

Breaking down Barriers

SPECIAL EDITION



SYNTHESIS
POLICY
BRIEF

18

School Leaders as Inclusive Education Champions Catalysing leadership

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Executive summary

Whilst promoted since the 1990s, successful Inclusive Education (IE) for children with disabilities in Sub-Saharan Africa is the exception rather than the norm. This comparative study which makes this policy brief to be a special edition, examined outliers in Zambia, Sierra Leone and Cameroon: schools that, against the odds, have achieved IE successes, focusing on the role of leadership. It found that successful IE schools across the countries employ a similar set of best practices, suggesting their relevance beyond individual country contexts. Many of these practices are aimed at mitigating and overcoming the external environment, which is hostile to IE. Moreover, successful IE schools adopt a holistic perspective that looks at the children's position and their experiences within their families, communities and schools.

The study found that (informal) leadership holds the key to successfully implementing IE. In all schools in the study, we identified exceptional individuals, most notably as head teachers, heads of special units and teachers of special units, acting as the driving force behind overcoming barriers, and promoting and sustaining IE practices.

Without the IE championing by these individuals, it seems unlikely that the observed best practices in the schools would have blossomed to the same extent or would have taken place at all. While acting as IE champions, (informal) leaders draw upon their intrinsic motivation and specialised knowledge and expertise. In doing so, they play five key interconnected roles: advocate, connector, knowledge broker, role model and entrepreneur. Not all IE champions always practise all of these roles, although nearly all of them practise at least three of them. The findings have important policy implications for donors, NGOs and governments seeking to promote IE in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Introduction

Inclusive Education provides meaningful learning opportunities to all students within the regular school system. Ideally, it allows children with and without disabilities to attend the same age-appropriate classes at the local school, with additional individually tailored support as needed. It requires accessible accommodation and a child-centred curriculum that promotes representation of the full spectrum of people found in society.¹

Particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, the successful implementation of inclusive education for children with disabilities remains elusive despite ratification and domestication of international conventions.² Numerous barriers constrain the implementation of IE. First, there are attitudinal barriers related to stigma, stereo-typing, discrimination and prejudice towards children with disabilities. Second, communication barriers concern the child's reading, writing, hearing, speaking and understanding, which require adequate measures in the schools that are often not available. Third, infrastructural barriers such as the lack of ramps or tailored toilets prevent children from fully accessing the school environment. Fourth, policy barriers are reflected in the lack of

implementation of existing policies and legislation on inclusive education, resulting in, for example, the lack of available budgets and trained teachers. In general, the environment in Sub-Saharan Africa to implement IE is far from favourable.³

Yet some schools succeed in implementing IE. Anecdotal evidence from Cameroon, Sierra Leone and Zambia suggests that successful IE schools draw upon IE champions: exceptional individuals who play a crucial role in mitigating and overcoming barriers whilst promoting best practices. This study seeks to learn from those schools that have managed, against all odds, to achieve IE successes. It tests the hypothesis that (informal) leadership is crucial to IE success in Sub-Saharan Africa, whilst seeking to shed light on how these leaders promote IE. The main question for this study is:

"How have (informal) school leaders contributed to the progressive implementation of inclusive education practices in their respective schools?"

Methodology

This cross-country research study was conducted in Zambia (Eastern, Southern, and Lusaka provinces), Sierra Leone (Bombali and Kailahun Districts) and Cameroon (North West and Centre regions) throughout 2021.⁴ Across the three countries, 18 schools participated. The schools were selected based on their reputation as successful implementors of inclusive education as perceived by the research team and external experts. The study mainly used semi-structured interviews to map the IE practices employed in the schools and clarify the roles of school leaders in promoting IE. A total of 185 respondents were interviewed to shed light on the role of (informal) leadership, including headteachers, heads of special units, teachers, district educational board secretaries, social workers, police officers, nurses, parents and children with and without disabilities. The identification of (informal) school leaders played an

important part in the data collection. Instead of pre-defining leadership or only recognising head teachers as school leaders, the study used an open approach to identify the key leaders. At each school, respondents were asked about the driving force, or forces, behind the observed IE practices. This resulted in the identification of (informal) leaders in a variety of positions.

In each country, learning events were organised with the involved schools and relevant stakeholders to discuss and validate preliminary findings. After completing the fieldwork, the research team undertook comparative analysis using a Grounded Theory approach to tease out common patterns across the countries.⁵ Finally, the team organized a webinar with all project partners to discuss the outcomes and policy implications.

Inclusive Education practices in Zambia, Sierra Leone and Cameroon

In each country, the research started by mapping the practices employed by the schools to promote IE, resulting in an overview of best IE practices across schools and countries. Table 1 below summarizes the key findings at the country level amongst four areas. Educational practices enable children with disabilities to realise educational goals. The most prominent practices revolve around (1) identifying children and addressing their specific learning needs through individual assessments and educational plans; (2) working towards an increasing number of children with disabilities in schools via adequate placement in classes and offering lessons using adjusted communication means such as sign language; (3) and stimulating children to take a proactive role in the school activities.

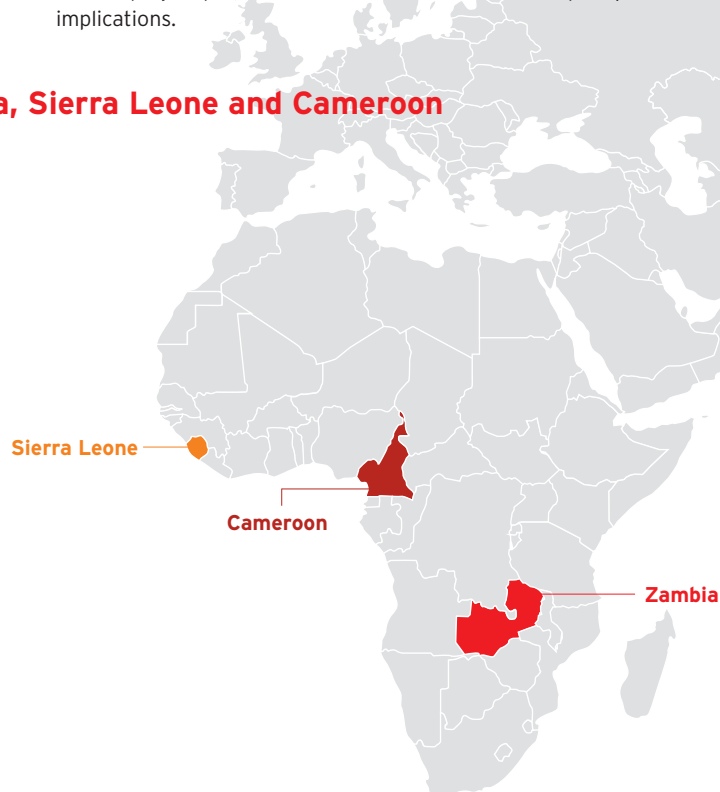


TABLE 1. Observed best IE practices in the countries

AREA	PRACTISE	Zambia	Cameroon	Sierra Leone
EDUCATIONAL	Formulating individual education plans for children with disabilities	●	●	
	Increasing retainment of children with disabilities in schools.	●	●	●
	Encouraging children with disabilities to take leadership roles and/or participate in extra-curricular activities.	●		●
BEHAVIORAL	Raising awareness among children, parents, teachers and community members.	●	●	●
	Strengthening coping skills of parents and teachers.	●	●	●
	Enhancing self-esteem and confidence among children with disabilities.	●		●
INSTITUTIONAL	Making infrastructural adjustments.	●	●	●
	Improving IE related competencies for teachers.	●	●	●
	Establish dedicated IE committees.	●	●	●
RESOURCES	Establishing partnerships with external funders.	●	●	●
	Collaborating with local government, CSOs and communities.	●		●
	Income generation activities.	●	●	●

Behavioural practices seek to influence the attitudes and behaviours of different stakeholders (children, parents, teachers, community members) about inclusive education. The most prominent observed practices concern (1) sensitizing children, parents, teachers and community members on the importance of inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools; (2) enabling parents and teachers to effectively respond to adversities that children with disabilities face; and (3) stimulating a positive self-image among children with disabilities and empowering them to see themselves as valuable and worthy.

Institutional practices are the organisational measures taken at the schools to enable IE. The most significant practices observed are about (1) making the infrastructural environment of the school accessible by building ramps; adjusting the toilets and the classrooms; (2) training teachers about IE didactics and methods; and (3) creating dedicated IE committees that monitor and promote IE activities within the schools.

Resource-oriented practices seek to generate additional income to promote and sustain IE. The most prominent practices observed relate to (1) reaching out to external funders working in the field of IE (mainly INGOs); (2) collaboration with local municipalities and district education offices for funding of IE activities; and (3) initiating income generating projects within the schools such as vegetable gardens or selling popcorn so that funds from the sale can be used to implement IE practices.

Overall, the observed practices appeared highly similar between the countries suggesting their relevance beyond individual country contexts. Clearly, successful IE schools put much effort into mitigating the many barriers that constrain the implementation of IE. Moreover, many observed practices are outward-oriented, aimed at overcoming the unfavourable external environment in which the schools must operate. Finally, successful IE schools seem to adopt a holistic perspective to IE, looking at the children's position and their experiences within their families, communities and schools.

Who are IE Champions?

The findings of this study strongly suggest that (informal) leadership is crucial for the successful IE in Sub-Saharan Africa. In all schools that participated in the study, stakeholders identified exceptional individuals who were widely recognised as the driving force behind the IE best practices observed. Without the IE championing by these individuals, it seems unlikely that these best practices would have blossomed to the same extent or would have been implemented at all. IE champions consisted of head teachers, heads of special units and teachers in special units. In many schools, a combination of two persons, for example, a head teacher with the head of a special unit, worked in tandem to promote IE. Working together had the added value that leaders could supplement each other’s competencies and share roles and responsibilities.

The IE leaders identified all featured two basic qualities. First, they share a strong intrinsic motivation to make their schools inclusive. In all three countries, the environment is such that leaders must go above and beyond their regular duties to make IE work. The required commitment to go the extra mile makes

the motivation of the (informal) leaders of the utmost importance. Those in this study had all made up their minds to do everything needed to make their school inclusive, even if it costs extra time, effort and resources. For them, achieving inclusion is a personal mission which propels them to do whatever it takes. For example, when prompted why she went the extra mile to promote IE, one IE champion said, *“I just have a heart for it. I really just want children with disabilities to access education.... they deserve education just like any other person.”* (teacher, Zambia). Second, all IE champions had specialised knowledge and expertise on IE, having been trained on the subject. In environments where such knowledge is generally not present among teachers, this made the leaders unique. Their knowledge of IE proved crucial because *“you cannot implement what you do not know”*. It enabled the (informal) leaders to envision a clear path towards the ultimate goal of inclusion in the school. One IE champion explained that *“As a leader, you have to [...] ensure you set your priorities right, have a clear vision and a plan; pair that vision with great passion, then see the result”*- (headteacher, Sierra Leone).

Five Key Roles of IE Champions

From examining the various ways in which the IE champions catalyse IE, five key roles emerged: role model, advocate, connector, knowledge broker, and entrepreneur (see figure 1). These roles are interconnected and reinforce each other. Not all leaders always practise all of these roles, although nearly all of them practise at least three roles. The role practised by all

leaders, and which can be seen as the pillar of the others, is that of a role model (more about this below). In schools with more than one IE leader present, leaders are often complementary in their roles and strengthen each other. The high intrinsic motivation and knowledge and expertise of IE form the overall backbone of the roles identified.



FIGURE 1. Roles played by IE School leaders



ROLE MODEL

inspiring disability-inclusive attitudes and behaviour

The first role is that of a role model who inspires disability-inclusive attitudes and behaviour. Children with disabilities in Zambia, Sierra Leone and Cameroon experience social exclusion because of myths, superstitions, and negative labels about disability. Hence, it is not self-evident to invest time and resources in educating children with disabilities, let alone enable these kids to participate in mainstream schools. Achieving any progress in IE, therefore, requires winning over the hearts and minds of people. The leaders did so not only by their communication and persuasion skills (see below), but also by their charisma, personal integrity and the inspiration they

provided. The leaders in this study were all persons of high integrity that ‘walked the talk’. They were typically described as embodying tolerance, equality and non-discrimination whilst being compassionate, empathic and caring for all children, including children with disabilities. Interviewees described the leaders as exemplary, inspiring and worthy of imitation. In their personal contact with others - colleagues, children, parents, community members, governmental staff - they motivated persons to reflect on themselves and their prejudices while encouraging inclusive behaviour.



ADVOCATE

building support for inclusive education amongst key stakeholders

The second role is that of an advocate, which is about building support for inclusive education amongst key stakeholders. Many school leaders in the study first used their negotiation, persuasion and communication skills to convince parents about the benefits of education for their children. In addition, school leaders typically work towards shifting perceptions about disability among the teachers by explaining that disability is not inability, that “CWD are a part of the fabric of the school” (head-teacher, Zambia) and that they have the potential to develop and become independent adults. This opens a space for the CWDs to become accepted in the schools and participate in extra-curricular

activities. In several schools, leaders pushed towards having children with disabilities assuming the role of class monitor and school prefect and encouraged them to participate in extra-curricular activities. Our findings suggest that, in many cases, this improved the self-image and self-esteem of children with disabilities. Additionally, many of the leaders were able to influence the district government to allocate a budget for the implementation of inclusive education activities. This enabled the schools to create inclusive education structures such as ramps, accessible toilets and classrooms.



CONNECTOR

building relationships between key stakeholders

The third role is a connector, the social equivalent of a computer network hub. The barriers to IE are many and typically cannot be effectively addressed by the school alone. Overcoming these barriers typically requires different stakeholders to work in concert. Many of the school leaders in the study acted as connectors, using their strong social network to bring people and stakeholders together across an array of social and professional economic circles, to create enduring relationships and work jointly on solutions for IE. Many leaders worked towards building and sustaining reciprocal family and community partnerships. For example,

several schools have established community clubs to reduce negative stereotypes about disability and enhance the enrolment of children with disabilities in schools. Many school leaders invested heavily in building strong relationships with CSOs and local councils to attract support to implement inclusive education in their schools. Some leaders succeeded in building relationships with international NGOs such as Sight-savers and Humanity for Inclusion to enable the training of teachers on inclusive education, provide scholarships for CWDs, provide learning materials and improve the schools' infrastructure.

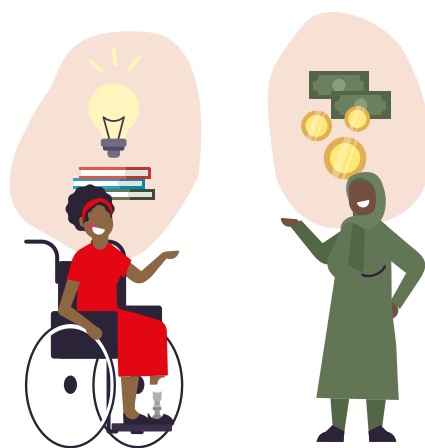


KNOWLEDGE BROKER

enabling the exchange of knowledge and skills

The fourth role is a knowledge broker. Although introduced in the 1990s, knowledge of IE in Zambia, Cameroon, and Sierra Leone is often limited or completely absent. Nearly all of the leaders in the study were well-versed in technical knowledge of inclusive education practices and policies. They all received training on inclusive education and were proficient in sharing their IE knowledge, and facilitating the exchange of this knowledge, between key stakeholders, including teachers, parents, communities and government officials. Inclusive education practices in the three countries were often outside the pedagogical curriculum for teachers. Many school leaders in

the study were instrumental in organizing teachers' training programmes on IE, seeking to enable teachers to handle inclusive classes and use appropriate instructional and pedagogical skills. In one of the schools in Cameroon, the training of teachers included a sign language course to enable teachers to communicate with learners with hearing impairments. The findings suggest this knowledge sharing contributed towards increased enrolment of children with disabilities, improved understanding of inclusive education practices by more stakeholders and improved welfare of the children with disabilities, both in school and home settings.



ENTREPRENEUR

raising monetary and non-monetary resources

The fifth role is that of an entrepreneur. The school leaders identified across Cameroon, Sierra Leone and Zambia all invested considerable time and energy into mobilising external resources to enable inclusive education practices. The schools that participated in the study received insufficient financial and human capital resources from the government to create a genuinely inclusive environment. Without securing additional resources, school leaders argued, realising an inclusive school would be impossible. Hence, many of them acted as entrepreneurs using their charisma, social network and persuasion and communication skills to attract external

financial and non-financial resources. Across the schools studied, school leaders were instrumental in mobilizing new resources through methods such as income-generating activities in their schools, crowdfunding via parent-teachers associations and institutional funding from local governments and CSOs. The resources attracted were used for purchasing teaching and learning tools, assistive devices, funding infrastructural adjustments and tailor-made support for children transitioning into mainstream classes and organising training courses for teachers.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Schools in Zambia, Cameroon and Sierra Leone that are successful in IE are the exception to the rule. This study aimed to learn from such exceptional schools, focusing on the role of (informal) leadership. It found that the practices employed to promote IE were highly similar across schools and countries, suggesting their relevance beyond individual country contexts. Successful IE schools put considerable time and energy into mitigating the many barriers in the external environment that constrain the implementation of IE, often adopting a holistic perspective to IE. All schools studied featured IE champions: leaders who, from their positions as head teachers, heads of

special units or teachers of special units, played a driving role in the best IE practices observed. Without such intrinsically motivated and capable school leaders present, it is doubtful whether IE would have flourished to the same extent in the schools. While acting as IE champions, (informal) school leaders play five interconnected roles: advocate, connector, knowledge broker, role model and entrepreneur. Not all leaders always practise all of these roles, although nearly all of them practise at least three roles. In many schools, school leaders work in duos, effectively pooling qualities, roles and responsibilities.



This study links the successful implementation of IE to the presence of intrinsically motivated school leaders with specialized knowledge and expertise who act as IE champions. From the findings, several recommendations emerge for agencies seeking to promote IE:

1. Invest in raising awareness about the importance of leadership for IE

Whilst leadership is clearly a critical success factor, it is currently not part of the collective awareness of decision-makers in government agencies, NGOs and donors. Increased consciousness about IE leadership, particularly the importance of the intrinsic motivation and specialised knowledge and expertise of leaders, lies at the root of action and better-informed policies and programs.

2. Integrate leadership in the IE curriculum in teacher training colleges

It is pivotal that new generations of IE teachers are educated with an understanding that successful IE, besides classroom skills, also requires skills to navigate the disability-hostile environment. A self-assessment tool that enables teachers to reflect upon their leadership skills in promoting IE would be particularly useful.

3. Integrate the importance of leadership in policy instruments and programmatic decision-making for IE

Leadership, as a success factor, needs to be integrated into the content and budgetary lines of policies and programmes. This can, for example, be achieved by making it part of funding proposal criteria (e.g. prioritise proposals which address leadership), targeting criteria (e.g. focus on schools with capable and committed leadership) or teacher recruitment criteria (for teachers who want to work in mainstream schools).

4. Support existing school leaders that act as IE champions in their respective schools

Given the hostile environment, championing IE is a constant challenge for school leaders. One way to support these leaders would be through building and supporting an (online) community of practice which would connect leaders from different parts of the country. In such a community, leaders can exchange best practices, support each other and get inspired.

5. Invest in further research on leadership in inclusive education

What is the best way to support school leaders? What are the best-practices used by school leaders? How does context matter for school leadership? These, and many other crucial questions, are not yet fully understood. Solid research is crucial for developing evidence-based policies and programs whilst propelling continuous learning and reflection.

Endnotes

¹ UNICEF (2013). The State of the World's Children 2013: Children with Disabilities. New York, UNICEF.

² Wodon, Q., Male, C., Montenegro, C., & Nayihouba, A. (2018). The challenge of inclusive education in Sub-Saharan Africa. Washington DC, Worldbank.

³ Charema, J. (2010). Inclusive Education in Developing Countries in the Sub Saharan Africa: From Theory to Practice. International Journal of Special Education, 25(1), 87-93

⁴ This policy brief draws upon the studies and policy briefs that were developed for Zambia, Sierra Leone and Cameroon on the same topic of Leadership in Inclusive Education:

- Best practices in Inclusive Education in Zambia. - Leadership matters, Kahemba Oscar, Thomas Mtonga and Willem Elbers (2022). - School leaders as Inclusive Education champions in Zambia, Brokers of Inclusion Esther Kamaara, Willem Elbers, Auma Okwany and Thomas Mtonga (2022). - Key Roles of School Leaders in the Implementation of Inclusive Education at Primary School Level in Sierra Leone, What makes leadership successful? Edson Alie Kamara, Aisha Ibrahim and Sofka Trajcevska. - School leaders as positive deviants in Cameroon: Champions of Inclusive Education. Ngoran Mathew Banlanjo, Valentine Banfegha Ngalim and Willem Elbers.

⁵ Glaser, B. G & Strauss, A. L. (1967). The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research, Chicago, Aldine Publishing Company.