

## SPECIAL EDUCATORS PERSPECTIVES REGARDING CONSTRAINTS IN DELIVERING SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION IN SIERRA LEONE

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### **Abstract**

*The study centered on special educators' perspectives regarding constraints in delivering special needs education in Sierra Leone through ascertaining whether teachers in special schools have the requisite human resource are adequately equipped in terms of teaching and learning devices, and physical infrastructure. The study employed a quantitative survey approach. It involved questionnaire administration to teachers and interviews with school heads. Data analysis involved using descriptive statistics. The study revealed that special educators are specialized in diverse fields related, and unrelated to special education. Most of them have spent approximately a decade in the profession and undergone some form of professional development training in special education. However, there were deficits in human resource – staffing and qualifications. Special education tutorials and assistive devices were lacking – especially modern technology tools. Physical infrastructure including amenities for extra-curricular activities were also inadequate. It is recommended that capacity gaps of educators be addressed via recruitment and training of qualified personnel; huge investment made in the acquisition of modern teaching and learning tools/devices/technologies; and physical infrastructure be improved to attain the government educational and human rights goals, and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).*

**Keywords:** special needs, special school, assistive devices, children with disabilities, inclusion, disability.

### **Introduction**

Sierra Leone is a presidential republic located on the West Coast of Africa. The country has a population of about 7.1 million people according to the 2015 Population and Housing Census (Stats SL, 2015). The 1991 Constitution of Sierra Leone guarantees fundamental human rights and freedom to all individuals irrespective of race, tribe, origin, political orientation, creed, or gender. The Persons with Disability Act (PDA) 2011 prohibits discrimination against Persons with Disability (PWDs). The goal of the PDA is to achieve equal opportunities for PWDs especially in the area of education. The law guarantees the right to education for the disabled, prohibits discrimination in educational

institutions based on disability, and provides access to instructional methods/specialized courses in public educational institutions for meeting the educational needs of disabled learners (Government of Sierra Leone, 2011).

The Education Act, of 2004 set out the structure of Sierra Leone's education system. It consists of six years of primary schooling, three years of junior secondary schooling, three years of senior secondary schooling, and four years of tertiary/university undergraduate education. The Education Act guarantees every citizen the right to free compulsory basic education. Section 4(1) of the Act prohibits discrimination (including disability), "*between pupils or students in the matter of their admission to and treatment in any educational institution in Sierra Leone*"(Government of Sierra Leone, 2004). The Education Sector Plan 2018-2020 provides opportunities for children and adults to acquire knowledge and skills, as well as to nurture attitudes and values that help the nation grow and prosper. The Plan seeks to increase equitable access for basic, senior, and higher education for all, including PWDs, improve school infrastructures and incorporate facilities for students living with a disability (MBSSE, 2018).

Special education has existed in Sierra Leone since the formation of the Milton Margai School for the Blind in Freetown in 1956, and the St Joseph School for the Deaf in Makeni in 1961. It has been a policy and practice of succeeding governments in Sierra Leone since independence to operate special educational institutions to meet the needs of the visually impaired, the hearing impaired, those with autistic spectrum disorder, and the physically challenged. Recently, the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) developed the National Policy on Radical Inclusion targeting girls, including pregnant girls, PWDs, and marginalized children (MBSSE, 2020). The policy seeks to ensure accessibility to, and inclusivity of schools for all children principally those that are marginalized or excluded – children with disabilities (CWDs), children from low-income families, children from rural or deprived communities, and girls especially pregnant girls.

The Medium-Term Development Plan 2019–2023 (MTNDP) – “Education for Development” – places a premium on human capital development through free education for basic and senior secondary education, access to quality and affordable healthcare and food security (MOPED, 2019). In that regard, the government has implemented a Free Quality Education (FQE) programme for basic and senior secondary education through fees waivers and provision of core textbooks (Math, English, and Science); including school feeding in partnership with WFP in vulnerable communities. Correspondingly, there has been a huge increase in the school teacher workforce. Nonetheless, in all of these initiatives, special education seems to be left out, and CWDs in inclusive schools face tremendous challenges. Mindful that non-disabled students face challenges in getting a developing nation of Sierra Leone (MBSSE, 2020), imagine the constraints, educational pupils, with special needs encounter in their occupational pursuit.

In all of these initiatives, teachers are a focal point since they are tasked with delivering general and special education.

### **Problem Statement**

Special education in Sierra Leone does not have the required attention it deserves (Lamin, 2018). The focus has been on inclusion, which is minimal and recently implemented. Much of the national legal instruments and policies on education mentioned inclusion (less emphasis given to CWDs) in mainstream schools, which is good and aligns with international best practice. However, not all CWDs, particularly those with special needs, could be successfully integrated into a regular education classroom. Some learners require special care and needs that mainstream schools in Sierra Leone are badly ill equipped to handle. In addition, special schools can serve as a transition phase and for the integration of CWDs into inclusive schools. Although educators are central to education service delivery, mainstream schools in Sierra Leone are not disabled-friendly and do not have trained and qualified educators to implement Individual Education Plan (IEPs) for CWDs (Nishimuko 2014). It has been posited that these schools are might in resources (human and material) to provide education for CWDs in special and general schools respectively. This implies deficits more so in the areas of special needs education related to educators' competence/capacity gap. The shortage of school educators in general, coupled with capacity shortfalls, the lack of proper special education in teacher training colleges, and students shifting from a specialty in special education major implies human resources challenges (Nishimuko, 2018). Lamin mentioned assistive devices and infrastructure as potential contributing factors for the education of CWDs in special schools. Moreover, special schools serve as boarding homes for pupils who have attended mainstream secondary schools most of whom are from rural areas are without such facilities. Therefore, these institutions should not be in the GoSL, since they are vital to achieving education for all children and would constitute a violation of government law/policies, international instruments, and the rights of PWDs. It is against this backdrop that the research was carried out.

### **Research Purpose**

The purpose of the study is to ascertain the constraints that educators encounter in meeting the educational needs of CWDs in special schools in the Freetown municipality – the capital of Sierra Leone.

### **Research Questions**

The following are the research questions:

1. How do special schools fare in relation to their educators training and qualification for addressing the educational needs of CWDs in their schools?

2. How do special schools fare in relation to adequacy of teaching and learning materials for addressing the educational needs of CWDs in their schools?
3. How do special schools fare in relation to adequacy of physical infrastructure for addressing the educational needs of CWDs in their schools?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The study is underpinned by the Urie Bronfenbrenner Ecosystem theory. Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory seeks to explain human development by the interaction between the individual and environment that directly or indirectly influences the individual. It consists of the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem; and the individual is the center of these systems (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Applied to this study, the special school is the microsystem. The school is governed by the relationship between its social (e.g. students, teachers, staff) and physical (e.g. buildings, yard, curricula, teaching methods, teaching and learning materials) elements. The mesosystem comprises the interface between the school and other microsystems such as the, family and support services that influence student learning. The exosystem includes the school culture – experiences, values, teacher education and educators' decisions. The macrosystem on the other hand entails the legal and policy framework that have direct or indirect impact on SEN student and special education. The ecological systems perspective supports the education and social structures influence on special education (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The SEN student learning is influenced by interactions (students, educators, resources, internal, and external environments). They enhance their cognitive, academic and social growth. The study encompasses educators' interactions, educational provisions, services and facilities and their influence on special education.

According to Berry and Gravelle (2013), special education entails a specialized or individualized design instructional program for meeting the educational needs of children with special needs. It usually requires special materials, equipment, facilities, and teaching techniques. Stout asserted that “*full inclusion means that all students, regardless of handicapping condition or severity, will be in the regular classroom/programme full time, and all services must be taken to the child in that setting*” (p.1).

Globally, numerous instruments have been developed on education for PWDs. Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CPRD) protects the rights of individuals with disabilities to education, prohibits discrimination, and equal participation in the general education system (Article 24).

The Conference on Special Needs Education (Salamanca Statement) provides access to special needs children in regular schools. It advocates for the placement of all children irrespective of their disabilities – physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic, or other

conditions – into mainstream schools. It also calls for education systems to be designed and implemented in a manner that addresses the diversity of character and needs (UNESCO, 1999). The SDG 4 focuses on equity in education, access, and inclusive education. It mandates the existence of educational facilities that are disabled-friendly (UN, 2015).

A central theme in both special and inclusive education is the role of the teacher or educator. Teachers play a crucial role in implementing both educational approaches (Farooq, 2012), without their input, the entire process will be futile (NCSE, 2014). Hence, both authors asserted that attention should be paid to teachers regarding the education of children with special needs.

The role of teachers cannot be underestimated due to the fact that there would not have been any form of education without them (Adebisi et al., 2014). Even though educators play a vital role in these special schools, little is known about their capacities and challenges (McIntyre, 2013). McIntyre stated that worldwide, special schools are not adequately funded and short-staffed; Sierra Leone is not an exception. Farooq (2012) noted that most special schools rely on private donations and support, and there are issues with inadequate funding and human resource development. The physical structures in these institutions are not up to standard for children with disabilities (Bouillet & Kudek-Mirošević 2014).

Since special education is not incorporated in teacher training institutions in Sierra Leone, coupled with the unavailability of majoring in special education programmes in higher education institutions (Trani et al. 2010); the future of education for children with disabilities including educators responsible for providing education for them is challenging.

Adebisi et al. (2014) believe that if special education is to succeed alongside inclusive education, educators' competence should be the topmost priority. Adebisi et al. further argued that inclusive education in a mainstream classroom is not the cure all due to the developmental capabilities of some children, thus, special education is necessary in some cases; and educators competence to address the educational needs of this cohort will ensure the success of quality education for all.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study employed a survey design and a quantitative approach. The research domain is the capital city of Freetown, which is the educational hub of Sierra Leone with about 80 percent of special schools in it. The targeted population for the study was the school heads and teachers in the special schools in Freetown. The total number of special schools in Freetown is three (3). The average number of teachers in the schools is

approximately 10. Thus, a sample comprising five (5) teachers. The total sample size was 15.

In line with the research approach, a structured questionnaire was used for collecting the primary data. The tool contained categorical and rating scale items. It was segmented into sections capturing data on respondents demographics, and special schools staffing capacities, assistive devices or equipment, and infrastructure. The tool was trial tested before its administration to highlight flaws in the design for subsequent adjustment pending final data capture.

Cronbach Alpha was the measure of reliability used for measuring the four dimensions in the research tool measuring human resources, assistive devices, infrastructure, and social environment. According to Table 1 all of the coefficients for the dimension are above 7 which are acceptable (Kothari, 2011).

**Table 4.1: Cronbach Alpha coefficients of dimensions**

Dimensions	No. of Items	Cronbach Alpha
Human Resource	7	0.770
Assistive Devices	7	0.792
Infrastructure	7	0.701

Source: primary data

The researcher collected data after obtaining the consent of participants. The data analysis was descriptive and involved the calculation of frequencies and measures of central tendencies (percentages, mean, median, and mode). Thematic analysis was used for the open-ended questions.

Ethical consideration also formed a component of the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their consent to participate was solicited. They were informed that they could participate voluntarily or discontinue their participation at any time without penalty. They were assured of privacy and confidentiality. Participants' identities were not revealed, and data were analysed in aggregate form only.

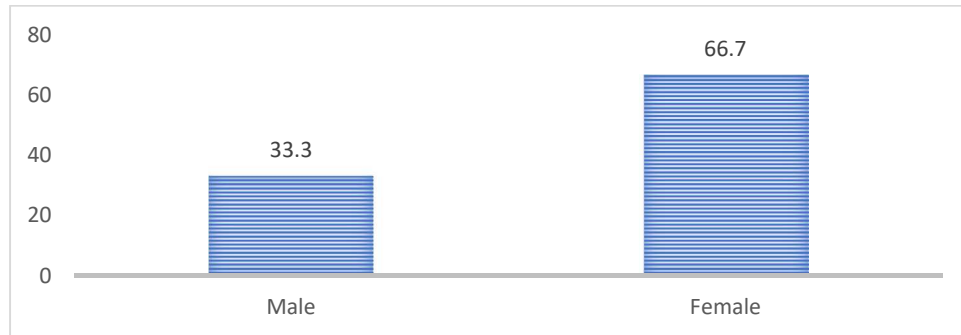
## RESULTS

### Introduction

Studies globally have revealed that special educators face in delivering special education. Sierra Leone is not an exception to this situation. This section presents the findings of the study and the analysis of primary data collected. All of the targeted respondents participated in the exercise giving a response of 100 percent.

## Demographic and Background Information

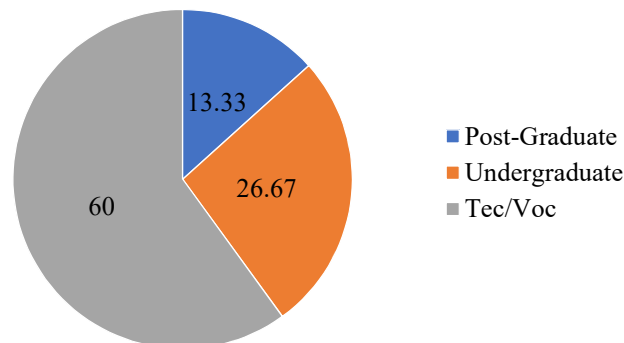
Figure 4.1 shows the gender representation of participants. The majority of the special educators are female. It shows that close to 67% of the special educators are women compared to 33% percent for men.



**Figure 4.1: Gender representation of participants.**

Source: primary data

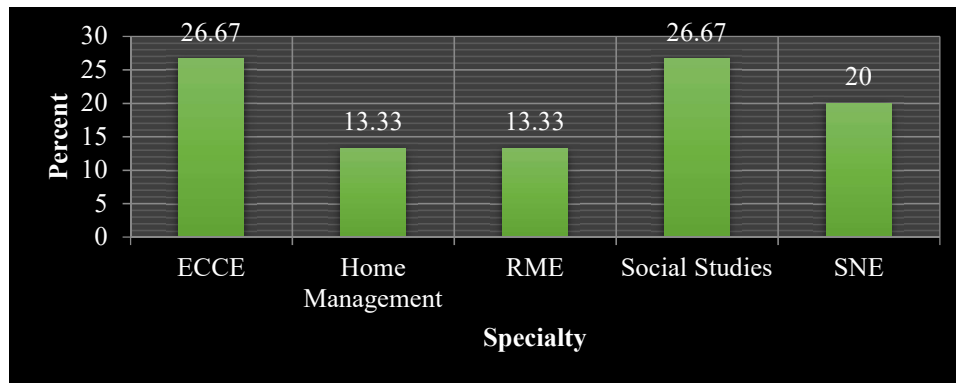
In terms of the qualification of the participants, the larger percentage (60%), have technical/vocational qualification, followed by those with a first degree at 27%. Those with post-graduate qualification were 13% (Figure 4.2).



**Figure 4.1: Proportion of Participant's education attainment**

Source: primary data

The larger portion of participants specialize or majored in Early Childhood Care Education and Social Studies at 27% each. Next was special needs education at 20% and Home Management and Religious and Moral Education at 13% respectively (Figure 4.3).



**Figure 4.2: Proportion of specialty or majors in education**

Source: primary data

About 87% of participants had undertaken professional development program – had some form of in-service training (short-course, workshop, seminar) and 13% had no form of training post-qualification or college.

There is huge disparity in terms of teaching experience of the teachers. The respondents minimum years of teaching experience is 4 years and the maximum years of teaching experience is 23 years. The median year of teaching experience is 9 years. In total, all of the participants have 194 years of teaching experience combined (Table 4.2).

**Table 4.2: Averages on years of teaching experience**

Measure	Statistic
No. of Respondents	15
Median	9
Minimum	4
Maximum	23
Sum	194

Source: primary data

### Human Resource

The participants were undecided/neutral in relation to them having the requisite knowledge to address special needs education ( $m=2.33$ ); adequate personnel in the schools ( $m=2.26$ ) and availability of specialists in special education ( $m=2.13$ ) as evident by the items modal score of three (3) respectively. The overwhelming disagree that exhibit discriminatory attitude towards the CWD ( $m=1.33$ ) and lack commitment to SNE ( $m=1.66$ ). The modal score for the latter items is one (1) and two (2) respectively (Table 4.3).



**Table 4.1: Averages of responses on personnel capacities**

No.	Human Resources	<i>n</i>	Mode	Median	Mean
1	Discriminatory attitude towards CWSEN	15	1	1	1.33
2	Commitment to SNE	15	2	2	1.66
3	Knowledge to address SNE	15	3	3	2.33
4	Adequate personnel/staff	15	3	3	2.26
5	Availability of special educators	15	3	3	2.13

Source: primary data

### Devices and Equipment

All of the participants agree with the absence of assistive devices or equipment needed for SNE in the schools. Overall, participants agreed that assistive technology/devices are expensive ( $m=4.60$ ), are not available in the country ( $m=4.26$ ), and in the special schools ( $m=4.60$ ), and there is a lack of specialized learning materials ( $m=4.00$ ). In addition, they agreed that sporting equipment are also unavailable in the institutions ( $m=4.13$ ). The mode for all of the items is one (1) respectively (Table 4.4).

**Table 4.2: Averages of responses on devices and equipment**

No.	Devices and Equipment	<i>n</i>	Mode	Median	Mean
1	High cost of assistive technology/devices	15	5	5	4.60
2	Lack of sporting equipment	15	5	5	4.60
4	Unavailability of assistive technologies/devices in the country	15	5	5	4.26
5	Lack of assistive technology/devices in the schools	15	5	5	4.13
7	Lack of specialized learning materials	15	5	5	4.00

Source: primary data

In the area of physical infrastructures to aid special education in the schools, participants overwhelmingly agreed that there is energy (power) supply ( $m=5.00$ ); water, sanitation and hygiene ( $m=4.73$ ); and spacious classrooms ( $m=4.40$ ). The modal score for the former items is one (1). However, participants were undecided when it comes to the adequacy of residential/hostel facilities ( $m=2.86$ ), disabled-friendly structures ( $m=2.86$ ) school buildings ( $m=2.86$ ) and transportation facilities ( $m=2.53$ ). The mode for the latter items is three (3) respectively (Table 4.5).

**Table 4.3: Averages of response on infrastructure**

No.	Infrastructure	n	Mode	Median	Mean
1	Energy supply	15	5	5	5.00
2	WASH	15	5	5	4.73
3	Spacious classrooms	15	5	5	4.40
4	Residential/hostel facilities	15	3	2	2.86
5	Disability friendly structures	15	3	2	2.86
6	Adequate school buildings	15	3	2	2.86
7	Transportation	15	3	3	2.53

Source: primary data

The result of the open-ended questions shows that about 67 percent of the educators are knowledgeable of the government's legislations and international instruments on disability, for example, PDA 2011, NPRI 2020, CPRD etc. The educators mentioned significant challenges in dealing with CWDs such as quality standards; poor facilities; a dearth of teaching and learning materials, assistive technology/devices; and financial support. Some of the basic equipment that are required for effective teaching at the institutions, according to the educators, are Perkins Braille machines, talking computers, digital recorders, writing frames and styles, and sign language text. In order for the educators to improve their service regarding special education, they requested support from the government in the form of increased subvention, psychosocial support for the CWDs, and transportation for teachers (most of them reside outside the facilities), regular in-service training, and incentives.

## **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

The study obtained data from the sampled personnel. These special schools have more female than male educators. Most of them are not university graduates although they do have technical and vocational certificates. Their areas of specialty are Early Childhood Education, Social Studies, Special Education, Home Management, Religious and Moral Education. In addition, most of them have undergone some kind of professional development training. Majority of the educators have good years of experience under their belt – the median years of experience in special education is 9 years.

The study found gaps in the area of human resources as noted by the educators who are responsible for providing education to the children. Even though they are committed to their jobs, they acquiesce to lacking the requisite knowledge to provide SNE. Furthermore, there is a shortage of special education teachers and personnel to meet the demands of the schools. Lending credence to this finding in the West African context, Adebisi et al. (2014) discovered the dearth of qualified special educators as a barrier to successful delivery of special education in Nigeria; and Anwar (2017) found Ghanaian special education teachers are deficit in adaptive abilities, which significantly hinders

education of students with special needs. Farooq (2012) also noted that availability of specialized educators having requisite knowledge and expertise is critical to meet special needs of students because managing diversity in the classroom is one of the greatest obstacles of special education.

There is a dismal lack of assistive devices, technology, equipment, teaching, and learning materials. In fact special needs devices and equipment are also noted as scarce in country and those available are expensive. Adebesei et al. (2014) found that absence of assistive devices and technologies, necessary equipment, materials and learning aid pose a barrier to delivery of special needs education; and Anwar (2017) found that special schools in Ghana are not equipped in terms of materials to handle SEN. Alkahtani (2016) stated that not having access to teaching and learning provisions in effect hinders special education. Farooq (2012) noted that with adaptive materials for teaching and learning of children with SEN, special education is ill-fated.

Infrastructural provision is not too bad. There is power, WASH facilities, and spacious classrooms. However, other structures such as residential/hostel facilities, disability-friendly structures, school buildings, and transportation are not enough. Transportation for staff is non-existent. This findings align to that of Alkahtani (2016), Mpofu and Shumba (2012) who found special schools (including inclusive school providing special education) lack physical facilities such as classrooms, furniture, transport, communication and other logistics required for special education of children with disabilities or susceptible to developmental impediments. Anwar (2017) stated that limited access to/or inaccessibility to specific structural facilities in reality impedes equal prospects for learners with special education needs.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proffered to address the challenges that special educators face in special schools:

The relevant authorities should recruit trained and qualified special education teachers and enhance capacity building. Periodic professional development programs, for example, in-service training, short courses/refresher courses, seminar/workshop for teachers will go a long way in enhancing their competence to deliver special education in special schools.

The unavailability of assistive technology, devices, and equipment poses a huge problem for special education in schools and requires serious attention. The relevant authorities should invest in modern assistive devices and technology for special education and import those that are not available locally. If feasible, special funding should be provided for equipping the schools with modern assistive tools.

The physical infrastructures in the schools should be upgraded. Emphasis should be placed on the provision of adequate learning materials such as braille machines, talking computers, digital recorders, writing frames and styles, sign language text. Subvention to special schools should also be increased and disbursed in a timely manner. Psychosocial support for children should be available. Furthermore, incentives to the educators could motivate them and serve as an expression of gratitude. It is envisaged that adhering to these recommendations will ease the difficulties teachers face in delivering SNE in special schools in Sierra Leone.

## **Conclusion**

The study investigated the challenges that special education teachers face in delivering special needs education in special schools in Sierra Leone using the capital city of Freetown as the research domain. Special education is a core component of education delivery worldwide and is in line with international conventions and best practices. A survey design was employed to obtain data from the educators regarding personnel capacities, devices, equipment, and infrastructures for the delivery of special education.

The study revealed that there is a deficiency in personnel capabilities, devices, and equipment. Physical structures are moderate. Thus, it is significant that attention is paid to capacity development; special needs devices, technologies, and equipment; upgrading of infrastructures in the school (hostel, buildings, transport); and increased subvention for the schools.

## **Limitations**

The study was limited by the reluctance of respondents to participate and the dearth of local literature on special needs education. The heads of the special schools were extremely cautious about allowing their institutions to participate in the study. A tremendous effort was made to persuade the school heads and educators and allay skepticism about the nature and goal of the study. Furthermore, the unavailability of literature/empirical studies on special needs education within the Sierra Leonean context also restricted the literature reviewed.

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