

Improving Inclusion and Learning Outcomes for Pupils with Impairments and Disabilities in Sierra Leone's Secondary Schools

Introduction

The Government of Sierra Leone, through its Free Quality School Education (FQSE) programme is committed to creating a high quality, accessible education system in which all children and young people can realise their potential. However, evidence shows that some learners, such as pupils with disabilities, often suffer discrimination and face structural barriers that deprive them of their right to safe, inclusive, and quality education.

The Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education's (MBSSE) approach to 'radical inclusion' is a commitment, outlined in the National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools, to ensure that every child—regardless of family origin, location, gender, or disability—can live and learn safely and with dignity.

Leh Wi Lan (LWL), led by MBSSE, is a programme funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) to support GoSL's drive to improve learning outcomes for young people at secondary level and to increase the enrolment, retention and well-being of girls and children with disabilities in school. The programme works with all government and government-assisted junior secondary schools (JSS) and senior secondary schools (SSS) nationwide. This Information Briefing summarises the interventions and learning of Leh Wi Lan and its partners towards MBSSE's goal of improving inclusion and outcomes for pupils with disabilities.

"Providing education for the blind child in secondary school needs a whole lot of education both to the teachers, principals, pupils and every other stakeholder."


Salieu Turay, Principal, Milton Margai School for the Blind



Teachers' code of conduct in braille

Learners with impairments and disabilities face significant barriers to fulfilling their educational potential

In Sierra Leone as elsewhere, children with impairments and disabilities face significant barriers to full participation in education and wider society, both inside and outside the classroom. These barriers may be institutional, practical – for example, a lack of access to assistive devices such as glasses or hearing aids – environmental – such as poor lighting or inaccessible toilets – or attitudinal, in the form of stigma, bullying and inadequate teacher training/pedagogy. Other factors that can exacerbate these barriers and increase vulnerability to fulfilling educational potential include poverty, gender and coming from rural areas. Children with disabilities,

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Practical tools and training help to identify and support children with impairments and disabilities

Special Needs Schools (SNS) in Sierra Leone are underfunded and lack basic teaching and learning materials. In mainstream schools, there is little support for children with disabilities and impairments, and the stigma around disability is high. As a result, communities, schools, and families do not prioritise the education of children with disabilities.

Leh Wi Lan was the first to assist MBSSE to include support to children with disabilities in mainstream schools at a national level, developing teachers' and principals' capacities and knowledge on inclusion through training on the social model of disability. Through this training, school mentors together with English and Maths teachers, are supported to observe their classes to identify students with difficulties, impairments, and disabilities using a new disability checklist. This checklist is a practical tool that enables schools to assess the type and level of support required to increase pupil participation and includes tips and classroom strategies as well how to access specialist support.

Recognising that disabled pupils may be more vulnerable to bullying; the checklist recommends that teachers and principals encourage a culture of respect among all students in the school. It also suggests putting a 'buddying system' in place, which pairs up pupils so they can support each other.

Specialist support and adaptative tools help children with impairments to participate in learning

Leh Wi Lan has supported over 3,600 medical screenings for visual impairment in JSS across the country and provided assistive devices to pupils, such as glasses and solar lamps, to address mild and moderate visual impairments that can be barriers to learning in school and at home. 3,139 children with visual impairments in both JSS and SSS have received glasses. In addition, blind and those with severe visual impairments have received English handbooks in braille as part of Leh Wi Lan's efforts to supply every secondary school child in Sierra Leone with appropriate pupil handbooks. These children have also received voice recorders to allow them record and listen to their lessons in all other subjects. Voice recorders have also been supplied to the personnel of the six national SNSs.

Strengthening the capacity for inclusive teaching practice

Teachers do not receive adequate inclusion training in Teacher Training Colleges, despite children with disabilities having to attend mainstream schools after primary school. Following the model of the draft Gender Responsive Pedagogy (GRP), Leh Wi Lan has supported MBSSE to produce Disability Inclusion Responsive Pedagogy (DRP). This aims to strengthen the capacity of MBSSE, the Teaching Service Commission and teachers to respond to the needs of children with disabilities, particularly those in mainstream secondary schools. The dissemination of the GRP and DRP in schools is planned for the school year 2021-22 and will build on the successful implementation of the Reducing Violence in Schools (RVS) Teachers Learning Circles and accompanying guide.

Supporting sustainability of the new school safety and inclusion initiatives

Leh Wi Lan has purposefully developed the skills and capacity of local staff to increase the effectiveness and sustainability of interventions to address school safety and inclusion. MBSSE inspectors have also been briefed on safeguarding, gender responsive approaches and disability inclusion through Learning Circles.

However, there is more to do to embed inclusive and safe practices in secondary schools. All school-based activities need continuous monitoring and the coordination of all stakeholders working on school health to ensure a concerted and cohesive approach to hygiene and safety. Going forward, the Radical Inclusion Policy and introduction of a new school health policy will help achieve greater inclusion.

Platform for success

Thanks to the leadership and commitment of the Government of Sierra Leone and the MBSSE, Leh Wi Lan has been able to support the processes and practices that support safety and inclusion in schools across the country. The UK Aid-funded Leh Wi Lan programme will continue to target resources and expertise at inclusion and school safety order to support the Government's Free Quality School Education (FQSE) programme spearheaded by President Bio, which aims to develop the human capital in the country by ensuring inclusion and equal educational access and participation for all children.