Disability data collection in schools in Sierra Leone

Phase 3 Research Summary

January 2025

Full report:

Introduction

This final phase of the feasibility study was conducted in collaboration with the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE), the National Commission of Persons with Disability (NCPD) and the Sierra Leone Union on Disability Issues (SLUDI). The objective of this study was to better understand the data generated by teachers using the Washington Group Short Set Questions (WG-SS) and the Child Functioning Module Teacher Version (CFM-TV) to record functional difficulties for children attending in schools in Sierra Leone. The study was conducted in Bombali and Karene districts in Sierra Leone.

This phase of the study assessed:

- The relationship between teacher assessments of functional difficulty, and the results of clinical assessment for health conditions or impairments, for domains of seeing, hearing and mobility;
- The relationship between teacher-assessed functional difficulty in a child, and their school attendance and academic outcomes; and
- How teachers made use of the functional difficulty data they generated to support teaching and learning.

This study was funded by Sightsavers.

Why is this issue important?

Accurate data on school children's functional difficulties and disabilities is essential. It enables the MBSSE and other education stakeholders to formulate sound policies for disability inclusion in schools, and to resource disability inclusion appropriately. It also supports educators in disability inclusive teaching. Currently, obtaining this data is a challenge. This study assesses use of the WG-SS or CFM-TV by class teachers as a possible way to generate this vital information.

What do the research findings tell us?

Key messages

1. Class teachers found the process of generating functional difficulty data helpful, and used them to strengthen their teaching and to improve disability inclusion.
2. The relationships between functional difficulty and academic outcomes were unclear, and varied based on the functional difficulty assessment tool used. These relationships would benefit from further exploration.
3. For the domains of seeing, hearing and mobility, functional difficulty assessments conducted by teachers did not reliably identify children with clinically confirmed impairments or disabilities. While the data generated by teachers using functional difficulty assessment tools may offer considerable value to teachers and schools, this data cannot replace clinical screening and assessment processes.

Summary

Background

To meet its commitments to inclusive education for children with disabilities, Sierra Leone needs an Education Management Information System (EMIS) which holds accurate and reliable data on children with disabilities. This information is crucial to ensure that planning and resource allocation takes the needs of these children into account, and so that their inclusion and progress in education can be adequately tracked and monitored.

Tools developed by the Washington Group on Disability Statistics, such as the Child Functioning Module (CFM) or the Washington Group Short Set (WG-SS) provide a way to collect internationally comparable data on disability in censuses and large-scale population surveys. These tools are increasingly used to collect disability data within education systems, but more evidence is needed about the feasibility and acceptability of this, and about the type of data generated. This study aims to provide some of this evidence.

Phase 1 of this study analysed Sierra Leone's EMIS from a disability-inclusion perspective. It identified the need to strengthen the country's EMIS, standardising disability data and data collection processes, enhancing use of disability data, and shifting towards a system which holds individual child records as well as school level data. Phase 2 tested the feasibility of teachers using the CFM Teacher Version (CFM-TV) or the WG-SS to generate individual level data on functional difficulties of children. Both tools were feasible, but there were some concerns about data variability across teachers and schools, particularly with the CFM-TV.

Phase 3 of the study aims to better understand the nature of functional difficulty data generated by teachers in schools in Sierra Leone. Specific questions answered are:

1. What is the relationship between teacher assessments of functional difficulty, and clinical assessments, for the domains of seeing, hearing and mobility?
2. What is the relationship between teacher-assessed functional difficulty in a child, and their school attendance and academic outcomes?
3. How have teachers used the functional difficulty data they generated to support teaching and learning?

Methods

This mixed-method study was conducted with 8 primary and junior secondary schools in Bombali and Karene districts, Sierra Leone. Phase 3 methods included:

- Children with functional difficulties in the domains of seeing, hearing and mobility, were clinically assessed in December 2024.
- School attendance and academic outcomes data was compared for children with and without functional difficulties.
- Focus group discussions were conducted with teachers at all 8 schools, about their experiences using the WG-SS or CFM-TV, and the data they had generated.

Findings

In the domains of seeing and hearing, children with functional difficulties had clinically verifiable difficulties, but these did not always meet the criteria of disability. All children with

functional difficulty seeing had an eye condition on clinical assessment, but none had visual impairment using World Health Organisation (WHO) definitions. All children with functional difficulty with hearing did have hearing impairment using WHO definitions. Only one of the four children with functional difficulty in mobility had a mobility related impairment.

At primary schools using CFM-TV, girls with functional difficulties had slightly better attendance than those without. There was no relationship for boys or overall. At junior secondary schools using the CFM-TV, children with functional difficulties had lower attendance than those without. In schools using the WG-SS, there was no relationship between school attendance and functional difficulty. At primary schools using CFM-TV, children with functional difficulties had better academic outcomes than those without. Girls with functional difficulties identified by the WG-SS performed better than those without, but given very small numbers, this finding needs to be treated with caution.

During FGDs, teachers were generally positive about using both the WG-SS or CFM-TV and reported value in systematically thinking about each child and difficulties they might be experiencing. They became more aware of disability and the need for inclusion due to completing assessments and used the data to inform and strengthen their teaching for greater disability inclusion. Strategies used by teachers included recognising individual learning differences, adjusting classroom seating arrangements, using different handwriting for the board, trying different teaching practices, and addressing issues of stigma and discrimination. Teachers spoke about the need for additional training in disability inclusive education to support them in meeting different needs. They also requested guidance on reasonable accommodations, resources to support disability inclusive education, and clear clinical referral pathways for children identified with functional difficulties.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

Sample size for this study is small, meaning that conclusions should be treated with some caution. Clinical assessments were conducted a year after the teachers completed the functional difficulty assessments. As a result, several children could no longer be located, reducing sample size. Some children may also have experienced changes in their functioning during the period between the teacher assessments and the clinical assessments.

Implications of the study

This study highlights the value that functional difficulty data can have for teachers, in improving their awareness of children's additional needs and helping them adopt more disability-inclusive approaches to teaching. However, it also highlights that functional difficulty data generated by teachers cannot replace the disability data derived from clinical assessment processes.

Learn more about

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