

Improved safety and wellbeing of learners

Information brief

Inclusion Champions: Promoting disability inclusive education in Sierra Leone



Photo: Leh Wi Lan - Victoria Peters, teacher and Disability Inclusion Champion at Mohanad Jondy Islamic School

“Disability is not inability. Every child has the right to quality education.”

Across Sierra Leone, children with disabilities are more likely to be excluded from education than their peers. Many face barriers such as stigma, bullying, inaccessible school environments, non-inclusive teaching practice and lack of assistive devices. However, with the right support, learners with disabilities can thrive in school and build brighter futures.

Recognising these challenges, the Government of Sierra Leone launched the Radical Inclusion in Schools Policy in 2021, which commits that every child has the right to quality education, especially those who are often left behind. The policy places disability inclusion at its core, focusing on children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) as well as girls (including pregnant learners and mothers), children from low-income families and children from rural and under-served areas.

A new intervention for inclusion

To implement this policy, 825 Disability Inclusion Champions (ICs) have been introduced to secondary schools across six districts. Their role is to:

- advocate for school-wide disability inclusion and accessibility amongst school and district education staff
- share knowledge with teachers and learners to reduce stigma
- provide direct support to learners
- advocate for disability inclusion amongst parents and communities
- liaise with Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) to ensure informed practice.

Their work supports, and is supported by, those working in education at all levels of the system, putting ICs at the heart of an ecosystem of inclusive education.

825 trained Disability Inclusion Champions working in six districts



Though ICs are already qualified teachers - comprising those on government payroll, working in a private capacity or working as a volunteer - they are given specialised training, ongoing coaching and peer support that builds specific knowledge of disability rights. This equips them with practical strategies for inclusive pedagogy, gives them tools to support SEND learners, and guides them to prepare a School Inclusion Plan.

The IC initiative is implemented by the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education (MBSSE) with the Teaching Service Commission (TSC) and support from the Leh Wi Lan programme (LWL).

Principles for inclusion

ICs are guided by a set of core principles that ensure their actions are always in the best interest of the child. These principles are the foundation upon which an equitable and inclusive education system is built:

Equity



Ensure all learners can access, participate in and succeed in education.

Dignity



Promote an environment where every child is treated with respect and their unique contribution is valued.

Collaboration



Work closely with school management, teachers, parents and the community, as inclusion is a shared responsibility.

Continuous learning



Be open to new ideas and strategies and actively seek out opportunities to improve knowledge of inclusion.

These principles underpin the core daily responsibilities of the ICs as they work to transform their schools into safe, supportive and accessible spaces.



Photo: Leh Wi Lan

"After our first training we realised the importance of identifying learners with disabilities to better support them. We visited each class, identified students with disabilities and assessed how their challenges affected their learning. Then, we trained all teachers on how to support these students."

Alusine Sheka Koroma, Teacher and Disability Inclusion Champion

Key responsibilities

A core responsibility of ICs is to identify and support SEND learners, keeping accurate records that track their progress and recognise when more support is needed. They work closely with families to encourage referrals for medical screening, assessment or therapy through local health services. This ensures children can access vital treatments, assistive devices and other forms of support so they can participate in school life and are less likely to drop out.

ICs ensure that disability inclusive practices are embedded in all school activities – from classroom teaching to access to extra-curricular activities. They cascade training to their peers and role model positive inclusion as well as promoting the use of assistive devices, adapting classroom environments to individual needs and collaborating with colleagues to design lessons that accommodate diverse learners.

Vitally, they also are trained to recognise and address the overlapping barriers that SEND children face when they belong to multiple disadvantaged groups (e.g. girls with disabilities, learners from low-income families with disabilities). To prevent bullying and tackle stigma and discrimination, ICs also support SEND learners to participate in Girls' and Boys' Clubs and set up peer support systems such as buddy groups and friends circles.

Each IC also leads the development and implementation of a plan to improve disability inclusion, setting annual goals, targets and activities to improve accessibility and inclusion. At a wider level, ICs work closely with school leaders, community groups and NGOs to encourage school enrolment of SEND learners, raise awareness of disability rights and shift negative attitudes towards disability.



Photo: Leh Wi Lan

"We seat children with disabilities, especially those with vision or hearing impairments, at the front of the class to help them better understand the lessons. I also give them extra time with assignments so they can fully benefit from my teaching."

Musu Sesay, Teacher and Inclusion Champion

Looking to the future

ICs are driving systemic change in Sierra Leone's education system. They play an integral grassroots role in shifting inclusive practices in schools and early evidence shows tangible improvements in the identification of learners with disabilities, referral processes and the adoption of inclusive classroom practices.

However, there are opportunities to strengthen this initiative, particularly in terms of the diversity of ICs. In the first cohort, 72% were male and 28% were female while only 7% of ICs identified as being disabled. While this reflects greater diversity than the national demographics of teachers in Sierra Leone's secondary schools, there is work to be done so that learners with disabilities see their own identities represented by the ICs who support them.



Over the longer term, there is potential for ICs to inspire and motivate other teachers to adopt disability inclusive pedagogy, strengthen the enrolment and retention of SEND learners and build greater institutional knowledge of inclusion.

To fully realise the potential of ICs to transform inclusion at an institutional level, there is a need for formalised national training that raises awareness of inclusion, and builds stronger links between the school and community, stronger referral processes, more robust monitoring and evaluation systems as well as formal curriculum resource development around inclusion. All of this requires sustained funding and political will.

By achieving this, ICs can play a pivotal role in creating a secondary school system in Sierra Leone that is truly radically inclusive, ensuring that every child can learn and thrive. This will create lasting change for future generations in Sierra Leone.



Photo: Leh Wi Lan

"My teachers support my education and help me learn so much. After the holidays, I missed the first day of school while visiting my mother. My teachers called her and encouraged her to send me back, telling her how clever I am."

Zainab, Junior Secondary School 3



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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.