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**Developing Inclusive Education Policy in Sierra Leone: A Research Informed Approach**

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In common with many countries in Africa and globally, the Government of Sierra Leone has given a commitment to address the requirements for ensuring universal primary education (Education for All) as demanded by the Sustainable Development Goals (UNESCO 2015). This chapter reports a process of inclusion policy development based upon research conducted within Sierra Leone in order to obtain the perspectives of service users and providers to inform an agenda for educational change across the country.

Sierra Leone, situated on the Atlantic coast of Africa and bordered by Guinea and Liberia, has a proud history of education but in recent years has been devastated by warfare and an outbreak of Ebola and both natural and manmade disasters that have had a negative impact upon the country’s infrastructure and economic and social stability. This has resulted in significant numbers of children, and particularly those with disabilities or from remote areas of the country being out of education.

Data were collected during a period of field work through the use of interviews and focus groups conducted with key respondents, including education professionals, disabled persons groups, parents and NGO personnel. These focused upon the current challenges of providing accessible schooling, a well prepared workforce and appropriate resourcing to enable all children to take their place within the Sierra Leone education system. Following analysis of the data, a series of consultation meetings were held across the country prior to developing a policy document which included key action points aimed at providing education for all children, including those who have been previously marginalised or excluded.

**Key words:** Sierra Leone, Inclusive Education, Inclusion Policy, Marginalisation

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**Introduction**

The provision of education that is equitable and addresses the needs of all learners has been identified as a priority internationally (Mitchell, 2005; European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2009). The Jomtien World Conference on Education for All (UNESCO, 1990) set the goal for achieving universal primary education (EFA) and served as a catalyst for an international movement towards inclusive practice. The subsequent Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994) built upon this early initiative and promoted principles that have been endorsed in further international agreements and national policies. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) has specifically focused upon a potentially vulnerable population and has placed an emphasis upon the need to ensure that all individuals, regardless of need or ability, gain access to education and social opportunities alongside their able bodied peers. More recently, the UNESCO Policy Guidelines on Inclusion in Education (2009) reinforced educational, social and economic justification of the need of nation states to work towards inclusive practices, so that all children are educated together.

The international literature in support of inclusive education is considerable (Armstrong, Armstrong and Spandagou, 2010; Rose, 2010; Timmons and Walsh, 2010). It covers all aspects of policy and practice, including educational leadership (Hoppey and McLeskey, 2013; ASEPA, 2017), curriculum planning (Davis and Florian, 2004; Tilstone and Lacey, 2000), identification and assessment (Engh and Rose 2014; Galloway, Armstrong and Tomlinson 2013), training and professional development (Dwyfor-Davies and Garner, 1997; Rose and Garner 2010), inter-agency collaboration (Todd 2007; Lacey, 2012) and extensive coverage of the challenges, and controversies that characterise the educational landscape in the 21st century (Hornby, Howard and Atkinson, 2013; Norwich, 2008).

This chapter reports on the response of administrators in one country, Sierra Leone, to the demands to provide a more inclusive approach to education that aims to ensure access to all learners, regardless of their needs or abilities. In particular it identifies a process which attempted to support a democratic and participatory approach to understanding the current situation of children with disabilities in Sierra Leone and their families, and a pathway for the development of inclusion policy.

**Sierra Leone: the national context**

Sierra Leone, located on the Atlantic Coast of West Africa has a population of approximately 6.1 million. Having gained independence from the UK in 1961 the country has developed an economy based upon mineral extraction and agriculture. However, despite being rich in natural resources which should provide significant economic benefits, exploitation, corruption and poor planning means that the majority of the population live in poverty (Maconachie and Binns 2007). Education in Sierra Leone is officially compulsory for all children between the ages of six and fifteen, though this has never been achieved and a significant proportion of children in this age group are not enrolled in school. A civil war (1991 – 2002) resulted in the destruction of almost 1,300 schools, a situation that continues to inhibit opportunities to provide education for all children.

**Education for children with disabilities in Sierra Leone**

In order to understand the current situation for children with disabilities in Sierra Leone a review of the literature was undertaken. This focused upon documents which provided within country data and that met a criterion for a high weight of evidence (Gough, Oliver and Thomas 2012). This process revealed that only a limited corpus of literature related to special and inclusive education has been generated within Sierra Leone, a situation that is not surprising given the relatively recent attention given to inclusion as a concept in Africa (Mariga*,* McConkey and Myezwa 2014). Having completed this nation specific review, it was possible to draw conclusions about in-country provision in the context of a wider pan-African situation and alongside the international literature.

When considering the findings from research reported in the literature from Sierra Leone, it is necessary to place these within the context of the political and socio-economic challenges that have characterised the situation within the country since the period of internal conflict (1991 – 2002) and that had a devastating impact upon the national economy and infrastructure (Bellows and Miguel 2006; UNICEF 2014). Throughout the conflict thousands of children, both boys and girls, were directly deployed as soldiers or exploited as child labourers or through sexual exploitation by armed groups. The physical and psychological damage inflicted by such a situation has inevitably had a negative impact upon the ability to reinstate a secure and effective system of education (Denov 2010).

Internationally provision for children with disabilities or those from other marginalised groups has often been addressed only after the establishment of systems aimed at addressing the needs of the general school population. The development of education policy aimed at including children who have previously had little opportunity to engage with formal schooling has therefore often become a matter of making adjustments to existing provision rather than seeking a radical realignment of national education systems (Eleweke and Rodda 2002; Peters 2007).This may be seen as an indication that the concept of inclusive education is becoming embedded within education systems, resulting in structural shifts in the way that provision is reformulated so that every child can receive an appropriate education. However, in some instances inclusive education policy has been interpreted as an add-on requiring teachers to make compromises in the delivery of well-established curriculum structures and pedagogical approaches (Norwich 2014). Where this has been the case inclusive education has at times met with resistance and policy has been slow in its transition into effective classroom practice (Graham and Jahnukainen 2011).

In considering the challenges faced in gaining consistency within the education system in Sierra Leone,Wang (2007) identified a series of issues that policy makers needed to prioritise. This study, based on data, previous studies, official reports, and documents available up to the 2004/05 school year, considered key issues, including access, quality, equity, management and finance, and the impact of each of these on the provision of basic education. A strength of Wang’s report was its focus upon the adoption of feasible, affordable, and sustainable policy options and a recognition that socio-economic restraints required a timetable for change that was realistic and based upon a vision that should be shared by policy makers and those charged with the delivery of change. One of the major challenges facing policy developers within Sierra Leone is the lack of adequate data reporting the number of children out of schools, and providing an overview of the needs of individuals and groups or the reasons why they are facing difficulties in accessing formal schooling (Guo 2014). There is a general consensus within the literature that the provision of more in-depth and accurate data will be essential in any effort to effect change in the education system within the country.

The United Nations Development Programme report (UNDP 2010) provided an analysis of the situation in Sierra Leone which was highly critical in its discussion of the impact of poor governanceupon the provision of education and social welfare infrastructure. Political and economic isolation resulting from widespread corruption was seen as an inhibiting factor preventing progresstowards a more equitable society. The UNDP report highlighted discrimination against minority groups and women as endemic and a significant challenge faced by those attempting to lead change. The authors of the report suggested that lessons learned from previous evaluations of interventions by the UNDP had led to an increase in interventions and initiative aimed at promoting change, but that this was unlikely to succeed without an increase in government ownership of the programmes being provided. Several areas were identified for development including improved political processes and democratic governance, decentralized policy, increases in gender equality and the participation of women at all levels, improved human rights concerning peace and the recovery of community and human security. Each of these can be identified as critical factors in promoting an inclusive society. A later report (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP 2013), indicated little progress or change since 2010, with the average expected years of access to formal schooling remaining at 7.3.In the same report the national Gender Inequality Index which assesses opportunities, including education provided for girls, ranked Sierra Leone in 139th place out of 148 countries.

The free primary education policy, introduced in Sierra Leone in 2000, led to rapid progress in terms of access to schooling. However, research conducted in 27 schools and reported by Nishimuko (2007) indicated that the quality of the education provided had been compromised due to the rapid increase in the number of enrolled children that was not accompanied by adequate planning or resourcing. High teacher-pupil ratios, shortages of teaching and learning materials, inadequate school buildings and furniture, and low motivation on the part of teachers were seen as pervasive. Nishimuko (2007) identified the importance of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in supplementing government efforts to expand educational access of acceptable quality, especially when the government’s capacity to deliver education was weak. A more recent study conducted by Foran (2017 in press), has emphasised the additional challenges and disadvantages confronting girls with disabilities in respect of accessing and completing education in Sierra Leone. Her findings state that gender issues have been largely overlooked and so long as this remains the case, discrimination and marginalisation will continue to obstruct opportunities for girls to receive an appropriate education.

Even though considerable effort had been directed in both policy and practice terms to secure ‘education for all’ in Sierra Leone, by 2006 the World Bank (2007) stated that 20-30% of children were out of school and that the additional costs at post-primary level, made school unaffordable for many. UNICEF in a more recent report (2014) found little change, suggesting that 23% of children were out of education and that the policy of providing basic primary education for all had not been realised. Children in poverty tend to drop out of school after the primary phase of schooling, with this being more common for girls than boys. The Sierra Leone Education Country Status Report (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, UNESCO and Regional Bureau for Education in Africa 2013) highlights that the biggest hurdle to children’s access and ability to finish education is poverty. This report is of particular significant for having directed some consideration to two issues at the heart of inclusive education. In the first instance, it indicated that child mental health and wellbeing issues are under reported: this has become a major focus of attention for many national systems, and is viewed as being a core aspect of inclusive provision. The second theme mentioned is that of special educational needs and disability (SEND). Few issues concerning these children are mentioned in the report. However, what references there are made are directed towards the National school for the deaf, Cheshire homes, the union for disability issues and schools for the blind indicating a high dependency upon charitable intervention or segregated school provision. The report identifies other areas where barriers to effective educational inclusion have be identified including that of teacher education. Here it is noted that poor remuneration does not attract the best candidates into teaching, and that, as a consequence the education system does not produce many qualified teachers who have a commitment to educating all children. This suggestion is endorsed by UNICEF (2010) with an indication that 40% of teachers are under-qualified, whilst there is a notable shortfall in the provision of in-service training generically, and of specialist input on matters of disability in particular. Furthermore, the Afri Map study indicates the possibility of corruption concerning the recruitment, retention, teaching and training of staff (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, UNESCO and Regional Bureau for Education in Africa 2013)

Pai (2014) states that there has never been a conception of universal education in Sierra Leone, and recommends that education must be adapted to different subpopulations within the country, as the Bunumbu Project (Banya, 1986; 1989) did for rural Sierra Leoneans in the 1970s to 1980s, to better meet the needs of all children. Pai’s recommendation that only by well defining the specific constituents of a target group and fulfilling their precise needs can myriad small-scale programmes ultimately aggregate to meet the diverse demands and desires of Sierra Leonean society at large may well be important as the country endeavours to embrace a philosophy of education for all.

Issues of stigma, discrimination and marginalisation have been identified as significant factors in the denial of educational opportunities to children with disabilities in several parts of West Africa (Baffoe 2013). Avoke (2002) reports that in Ghana negative attitudes and the application of pejorative labels are common features in the treatment of children with disabilities. His views are endorsed by Fefoame (2009) who suggests that high levels of ignorance about the causes of disability are further exacerbated by a traditional belief that children may be possessed or that parents are being punished for previous misdemeanours.

Whilst the literature surrounding the education of children from marginalised groups in Sierra Leone provides a negative impression of the situation for many children, it is important to acknowledge the current efforts being made by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, often in partnership with NGOs to bring about change. The research reported in this chapter is just one example of the progress towards creating a more inclusive education system in Sierra Leone.

**Methodology**

The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEST), in issuing a tender for the development of an inclusive education policy required that data should be collected in order to provide an informed overview of the expectations of service users and providers. This was achieved through the development of interviews and focus groups (N=121) that were conducted with key stake holders in four regions of the country (see table 1 below). Field workers who were familiar with the national education system and local languages were provided with training in the use of instruments that had been developed by the research team through a one day workshop held in Freetown, the capital city of Sierra Leone. Following ethical approval teams were sent into the field, under the direction of the principal investigator to conduct interviews that were semi-structured in nature (Gillham, 2005), in order to encourage probing of respondents, with questions formulated in direct response to the research questions provided by MEST and The Education Network for Children with Disabilities (ENCD) who have a national overview of matters related to disability and special educational needs. All interviews were either recorded digitally or through the collation of field notes. Informed consent was obtained from all participants in the research process prior to collection of their data.

Data were collated and analysed by the research team through a process of thematic coding (Creswell *et al*., 2003), in order to identify emergent key issues. Initial themes were scrutinised and subjected to a process of code reduction to ensure that those issues which were most commonly emerging from the data could be emphasised and then organised thematically. This process resulted in the establishment of sixteen codes, each of which recurred throughout the data to be highlighted as those most representative of views expressed. These were then grouped under four themes as discussed in the findings section of this chapter. During the analysis process all data was anonymised and data maintained securely in encrypted files accessible only by members of the research team.

**Table 1 Four Regions from which data were collected**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Region** | **Districts** | **Population**  **(2004 census)** |
| **Western** | Western Urban | 772,873 |
| Western Rural | 174,249 |
| **Eastern** | [Kailahun](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kailahun_District) | 358,190 |
| [Kenema](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kenema_District) | 497,948 |
| [Kono](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kono_District) | 335,401 |
| **Northern** | [Bombali](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bombali_District) | 408,390 |
| [Kambia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kambia_District) | 270,462 |
| [Koinadugu](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Koinadugu_District) | 265,758 |
| [Port Loko](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Port_Loko_District) | 453,746 |
| [Tonkolili](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tonkolili_District) | 347,197 |
| **Southern** | [Bo](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bo_District) | 463,668 |
| [Bonthe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bonthe_District) | 139,687 |
| [Moyamba](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moyamba_District) | 260,910 |
| [Pujehun](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pujehun_District) | 228,392 |

**Findings**

The analysis of data from interviews and focus groups (N=121) with key service providers was undertaken independently by the three authors of this chapterwho were able to identify 16 key issues identified as inhibitors of progress towards the establishment of inclusive education in Sierra Leone (See table 2 below). Careful scrutiny of the interview transcripts enabled definitions to be applied to each of the identified issues and to group these under the four thematic headings. These regularly recurring issues were seen by the research team as providing the foundation upon which an inclusive education policy could be formulated following a process of further consultation and clarification with colleagues in the country.

**Table 2 Key issues within the four themes**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Theme 1: The Teaching and Learning Environment** | |
| **Key Issue** | **Definition of findings** |
| Initial Assessment of disability/SEN | Limitations of early assessment and provision of information for schools |
| Pedagogical resources | Lack of adequate teaching resources, to provide appropriate access to learning for children with disabilities |
| Physical access | Physical access a problem for some students |
| National Curriculum | Limitations of the National Curriculum in providing for children with disabilities |
| Assistive Technology | Limited access to assistive technology (including hearing aids) |
| Post school provision | Need for further development of vocational education and training |
| Budget | Allocation of Government budget to education is inadequate to support development |
| **Theme 2: Professional Development and Support** | |
| Teacher Training | Training deficient at both initial teacher training and continuing professional development level in equipping teachers to address the needs of children with disabilities |
| Teacher confidence/competence | Teacher lack of skills inhibits confidence in addressing disability/SEN issues |
| Support from NGOs | NGO support is currently critical in providing support for learners with disabilities and their families |
| **Theme 3: Dissemination of Information and Expertise** | |
| Communication | Communication across agencies (including ministries) responsible for supporting children with disabilities/SEN is limited |
| Research | Limited research base to inform development in the area of disability/SEN |
| **Theme 4: Other Exclusionary Factors** | |
| Regional Variations | An indication that there are variations across regions that may impact upon provision |
| SEN excluded | Children with disabilities are known to be not attending schools and only a few SEN/Disabilities are recognised – (these tend to be sensory or physical). No recognition of intellectual difficulties, ASD, SEBD |
| School recognition | Some schools not recognised and teachers in non-approved schools are not paid. These have a good number of learners with disability/SEN |
| Exclusion of girls from education | Difficulties in enrolling and retaining girls in education |

The research team were committed to hearing the voices of a variety of respondents and to ensuring that a range of perspectives were obtained. The data collection process enabled the research team to gain the opinions and insights of 268 individual respondents (see table 3 below). Service providers included a range of professionals from within the education, medical and caring professions, whilst equal weighting was given to the opinions of parents and persons with disabilities including some who were currently receiving education. The qualitative data collated through this research not only enabled the researchers to identify where these pressure points upon current provision exist, but also in some cases to identify practices that have endeavoured to address these and strengthen provision for children with disabilities and special educational needs.

**Table 3 Categorisation of respondents in interviews and focus groups**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Designation** | **Western** | **Eastern** | **Northern** | **Southern** | **Interviews/**  **Focus Groups N=** | **Individuals providing data** |
| **Education Officers/ MEST** | 6 | 3 | 7 | 13 | 28 | 50 |
| **School Principals (mainstream and special)** | 1 | 0 | 7 | 8 | 16 | 16 |
| **Teachers** | 2 | 2 | 4 | 9 | 17 | 28 |
| **Medical professionals** | 2 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 5 | 5 |
| **Parents** | 1 | 2 | 4 | 5 | 12 | 84 |
| **School pupils with disabilities** | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| **Disabled people’s organisations** | 2 | 1 | 4 | 4 | 11 | 43 |
| **NGO representatives** | 1 | 0 | 5 | 5 | 11 | 15 |
| **Faith Group representatives** | 0 | 0 | 3 | 6 | 9 | 9 |
| **University representatives** | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| **Civic representatives** | 0 | 0 | 5 | 1 | 6 | 10 |
| **Social Worker** | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| **Total Numbers of interviews/focus groups and individuals providing data** | | | | | **121** | **268** |

Field visits were made to schools in each of the four districts which allowed for both contextual information to be collated and also to verify the data provided by interviewees. As a result of the field work it was possible to provide both a report of the findings in relation to each of the 16 issues and to make some recommendations for actions that would need to be taken if a policy of inclusive education is to succeed. Shortcomings in terms of procedures (school enrolment, assessment of disability or special educational need, communication between education professionals and parents), resource provision (teaching materials, assistive technology), school environment (toilet facilities, accessibility), and the preparedness of teachers and other professionals to meet the needs of a diverse population (teacher training and professional development) were all identified through the research. Recommendations were made by the research team in respect of both actions to be taken to address these inhibitors, and the ways in which they might be incorporated into a national inclusion policy.

**From research findings to policy development**

Following the development of a research report and recommendations, the Principal Investigator returned to Sierra Leone in order to present the findings and recommendations to service providers and users in each of the four districts of the country (see table 1 above). The purpose of this second round of consultations was to enable individuals and groups within the country to discuss the implications of the findings and recommendations and to consider the practicalities of implementing a national policy.

One day workshops were conducted in each of the four regions at which the researcher gave a presentation of the report which had been circulated to attendees in advance. Following an opportunity to ask questions or seek clarifications, each workshop provided an opportunity for attendees to work in groups to provide a critical commentary on the findings and to make observations about how a national inclusion policy might be presented and implemented. Further consideration was given to the roles and responsibilities that individuals and groups would need to take in order to ensure that the policy had influence upon practice. Each group made a series of observations and recommendations which were collated as field notes for refinement of the policy document and clarification of points made within the research report.

Following this round of consultations, the research team made amendments to the report and these were returned to participants from the consultation workshops in order to ensure that their recommendations had been fairly interpreted and reflected in the revised documentation. Once final comments were received the substantive research report and recommended inclusive education policy were submitted to MEST.

**Discussion**

In this chapter we have emphasised a process which attempted to demonstrate a democratic and representative approach to policy development. Inclusive education policy should impact the lives of professionals and families in a positive manner and should therefore be seen to be practicable and focused upon the needs of all parties. It is our contention that this is best achieved through a process that involves service users and providers at all stages of information seeking, development and implementation (see figure 1 below).

**Figure 1 the Consultation Process**

In the process adopted for this research, six distinct phases of development and consultation can be identified. At phase 1, having clarified the project brief with the commissioners of the research, the instruments were initially developed by the research team. These were then presented to colleagues in Sierra Leone in order to ascertain the suitability of the instruments and to identify any potential difficulties during the field work stage. Local field workers were trained in the use of the instruments with the research team recognising that their knowledge of the country, its culture and languages was likely to be a critical factor in obtaining trustworthy data. This phase was also important in demonstrating respect for local expertise and ensuring that individuals who may eventually be required to implement aspects of an inclusive education policy felt valued and that their knowledge and experience was recognised.

The experiences and opinions of both service users and providers hold the key to the likely success of implementing any policy. At phase 2 of the project significant efforts were made to ensure that these critical individuals and groups were fully involved and enabled to express their feelings and ideas to field workers. Verbatim recording of data enabled the research team at phase 3 to make an initial interpretation of the views and experiences of these individuals and groups on the basis of thematic analysis. This interpretation was used to inform an initial report and a series of recommendations for action. At phase 4 this report and recommendations was presented in country for critical scrutiny and analysis. An important component of this phase was the provision of a forum for service users and providers where they could express their views to their peers and shape the changes that they felt necessary if an eventual policy was to be practically implemented within Sierra Leone. It also enabled them to consider who should accept responsibility for the implementation and monitoring of all various aspects of the policy and to discuss a possible timetable and priorities for action.

Following this detailed in-country consultation, phase 5 saw a re-writing of the report and policy and its return to colleagues who had attended the workshops to ensure that fair representation had been made in the amended documentation. This led to the final phase 6 with the research team issuing documentation for presentation to MEST in which they were confident that the views of service users were fairly represented and presented, and that a policy could be implemented that is seen to be practical and fit for purpose.

The advantages of this process have been outlined here, though it is acknowledged that there are certain drawbacks to following a path such as this which endeavours to seek the participation of so many individuals. Firstly, with so many professionals, families and others involved it is not always easy to gain a consensus. The experiences of individuals vary considerably and not all would seek similar provision or outcomes. As arbiters in the process the researchers and those in positions of authority are inevitably called upon to make decisions which they hope reflect interests and aspirations of individuals and groups who will ultimately be affected by any decisions taken. Similarly, the process here described is time consuming and would be unrealistic in situations where immediate action was seen as essential. However, we would suggest that in democratic societies a process that involves and respects the views of as many interested parties as possible is important and that this is ultimately more likely to result in increased support for those who will be charged with the implementation of policy and the development of services.

In writing this chapter we have attempted to emphasise the advantages of policy development on the basis of empirical research and a democratic process. Whilst we suggest that there are many advantages top this approach for education policy makers and those working on the ground, we would also observe that there are important lessons to be learned for researchers who like to define their work as being emancipatory or inclusive.

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