

Improved safety and wellbeing of learners

Information brief

Understanding exclusion in secondary schools



Photo credit: Leh Wi Lan

Introduction

Leh Wi Lan commissioned research on school exclusion, perceptions of violence and Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) education to inform the design and implementation of its work to:

- 1) strengthen responses to School-Related Gender-Based Violence (SRGBV) and challenge harmful gender norms and;
- 2) increase access to quality Child and Adolescent Health Skills education and remove barriers to school retention for adolescent girls.

The research was carried out in 11 schools and their communities in Western Area Urban, Western Area Rural, Koinadugu, Bombali, Bo, Karene and Falaba. It was designed to generate evidence on the complex factors that shape violence, exclusion or the successful delivery of SRH education, by learning from lived experiences, and to provide recommendations and potential strategies for addressing these challenges faced by Sierra Leone's learners.

This information brief explores findings from the research and summarises recommendations in relation to exclusion, with particular focus on the social norms that drive exclusion from school.

Summary of findings

- Norms and attitudes are shifting about the inclusion of marginalised students in school, with more acceptance and positive attitudes witnessed in recent years.
- There is still particularly strong resistance to the inclusion of pregnant girls at school.
- Alongside financial barriers to inclusion, learners from poorer backgrounds are also more often at risk of violence, abuse and unwanted pregnancy.
- Stakeholders identified three categories of measures to address exclusion:
 - addressing discriminatory social norms and attitudes and promoting more inclusive behaviour;
 - taking practical steps to facilitate inclusion in school;
 - strengthening the capacities of schools to promote inclusion.

Discriminatory norms and attitudes

Amongst the marginalised groups in the research, pregnant learners were found to experience the greatest levels of stigma and exclusion. In particular, they face high levels of exclusion by their peers, often because of the attitudes of their parents and communities.

Treatment of pregnant girls by teachers varies but there is a common assumption that once a girl is pregnant, she is unlikely to be successful in education. Teachers also often make judgemental and humiliating comments about them.

Many pregnant learners drop out of school due to the combination of their exclusion and isolation, their feelings of shame, and a lack of support from parents and teachers. Those who return to school after having a baby face stigma and difficulty in breastfeeding, and a fear of exclusion prevents many from returning to school.

Learners with disabilities also face social exclusion by their peers and there was variety in the extent to which the families of students with disabilities support them to access and participate in school, or to overcome exclusion. Some parents are very strong advocates for their children with disabilities, while others are not supported to go to school.

Sensitisation efforts have inspired a positive change in attitudes to people with disabilities and they do not experience much direct exclusion or stigmatisation by teachers. However, they are sometimes not allowed or encouraged to participate in key areas of school life because of misunderstandings about the extent of their capabilities.

Learners from the poorest backgrounds and those who live away from their families face bullying and stigmatisation from their peers. It was widely reported that these students do not participate much in class because of a lack of confidence, and that they often avoid school events or classes because they are ashamed.

'There are high levels of awareness of the Radical Inclusion Policy amongst school staff, parents and community stakeholders'

Practical barriers to inclusion

Many marginalised students face practical barriers to inclusion as well as challenges generated by the attitudes of those around them.

Learners with disabilities face challenges in getting to and from school and are punished when they are late because of this. They are often excluded from activities, such as sport, because of lack of provision of resources and equipment, as well as a lack of understanding of their abilities. As a result of this exclusion, learners with disabilities frequently drop out of school, particularly if they do not have family support to address these challenges.

Poverty also prevents learners being able to fully participate in educational or social activities. Sometimes they struggle to concentrate in class because they do not have enough to eat, and they also frequently lack money for school fees, materials and uniforms, or to meet payment demands from teachers.

Poorer students are often also called on to help generate income for the family and this impacts on their learning and school attendance. It is important to note that female students who are from the poorest families or are living away from their families are at particular risk of sexual exploitation, and therefore of pregnancy.

The role of school staff and structures

There are high levels of awareness of the Radical Inclusion Policy amongst school staff, parents and community stakeholders, which creates a framework to ensure that school is accessible to and inclusive of all children. Parents of students with disabilities also reported being more aware of their child's rights and more empowered to make demands from the school because of the policy.

Together with sensitisation initiatives on the rights of people with disabilities, this has contributed to a shift in attitudes around inclusion and teachers are reported to be much more supportive of them in school. However, a focus on 'protection' has meant some schools are overprotective of these learners, particularly in terms of participation in sport.

School responses to address exclusion of pregnant learners have been much weaker. Stakeholders were found to profoundly disagree with the policy's provision to include pregnant girls, reflecting high levels of judgement and stigmatisation faced by these girls across their community.

While many of these learners drop out of school, the Radical Inclusion Policy is at least preventing schools from ordering them to leave because of their pregnancy. Further, schools appear to be more supportive of those who return after having a baby and it was reported that girls who had dropped out of school some time ago because of pregnancy were being supported to return, as part of implementation of the radical inclusion policy.

School responses to students marginalised because of their poverty have also been limited, partly due to lack of awareness of their exclusion and partly because their challenges are less visible. It is also possible that schools have less knowledge about how to address such poverty-based exclusion.



Photo: Leh Wi Lan

Recommendations

Address discriminatory norms and attitudes:

- Introduce regular engagement between school and parents/wider community on key relevant issues
- Encourage community leaders to promote inclusion
- Promote role models and positive examples.

Identify practical steps:

- Design inclusive school activities
- Provide disability equipment, spaces for breast feeding, rest spaces for pregnant girls.

Strengthen school structures and capacities:

- Deliver inclusion training for all teachers
- Development of school wide inclusion policy
- Provide financial support for poor students and systematic availability of emotional support /counselling for students experiencing exclusion in school
- Strengthen student-teacher communication channels.



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The second phase of the Leh Wi Lan programme is part of the Sierra Leone Secondary Education Improvement Programme II (SSEIP II), which is funded by UK International Development. This five-year programme supports Sierra Leone's Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) to deliver improved education outcomes at secondary level, with a focus on schoolgirls and learners with disabilities. Leh Wi Lan is implemented by a consortium of national and international organisations led by Cambridge Education.

