigate whether home pre-schooling can contribute to the inclusion of Children with disabilities (CWDs) into mainstream education by developing skills that facilitate this process.

Two sets of findings emerged from the research. First, home pre-schooling develops important skills necessary for inclusive education such as braille, use of sign language, use of pedagogic/didactic materials, appreciation of nature and interaction with friends.

Second, socialization, dramatization, demonstration, and physical exercise are key strategies that teachers can use to develop these skills. The involvement of families and communities is essential in home pre-schooling because they constitute part of the educational triangle. In the case study, Community-Based Rehabilitation workers played a central role in the processes of identifying these children, screening and placing them in the required category for home pre-schooling. Apart from identifying these children in the various communities, they are also inclusive education teachers engaged in home pre-schooling activities.

**Introduction**

Since the mid-1990s, inclusive education (IE) has been promoted as the preferred way of enhancing quality education for CWDs. Despite these efforts, IE is not immediately feasible as the CWDs lack some necessary skills like braille, sign language communication, and face writing. Some CWDs also cope with attitudinal challenges like lack of self-esteem and self-acceptance and inferiority complex to adequately participate in mainstream school. Home pre-schooling seems a promising approach to prepare and enable the effective participation of these children in the mainstream school system. The concept of home pre-schooling involves both learning in the homes or specialized centres.

This study seeks to learn from experiences of the Socio-Economic Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (SEEPD) and the Empowerment and Disability Inclusive Development (EDID) programs of Cameroon Baptist Convention Health Services (CBCHS), with regard to the practice of home pre-schooling. In order to attain this, two research questions have been identified within this research:

1. What skills do CWDs need to have for IE to become feasible?
2. What do those involved consider best practices to promote these skills in home pre-schooling?

**Seepd and edid programs**

The CBCHS-SEEPD program in the North-West region of Cameroon seeks to contribute to development by improving on the quality of life of persons with disability. This program builds on its experience to support development actors (including the government) to adopt a disability approach in their development plans and actions. There are six key components that align their interventions. These include; Medical, Rehabilitation, Inclusive

Education, Livelihood, Social, Gender and Child protection. The program builds self-esteem and provides persons with disability the necessary knowledge and skills to fully participate within their communities. In order to realize this objective, the SEEPD program engages in a number of gainful activities like micro-credit, capacity building, community-based vocational training, advocacy for formal employment, job placement and presently home pre-schooling.

The EDID program complements the SEEPD program. It was created as a coordinating office to ensure the effective implementation of activities outlined in the CBCHS strategic partnership role with LF. Its core objective is to empower children and youths with disabilities aged 0-25 in Cameroon and foster disability-inclusive development. Activities are implemented using two core strategies. First, the child development empowers needy children and youths with disabilities by facilitating their access to education, healthcare, social and livelihood activities. Second, it provides an enabling environment that reduces the barriers that hinder the effective and meaningful participation of Children and Youths with disability in the Society. This core strategy is implemented through a network of over 20 partner organizations spread in nine regions in Cameroon who receive technical and financial support from the program, coming from the Liliane Foundation. The goal of the EDID program is to ensure that children and youngsters with disabilities in Cameroon participate equally in the lives of their families and communities. There are fourfold activities of this program, namely, Education, Health, Socials and Livelihood. EDID program facilitates transportation to teachers and field workers, payment of school fees and purchase of didactic materials to facilitate home pre-schooling in the sites where data was collected.



Kfeban Blaise Sunjo poses with the facilitator of inclusive education in Government Bilingual High School Nkol-Eton, the Community Based Rehabilitation Worker in charge of Home preschool based at the Etoug-Ebe Baptist Center and the Research Assistant. PHOTO: KFEBAN BLAISE SUNJO

Home pre-schooling in the SEEPD and EDID programs aims to create the pre-conditions for inclusive education. IE is only possible if all the learners have the basic skills to follow lessons and participate actively in classroom activities. The assumption is CWDs that have participated in the home pre-schooling program are less likely to experience school failure and be misidentified as persons incapable of formal education. Home pre-schooling activities target CWDs who are admitted into mainstream schools but lack essential skills. These include children with visual impairments who cannot braille, children with hearing impairments who cannot understand or respond to basic communication using sign language and children with cerebral palsy who cannot write.

In the SEEPD and EDID programs, the services of Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBR) workers are hired for home pre-schooling activities. These include early identification, support and interventions for the needs of these learners. The activities undertaken in home pre-schooling in the SEEPD and EDID programs depend on the needs of the diverse CWDs. Children with visual impairment learn braille skills, those with hearing impairment learn sign language communication, and children with cerebral palsy carry out activities that help them to be flexible and subsequently to write. Also, there are many other social activities that they do like social and physical exercises

that enhance skills and values of social life and good health. Home pre-schooling requires assessment and evaluation to determine the state of readiness for CWDs. Home-pre-schooling trajectories range between three months to one year. This depends on the ability of the learners to develop the necessary learning skills and the severity of the impairment. Certain impairments, like cerebral palsy take longer time but visual impairments usually take a shorter time.

What complicates the home pre-schooling activities in the SEEPD and EDID programs is that there are CWDs dispersed in different communities but there are relatively few workers to access these areas and offer them home pre-schooling activities. The home pre-schools in the program are pilot centres working in collaboration with CBCHS. However, many schools are closed due to the political unrest and insecurity in the North West region of Cameroon. An unexpected benefit of more home pre-schooling happening in the children's' homes is that this has resulted in the involvement of the family members of CWDs (parents, guardians, brothers and sisters). Currently, the home pre-schooling activities of the SEEPD and EDID programs target high number of dispersed CWDs in different communities and offer services by a low number of CBR workers. Therefore, there is imbalance of the demand and the supply of home pre-schooling services.



Tatisan Verel has hydrocephalus. His brother helps him in school and father Mr. Djoumisse says he does same at home. PHOTO: CBCHS, 2022

**Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative research design, comprised by interviews and Focus Group discussions with thirteen (13) persons in two (2) regions where home pre-schooling is practiced in Cameroon. These included; CWDs, teachers/CBR workers and parents. The participants of this study were drawn from six (6) institutions supported by the SEEPD and EDID Programs: Cameroon Baptist Integrated School for Children with Disabilities, Cameroon Baptist Convention (CBC) School Nkwen, in the Northwest regions; and PROHANDICAM Center Yaounde, Etoug-Ebe Baptist Hospital Yaounde and the resource centre staff of Government Bilingual High School, Nkol-Eton in the Centre region. These were all pilot institutions on home pre-schooling in the sampled regions. We analyzed the results using the Grounded Model.

**Findings**

**Skills for proper inclusion**

In the sampled home pre-schools, there were learners with visual or hearing impairments and children with cerebral palsy. From the interviews and focus group discussions with teachers, CWDs and parents, we learned that the main skills necessary for inclusion into mainstream education are the ability to use braille for those with visual problems, use of sign language for those with hearing impairments, building of a circle of friends and a positive attitude towards life, ability to hold and use any pedagogic/didactic material and appreciation of nature.

**Brailing skills**

Brailing skills appeared indispensable for the proper inclusion of learners with visual impairments. When they develop brailing skills, they are able to express their knowledge in writing like any other learner in the mainstream institution. This is very capital for their academic output because the assessment of what they write and how much they have learned is determined through written scripts. Writing is a very important component in the process of learning. Brailing is the only means through which persons with visual impairments express themselves in written scripts. Consequently, if a child with visual impairment has to take part in all school activities like any other child, then he/she requires these skills prior to inclusion into mainstream schools.

**Sign language communication skills**

Learners with a hearing impairment need to understand and communicate using sign language to participate in mainstream schools. Sign language closes the gap in the communication between the learner and the teacher, permitting learners with hearing impairment to follow lessons and express themselves adequately. It is on the basis of this communication, that the various teachers and peers in the institutions could understand their problems and give them the support they need. Sign language communication is important because it permits children with hearing impairments to cooperate and take part in all school activities.

**Writing**

One of the most important skills highlighted for children with cerebral palsy was writing. This is the skill that home pre-schooling takes time to develop. The process begins by helping children who have sensory or motor impairments carry out activities that render their hands flexible and ready for writing activities. The importance of writing to educational achievement cannot be overemphasized. The frustration of not writing well could be misleading as some of these learners could easily be misidentified as having learning disabilities. Writing is a central



Kfeban Blaise Sunjo poses with one of the beneficiaries inclusive education and alumni of the Etoug-Ebe Baptist Center home preschool program. PHOTO: KFEBAN BLAISE SUNJO

skill to one's success in mainstream education. Thus, the inability to write renders the process of learning almost impossible.

**Social skills**

From the responses in the six institutions, all the teachers and learners agreed that home pre-schooling develops social and interpersonal skills like establishing good relations with friends, sharing ideas, participating in group studies especially with persons without impairments, associating with others beyond the school set up, and being able to share educational materials like books, pens, and pencils. The teachers observed that CWDs have to be prepared psychologically, ensuring their socio-emotional resilience prior to their entry in mainstream schools. This need was emphasized for learners with hearing impairment and those with visual impairment. This is because social skills permit the individuals concerned, to be able to associate with others, share ideas and learn from one another. In mainstream schools, both learners who braille and use a sign language are still in need of the assistance that everyone else requires to live in any academic community. The process of constructing knowledge is not limited to individual skills but extends to one's environment as well as the community. Therefore, this democratic character of learning imposes the need for social skills for all learners including those with disabilities.



Precious mother's wish is to have her child go back to school. PHOTO: CBCHS, 2022

These social skills enable them to interact with members of the school community and foster constructive relationships built on trust, respect and reciprocity.

### Strategies for home pre-schooling

The SEEPD program has experimented with different strategies to develop key skills in home pre-schooling. The strategies were developed based on the best practices by those involved in the home pre-schooling activities and these are: socialization, demonstration, dramatization, and physical exercise. The teaching strategies for home pre-schooling entail a mélange of several methods to respond to the diverse learning needs of children.

#### *Socialization*

In the process of socialization, CWDs are given exposure to different groups of people like teachers, other learners with disabilities and parents so as to enable interaction with different persons in the community. This process enhances the development of social skills and leads to the process of inclusion in communities with diverse experiences, views and interests. The increased engagement of CWDs with other learners contributed in overcoming prejudices and stigma among learners without disabilities and seeing the true value of CWDs as equal members of the school and of the community.

#### *Demonstration*

Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBR) workers and teachers

explained that demonstration is key teaching strategy in home pre-schooling. By demonstration, we mean the diverse practical illustrations of communicating skills related to basic hygiene needs for all, writing for children with hearing impairment, speaking for children with impairments other than speech and signing for all the learners in the centre. In the responses, the teachers said they put great efforts to prepare lessons and make sure that teachers present some of the lessons in form of demonstration. The teachers use diverse styles of illustrations (like body movements) to enhance the communication of certain skills to CWDs especially those who require sign language communication. They explained that teaching children with hearing impairment requires a lot of actions, illustrations and role playing because they are more of visual and tactile learners. They acquire learning skills when they visualize and repeat what you perform. This approach already sets the pace for CWDs to understand the diverse methods of teaching as seen in mainstream schools.

#### *Dramatization*

Dramatization is a key pedagogic method within the context of demonstration. This method is emphasized because CWDs embark on role play in the process of learning. The teachers indicated that they lead CWDs to act certain roles in some of the learning sessions like in the teaching of language and basic hygiene values and skills. This method gives them the opportunities to carry out actions in sign language communication, perform activities that render them flexible and

enable them to interact with other persons in the communities. What one must retain is that these learners are not completely separated from their communities. Home pre-schooling instead reinforces the involvement of the communities in the education of their learners. Drama sessions provide an opportunity for many persons to understand the potentials of the CWDs thus corroborating the phrase that “disability is not inability”. When the CWDs are accepted they become more resilient to face the challenges within mainstream institutions. Dramatization is important to IE education because it promotes social skills and interaction between CWDs and other persons in the communities and the school milieu.

### Community-Based approach

The community-based approach has been employed in home pre-schooling by CBR workers and teachers to narrow the gap between learning and parental guidance. Parents/caregivers collaborate, providing some educational needs for the CWDs and assisting them in doing their assignment. For instance, homework done from textbooks at times requires the assistance of parents/caregivers especially for children with visual impairments. One may be required to read a text for them to listen and answer questions. Also, audio information may have to be signed for those with hearing impairments to permit them understand what to write in their books. The collaboration among the parents/caregivers, the teachers and CBR workers creates a successful educational triangle which bridges the gaps between the school and the home learning environment. What the child learns in school he/she experiences at home and what he learns at home he/she experiences in school. This approach

also breaks the myths of disability and enables other persons to accept CWDs as active and valuable participants in the community.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

Home pre-schooling of CWDs has positively contributed to development of their communication, writing and social skills and competencies as necessary prerequisites for their inclusion in the mainstream schools. To attain this objective, the CBCHS through the SEEDP and EDID programs has made great strides in this practice especially with the recruitment and training of CBR workers who assist in the transmission of these skills. To ensure that the skills which render IE feasible are transmitted, there is need to employ pedagogic strategies like socialization, dramatization, demonstration and community involvement in the process. Consequently, a policy to recruit and train CBR workers under the auspices of the Ministry of Social affairs (MINAS) and the Ministry of Basic Education (MINEDUB) is absolutely necessary. These staff could ensure the adaptation of home pre-schooling to the local contexts of Cameroon. Also, there is a need to make sure that there are enough capable teachers/CBR workers who can implement home-pre-schooling. In addition, the provision of incentives to teachers/ CBR workers is imperative and this does not need to be limited to finances but it has to extend to career development opportunities. Lastly, the need to closely monitor the progress of CWDs when they access mainstream schools is absolutely necessary because it will provide adequate feedback for the adjustment of strategies following the learning needs of children.



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### Editors

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### Notes

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