

Inclusion and Special Needs Education in Sierra Leone: Developing Local Expertise by Elevating Content and Context Connections

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ABSTRACT

Inclusion and special needs education has gained attention in recent years in the West African country of Sierra Leone. Policies addressing access to education are in place and various international partners have been supporting the growth of knowledge through short term in-person professional development, but policies have not translated into practice; systems and methods for identifying and teaching learners with disabilities are lacking and an in-country expertise is not fully developed. An innovative approach to international partnership was used where content expertise and context expertise were equally elevated so that practices fit Sierra Leone's needs and in-country experts in the field of inclusion and special needs education developed.

KEYWORDS

disability, inclusion, special education, teacher preparation, Sierra Leone, West Africa

Sierra Leone is a small country on the coast of West Africa bordered by Guinea to the north and northeast, Liberia to the southeast, and the Atlantic Ocean to the southwest. It has a population of 8.6 million with over half of the population living in rural villages and the rest concentrated in the capital city, Freetown, and other major cities including Bo, Kenema, and Makeni (WorldData, 2023). Sierra Leone was colonized by the British in 1808, became an independent sovereign state in 1961, and a republic with an elected president in 1971 (Embassy of the Republic of Sierra Leone in the United States, 2019). Sierra Leone is probably most known around the world for its devastating 10-year civil war (1991-2001), which caused the deaths of over fifty thousand people, displaced approximately two million people, and halted the country's social, economic, and educational development (Sahel, 2017).

Before the war, Sierra Leone's population was already divided regarding education. In the first half of the 20th century, only those with colonial ties were educated and during the second half of the century, despite the establishment of many grammar schools for the general population, most children did not attend because of expenses such as enrollment fees and required school uniforms (Wurie, 2007) as well as excessive difficulty commuting to schools, walking miles and even crossing rivers (Nyuma & Mondywa, 2022). Children with obvious disabilities were often explicitly excluded from school or were not sent to school due to false beliefs about disability etiology and social stigma (Ali et al., 2014; Morin et al., 2022), which made attending school potentially physically or emotionally unsafe (Njelesani et al., 2018).

When the war ended, steps were taken to begin rebuilding hundreds of schools that were demolished, and reestablishing teacher training colleges. Attention was focused on making education accessible for young victims of the war: child mothers, ex-combatants, young adults who missed the opportunity for education because schools were not open, and those with war-related physical impairments (Maclure & Denov, 2009; Njelesani, 2019), but the state of education in Sierra Leone remains less than ideal especially for those with special learning needs who are acknowledged and allowed to

attend school, but receive no specialized instruction. Prior to the teacher preparation programs discussed in this article, no universities in Sierra Leone offered certificates or degrees in special needs education, and training was not provided beyond rudimentary principles of inclusion, clarification about disability etiology, and accommodations for children with vision and hearing impairments. This lack of adequate teacher preparation (Harris, 2020) along with overcrowded classrooms, insufficient materials (Amman & O'Donnell, 2011), and inconsistent teacher attendance due to low pay and difficult working conditions (Amman & O'Donnell, 2011; Chaudhury 2006) means that children with disabilities are not receiving the specialized and individualized instruction that is essential for their success.

Disability in Sierra Leone

According to the World Health Organization (2023), 16% of the world population experiences a disability that impacts everyday life. Often, the disability itself is not the impairment so much as the accompanying stigma, exclusion, and inequity that have been the tacit status quo around the world. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD; 2006) sparked new or renewed efforts to dismantle barriers faced by people with disabilities and many countries now have policies that prohibit disability-based discrimination as well as policies that mandate equal access to education.

Before the CRPD, Sierra Leone mandated that all children have access to education (Education Act, 2004) and in 2007 the Child Rights Act briefly but directly mentioned children with disabilities stating that they should be treated in a dignified manner and provided with education and training to become self-reliant. In 2011, the Persons with Disabilities Act established a National

Commission for Persons with Disabilities in addition to prohibiting discrimination and promoting equal opportunities for people with disabilities. During the time of these policies, children with disabilities were often still excluded from school because parents wanted to protect them from violence (Njelesani et al., 2018) or because expenses associated with schooling were prohibitive (Wurie, 2007). In 2018, Sierra Leone launched the Free Quality School Education (FQSE) program, which indicates that all core costs of education are provided by the government. As a result, more children with disabilities are enrolled in schools (Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education, 2022), but they are not *meaningfully* included with curriculum and pedagogy that meets their needs (Bakhshi et al., 2021).

Sierra Leone's National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools (2021) boldly and explicitly addresses the barriers faced by children with disabilities, children from low-income families, children in rural and underserved areas, and girls who are pregnant or parenting. The most recent policy, the Basic and Senior Secondary Education Act (2023), which replaces the Education Act of 2004, aligns with and builds upon the National Policy on Radical Inclusion by directly addressing the topics of inclusive schools and staff members who have disabilities as well as mandating that a representative from the Persons with Disability Commission sit on the newly established National Board of Education and a pupil representative with a disability participate on the newly established Education Youth Advisory Group. This new law represents a meaningful step forward for children and youth with disabilities and the field of Inclusion and Special Needs Education in Sierra Leone because for the first time, a law names a specific disability category (Autism Spectrum Disorder),

defines *special needs education*, and uses language that alludes to specialized instruction and previously unrecognized disabilities (e.g., learning disability or mild intellectual disability): "Special arrangements to access education shall be made for pupils with mental health, autism spectrum disorder, and other related unseen disability and health issues" (p. 24).

The existing laws and policies, specifically the two mentioned above, provide a *structure*; they indicate *what* is to be done, but laws and policies do not generally prescribe *how* the specific policy components should be implemented. That is left to other entities; in Sierra Leone, that is the Teaching Service Commission (TSC), responsible for ongoing teacher professional development and the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC), which approves programs in higher education, such as university teacher preparation programs. The TSC, in collaboration with Handicap International, UKaid, and Njala University (in Sierra Leone) has created an Inclusive Education Training Manual (2021) and the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education, in collaboration with Education Partnership Group and UKaid, has created a National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools *Implementation Plan* to be used from 2021-2026. The implementation plan contains information about what should be done: screening and assessment, developing individual learning plans or individual education plans, adapting learning materials, and providing pre-service teacher training in special needs education. The plan also indicates implementation partners (e.g., CGA Technologies, Leh Wi Lan, Plan International), and development partners (e.g., European Union, Irish Aid, World Bank, UNICEF). The collaboration between these governmental and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) is crucial if these policies are

to take root in the daily reality of Sierra Leone education. The role of the private sector, which typically includes people with specific expertise, is also especially important so that policies relevant for the education of children with special needs, though not limited to them, translate to evidence-based practices resulting in quality teaching and learning that is desperately needed in Sierra Leone. Despite all good intentions, however, there remains a policy-to-practice gap. Policies are written, plans are made, and training is provided, but little has changed for children with disabilities because the field of special needs education has not gained traction in Sierra Leone.

Most teachers have not received any form of training in how to work with learners with special needs. The training that has been provided by various organizations has been short-term and typically only included basic principles of inclusion, clarification about disability etiology, acceptance of children with medical-related disabilities such as epilepsy, and accommodations for children with vision and hearing impairments. For the field to gain traction, education leaders and teachers need in-depth training for extended periods of time that encompasses practical skills such as identification of children with disabilities through universal screening, curriculum selection and adaptation, teaching methods for teaching foundational skills such as phonics-based reading, and implementation of intensive interventions for students who are not making adequate progress. In other words, in-country expertise must be developed so that practices known to result in positive student outcomes are adapted for the culture of Sierra Leone, utilized regularly, and sustained over time. To address these deficits and to ensure that schools adequately provide for the education of learners with special needs, the University of Makeni decided to support

the growth of special needs education in Sierra Leone.

The Fledgling Field of Inclusion and Special Needs Education in Sierra Leone

The University of Makeni (UNIMAK), a private university in the Northern Province of Sierra Leone, established a teacher preparation program when the university was founded in 2005. The program provided training for general education teachers and teachers who were seeking expertise in hearing impairment through a collaborative program with St. Joseph's School for the Hearing Impaired. At the same time, content related to inclusion and strategies for teaching children with other disabilities was offered through short-term, in-person professional development provided by various NGOs such as Plan International, Helen Keller International, SightSavers, and Handicap International, along with some university-sponsored experts and individuals from the United Kingdom, Germany, and the United States, and UNIMAK established the department of Inclusion and Special Needs Education (ISNE) which offered a Higher Teacher Certificate (HTC), a bachelor's degree, and a master's degree in education with concentration in inclusion and special needs education.

As a result, there are now a handful of people who have extensive knowledge of hearing impairment along with introductory-level knowledge in general disabilities, and UNIMAK is considered the hub for teacher training in inclusion and special needs education in the country. While the various professional development opportunities have certainly moved the specialty area at UNIMAK forward, the lack of cohesion between out-of-country professional development providers and the lack of follow-up from these providers has resulted in fragmented knowledge, which often does not fit the context of Sierra Leone and thus has not

translated into practice. More importantly, these short-term learning opportunities have not resulted in the development of in-country experts in the field.

The development of expertise involves rigorous study over a long period of time (Elvira et al., 2017; Orlich Kuhlman & Ardichvili, 2015) because becoming a true expert means reaching a depth of knowledge that results in the ability to apply it in novel situations and transform it to develop new knowledge (Wallin et al., 2019). Research suggests that the development of expertise is dependent upon several factors including access to expert mentors or coaches and opportunities to practice and receive feedback (Klinge 2015). International mentoring creates barriers related to language and communication, limited face-to-face interactions, and cultural differences (van Bakel et al., 2021). To develop true experts in a field of study in a country where it does not currently exist, such as the case of developing experts in inclusion and special needs education in Sierra Leone, these factors must be purposefully put in place and barriers must be addressed in order to bridge the gap between *content*, the up-to-date knowledge of the field, and *context*, the location and culture where the content will be applied. The expert in a field of study is the key to the content knowledge and the local team is the key to deep understanding of the context. Each is impacted by the other, resulting in transformation of both. This innovative approach, though not fully conceptualized in the beginning, was employed by a team of one international *content* expert from the United States and three in-country *context* experts in Sierra Leone.

Developing Content and Context Expertise

In the summer of 2020, the first author, a professor from the United States, was planning for a full-year sabbatical and reached out to UNIMAK as a potential

host university through the Fulbright U.S. Scholar program. UNIMAK was interested in expanding their Inclusion and Special Needs Education department to increase the breadth and depth of content related to all disability categories and to develop procedures for identifying children with special learning needs - the *how* part of the National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools and the Education Act of 2023. Planning began through emails and virtual meetings in 2021-2022 and then the team was together in-person at UNIMAK for the entire 2022-2023 academic year.

The team determined that the practical work would include the expansion of the three existing teacher preparation programs (Higher Teacher Certificate, bachelor's degree, and master's degree) to include more disability categories (e.g., Autism Spectrum Disorder, Learning Disabilities, Intellectual Disabilities, Speech and Language Impairment), general pedagogy, intensive intervention methods, and systems for identification of children with disabilities. Knowing that the practical work would extend beyond the in-person time together, the primary goal for the in-person work was to begin a long-term partnership through which in-country experts develop so that the field of inclusion and special needs education grows within the country, transitioning it from dependence on other countries for knowledge and training to becoming collaborators and contributors to the field, worldwide. As such, the task of the content expert was to learn the context (the culture) and understand it well enough to bring content and context together and the task of the local team, context experts, was to learn the content well enough so that they could adjust it for application in the context of Sierra Leone. The connection between context and content laid the foundation for the practical work that followed.

The team engaged in a continuous cy-

cle where an activity such as observing a teacher delivering a lesson was followed by discussions within the team and then beyond the team with other UNIMAK faculty members, education officials at the local and government level, and additional experts in the field of inclusion and special needs education. The activities and discussions informed program development decisions and shaped the direction of further activities. Think of it like this: The *activity* is taking the content to the context either in theory by thinking about it while observing or in reality by doing it (e.g., a teaching strategy). The *discussion* is checking the understanding of both the content and context experts and building mutual understanding. To illustrate, consider the following examples.

Student Engagement

The team began their work together with several weeks of school visits in order for the content expert to take in the school and classroom environments (context), see typical Sierra Leonean instructional styles, and observe interactions between children and adults and among children with and without disabilities. Visits included schools at all levels (primary through secondary) and all types (public, private, and separate special schools) as well as schools considered to be very good and not so good (schools are rated A, B, or C based on criteria such as teacher qualifications, structures and facilities, and exam scores). Because school visits happened in the capital city of Freetown (the largest city in the country), Makeni (the largest city in the Northern Province), and in rural villages, the expert also had the opportunity to better understand the communities in which the school systems exist.

During and after school visits, the team discussed their observations. One observation that prompted discussion early in the process was about the enormous class sizes, many well above 60.

Discussions with various entities over many weeks revealed that the class sizes were already large, but enrollment had increased substantially since the FQSE in 2018. Discussions also naturally lead to the topic of student engagement and how difficult it is for a teacher to meaningfully engage so many learners and how easy it would be for learners with disabilities to be disengaged and never identified as needing additional support. This had implications related to program development (university course content), in-service teacher professional development, and advocacy for learners with special educational needs in inclusive classrooms. All aspects were intertwined and required both content and context learning on the part of all team members. The content expert was challenged to think of new ways that existing research-based strategies such as think-pair-share (Barrett et al., 2021) might work in a classroom with over 60 students and context experts were challenged to think about how teachers might accept using such a strategy when the traditional teaching method is lecture, memorization, and unison responding. The team agreed that bringing a strategy from one context (e.g., country and culture) to another and implementing it without first fully understanding the new context is a waste of time at best because the strategy will not be implemented, and irresponsible at worst because it could be confusing and frustrating for students and teachers.

Reading Instruction

In subsequent school visits, the team observed instruction in the areas of reading, writing, and math. This provided the team with the opportunity to gain a mutual understanding of the existing content knowledge (e.g., reading skills) and pedagogical content knowledge (i.e., teaching methods) in addition to the government-prescribed learning standards. Observations of reading instruction along

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Rev. Fr. Dr. George P. Ernest Gbamanja is the Director of Academic Affairs and Planning at the University of Makeni (UniMak). He holds a PhD in Education: Pedagogy of Schools and Professional Formation from the Salesian Pontifical University, Rome 2018. He teaches courses related to administration and leadership and his research interests center on interventions to improve teaching and learning in Sierra Leone. Dr. Gbamanja has a wealth of experience in the field of education and has served in leadership positions and delivered in-service professional training for primary and secondary school teachers in Northern Sierra Leone. As a catholic priest, he has worked in several parishes in the Diocese of Makeni - Sierra Leone, where, apart from his pastoral responsibilities, he was also actively involved in supporting and promoting educational development.

Andrew Unisa Dumbuya, M.Ed

Prior to becoming the head of the Department of Inclusion and Special Needs Education (ISNE) at the University of Makeni (UniMak), Andrew Unisa Dumbuya was a teacher at St. Joseph's School for the Hearing Impaired for 36 years. He completed his bachelor's degree and master's degree in Inclusion and Special Needs Education at the University of Makeni in 2010 and 2021. He teaches courses related to inclusion and provides professional development to teachers in local schools. His research interests include exploring solutions for challenges faced by teachers of students with disabilities in mainstream schools in Sierra Leone.

with informal student evaluations of reading-related skills (e.g., letter-sound correspondence, sounding out words) revealed an urgent need in the area of reading instruction. In all observations of instruction, children were memorizing words rather than decoding words. Teachers wrote words, sentences, or paragraphs on chalkboards and pointed while students recited the words in unison. When students in grade levels from first grade through middle school were asked to say letter sounds or say the sound at the beginning, middle, or end of a word, most could not. When asked to read an unfamiliar word, even one that had the same ending letters as a word from a memorized passage, most could not. When students were given a passage to read at what should be their independent reading level according to their class level and learning standards, most students could not read the passage let alone answer comprehension questions about it. During team discussions, Sierra Leonean team members shared that they were aware of the reading problem and a feeling of urgency about it unfolded for everyone as the dialogue continued. Knowledge of the reading crisis was confirmed at the Foundational Learning Exchange (FLEx) summit (hosted by Sierra Leone in 2023) where it was reported that 70% of 10-year-olds in low- and middle-income countries are unable to read well enough to comprehend simple text (World Bank, 2022). This information had significant implications for program development, in-service teacher training, and advocacy for students with disabilities. The team decided to add reading instruction as a focus area in all three UNIMAK programs and began to address basic reading instruction strategies in Makeni-area schools immediately in addition to developing a website to provide teachers with a reliable and context-appropriate source for clear

information related to literacy instruction. Additionally, after close examination of the learning standards related to reading, the team became aware of the need to advocate for the government to reexamine them. The reading crisis is a significant barrier to identifying learners with unseen disabilities such as learning disabilities (e.g., dyslexia). These types of disabilities cannot be identified if quality reading instruction is not first in place in the classroom, so the development of a systematic process for identifying learners with unseen disabilities (e.g., Response to Intervention; Siegel, 2020) had to be put on hold while focus shifted to addressing the improvement of reading instruction.

The cycle described and illustrated in the two examples above played out in countless other ways. When the team provided in-service teacher training in inclusion and special needs education, they became aware of the need for many additional areas of teacher training (e.g., evidence-based practices for teaching reading, writing, mathematics). This informed a shift in the master's program courses to include learning how to design and deliver effective in-service training to practicing teachers. The delivery of university courses informed program development in terms of instructional design and delivery for teaching university students in Sierra Leone. The content expert learned how to adjust the content to be appropriate for the context (e.g., considering available resources) and the context experts learned new methods for teaching university students (e.g., use of free Google tools). Providing support for students' theses and dissertations informed program development to include specific research methods classes that would have maximum impact for practitioners and researchers in Sierra Leone. For example, bachelor-level students would learn action

research and master-level students would learn single subject research design. Both are common research methodologies used in special needs education.

Although the focus was special needs education, it was clear that supporting special needs learners also enhanced teaching and learning for learners without disabilities. For example, training teachers to deliver reading instruction using a phonics-based approach benefits all learners and it makes it possible to correctly identify children with reading disabilities. Every phase and element of the work led to deep thinking and conversations about the content and context connection and how each impacted the other resulting special needs education teacher training programs that are purposefully designed to be appropriate for the context of Sierra Leone.

The work that was begun during the 2022-2023 academic year represents the beginning of a long-term partnership. The intensive, immersive experience allowed the team to develop shared understanding related to both content and context and provided a foundation for authentic collaboration moving forward. This innovative approach to international partnership where content expertise and context (cultural) expertise are equally elevated should be seen as a model for international partners. While it may not be possible to spend a full academic year together in person it is critical for the team to be together in the context for a substantial period of time engaging in this collaborative cycle where activities and discussions inform mutual understandings.

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