

TEACHERS PERSPECTIVES ON INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN SIERRA LEONE

Author: Abubakarr Lamin

Fourah Bay College,
University of Sierra Leone

Email: abulamin473@gmail.com

Abstract: *The study probed teachers' perspectives regarding children with disabilities in mainstream secondary schools in Sierra Leone. In that regard, the objectives were to ascertain teachers' ability to meet the learning needs of this cohort; the extent of work load; class size; and adequacy of resources and physical provisions. Phenomenological research design was employed. The study population were teachers in three inclusive secondary schools in the capital city, Freetown. Accordingly, the sample constituted 15 teachers who were purposively selected based on the knowledge they had on inclusive education in secondary schools. Data was obtained through semi-structured interviews and analyzed via thematic analysis. The findings revealed teachers encountered difficulties in delivering instruction due to workload, class size and inadequate resources. Most of the teachers were not adequately trained to meet the learning needs of children with disabilities in an inclusive educational environment. From the investigation, it could be asserted that existing physical structures are not up-graded to allow free movement. Therefore, the study suggested initiatives such as provision of resource centers, regular training on special needs/disability and inclusive education could be designed for mainstream school teachers. In addition, modification of physical structures, small class size and spacious classrooms are required to reduce teacher workload and burnout.*

Keywords: *Children with Disabilities, Special Educational Needs, Inclusive schools.*

INTRODUCTION

The study was based on investigating the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream inclusive schools from the perspectives of teachers. There is a disconnect between what mainstream school teachers are expected to do and what they are actually able to do regarding inclusive education. There is anecdotal evidence related to teachers' view on inclusive education because disability related studies in Sierra Leone are not focused on teachers. Against this backdrop, the study was intended to address that gap. The study provides context-specific evidence to inclusive education. It contributes to improved teaching practices for children with disabilities and better learning outcomes. In addition, it adds to empirical evidence on disability issues in Sierra Leone.

Mainstream schools are required to educate children with disabilities (CwDs) in general education classes alongside their non-disabled counterparts (Morina, 2017). This form of education manifests the concept of Inclusive Education which implies equal opportunities for all learners to access education in mainstream schools free of any form of discrimination. Notably, teachers contribute

a lot to the success of inclusive education through teaching programs and services. Their support is essential in accommodating all students, including those with disabilities and special educational needs in mainstream schools (Miller, 2019). Therefore, they are required to possess the necessary knowledge, skills and competencies to deliver instruction effectively in inclusive classrooms (Leifler, 2020).

The World Conference on Special Needs Education held in June 1994 in Spain, under the auspices of the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) published the ‘Salamanca Statement’ on special needs education in 1994. It was a global watershed document in relation to the education of children with disabilities and inclusive education. Salamanca demanded essential reforms in mainstream schools worldwide requiring all children to learn together, wherever possible, regardless of any difficulties or differences they may have. It is worth noting that arguments in support of inclusive education were based on three major justifications (Ainscow, 2020): education justification (everybody should be educated aside from abilities; social justification (alters social attitudes and basis for just and non-discriminatory environment); and economic justification (less costly to authorities to run inclusive schooling than separate special schools).

Research conducted on Inclusive Education highlighted several challenges related to implementation in mainstream schools such as the classroom climate, physical barriers, inadequate teaching and learning materials and teachers’ knowledge regarding inclusion. Howard et al. (2020) averred that mainstream school teachers are not knowledgeable in terms of disability coupled with the workload involved in meeting the learning needs of a diverse range of learners. Holzer & Opitz (2026) averred that the difficulties encountered in inclusive settings threaten educators’ sense of efficacy and contribute to teacher burnout. Hill (2026) asserted that spoken language in a mainstream setting is simply understood by teachers and students, yet, learners with hearing impairment may face difficulty due to audism in an inclusive learning environment.

Irrespective of the latter challenge, inclusive education provides a sense of belonging for students with disabilities. Another area of concern related to inclusion is teachers’ attitude (Nilholm, 2020). The author is of the view that general education teachers are unwilling to have children with special education needs in their classrooms due to deficit related to competence, knowledge and skills required to meet learning needs. In addition, (Ainscow, 2020) posited that some teachers in inclusive settings refuse to take responsibility for the education of learners with disabilities due to inadequate skills to operate special devices such as braille machine and audiovisual tools. Another issue is related to unfamiliarity with teaching strategies/pedagogy necessary to enhance learning (Kauffman & Badar. 2020).

In addition to other school related challenges, Saloviita (2020) averred that mainstream schools in developing countries are in need of adequate resources, trained and qualified professional personnel and administrative support. In harmony with Saloviita regarding school related challenges, Slee (2018) identified other factors such as physical provisions, classroom size and

space to accommodate every learner especially those with disabilities. On the issue of skills and teaching methods, Zwane and Malale (2018) revealed that teachers are not trained in special needs and inclusive education. As a result, Bentley-Williams et al. (2017) affirmed that teachers without the appropriate knowledge and training on inclusive education are unable to deliver instruction to learners with diverse learning needs. On the contrary, Morina (2017) argued that more emphasis needs to be placed on special education schools rather than on mainstream inclusive schools. In terms of addressing this issue (Miller, 2019) suggested in-service training for teachers prior to the implementation of inclusive education.

Regarding mainstream school related challenges, existing literature revealed that teachers are unable to identify children with special educational needs (Leifler, 2020). (Miller 2019) is of the view that communication and collaboration issues among teachers, parents and other professional are inimical to the successful implementation of inclusive education. In addition, some teachers are unable to apply a multi-sensory approach for learners with different disabilities (Zwane & Malale, 2018) due to insufficient or limited skills related to inclusive practice. Bentley-Williams et al. (2018) posited that some teachers in inclusive classrooms lacked experience, skills, and knowledge required in an inclusive learning environment. (Leifler, 2020). As a result of these challenges, teachers are unwilling to take on responsibilities especially those related to children with multiple disabilities (Leifer, 2020).

In relation to management and societal norms, Zwane and Malale (2018) averred that a significant challenge regarding inclusive education is parents of non-disabled children attitude towards inclusion, wherein they frown on placing their children in the same learning environment with those with disabilities. Other practices which are inimical to the effective implementation of inclusion education are stigma, peer acceptance, lack of awareness and general negative attitudes towards disability. (Ainscow, 2020). Another hindrance is placement of children with severe physical and learning difficulties in co-curricular activities due to non-modification or alteration of the curriculum Morina (2017).

According to national and global instruments related to disability, every child with a disability is entitled to access mainstream primary and secondary schools (Pitten et al., 2018). To catch-up, developing nations have aligned with the concepts of disability and inclusion through legislation and policies. In the case of Sierra Leone, significant progress was made through ratification of the United Nations 'Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the subsequent Persons with Disabilities Act of 2011 (GoSL, 2011) and the National Policy on Radical Inclusion of 2021 (MBSSE, 2021).

Over the years, the government through the Ministry of Education had advocated for inclusive education in public and private schools to enable children with disabilities access the same educational services as their non-disabled counterparts. The aim is to ensure access to educational opportunities and services appropriate to their ability and interests without discrimination. In Sierra Leone, Inclusive Education is aligned with the national vision of achieving equal access to quality

education for all young people and children regardless of their differences and educational needs; to ensure that they become productive and valued in the society (MBSSE, 2021). The government's determination and commitment to meet international development targets in education has facilitated educational access for all especially those with disabilities/special educational needs. To achieve this, strides have been made to create a conducive learning environment free from restraints on Inclusive Education and Education for All. Lamin (2022) is of the view that challenges related to inclusive education still exist due to factors such as financial constraints, inadequate support system, attitudinal barriers and discriminatory practices.

The government as per policy decision recognized that there is need to enhance the quality of education and learning outcomes for all Sierra Leonean children through addressing constraints related to the implementation of Inclusive Education. Lamin (2022) highlighted lingering challenges in relation to creating an inclusive educational environment that works for children with disabilities. Efforts have been made to address specific challenges related to this cohort in mainstream schools. However, there is only anecdotal evidence regarding teachers, the ones responsible for meeting their educational needs. Rogers (2025) investigated challenges in inclusive secondary schools that would potentiate inclusive delivery for learners and parents' views. It revealed significant challenges such as physical provisions and training of personnel. In line with Rogers, Johnson & Gbamanja (2023) highlighted systemic problems related to education wherein factors affecting a successful inclusive educational environment were uncovered. The extant literature on inclusion failed to capture an important component of inclusive education practices – the teachers/educators indicating an important gap. Many disability- related studies in Sierra Leone target other players like children and parents exempting teachers, who are tasked with practical inclusive education delivery. The study addressed this important gap in literature. Accordingly, it is worthwhile to probe teachers' perspectives on mainstreaming children with disabilities in public secondary schools. The purpose is to present potential evidence grounded investigation, mapping teachers' perspectives regarding inclusive education delivery. Due to the limited qualitative data/information in relation to the phenomenon studied and literature gap, the study complements other evidence-based studies by mapping individual teachers' perceptions relating to inclusive education. Failing to investigate this construct will have dire implication for the success of inclusive education.

Correspondingly, study addressed the following questions:

- How do teachers perceive their competence in meeting the education needs of learners with disabilities in inclusive secondary schools in Sierra Leone?
- To what extent does workload and class size affect teaching and learning in inclusive secondary schools in Sierra Leone?
- Are there adequate resources and physical provisions in inclusive secondary schools in Sierra Leone?

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore and understand teachers' lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of inclusive education practices in mainstream inclusive secondary schools in Freetown, Sierra Leone. A phenomenological design was considered appropriate because it enabled the study to examine how teachers experienced the challenges of implementing inclusive education, particularly in relation to their professional competence, workload and class size, and the adequacy of educational resources and physical provisions. The design facilitated an in-depth understanding of the meanings teachers attached to their experiences within the inclusive classroom environment.

The study population comprised 150 teachers drawn from three mainstream inclusive secondary schools in Freetown, Sierra Leone. The teachers constituted the target population because of their direct involvement in teaching learners with and without disabilities in inclusive classroom settings.

A sample of 15 teachers, representing 10% of the target population, was selected to participate in the study. The sample size was justified with reference to the recommendation attributed to Gall and Borg that at least 10% of a population may be considered representative for sampling purposes. The selected participants were expected to provide relevant and detailed accounts of the phenomenon under investigation. Given the phenomenological nature of the study, participants were selected purposively based on their direct experience of teaching in inclusive secondary school classrooms. This ensured that the interviews generated information relevant to understanding teachers' lived experiences and perceptions of inclusive education. The final sample comprised 15 teacher-participants drawn from the three selected schools.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the selected teacher-participants. An interview guide was developed around the study objectives and research questions, focusing on teachers' perceived competence in meeting the educational needs of learners with disabilities, the effects of workload and class size on teaching and learning, and the adequacy of resources and physical provisions in inclusive secondary schools.

The interview data were analysed thematically. The analysis involved the systematic transcription and familiarisation with the interview data, identification of meaningful statements, development of initial codes, and organisation of related codes into broader themes. The themes were subsequently reviewed and refined to ensure that they accurately represented the participants' accounts and addressed the research questions.

Ethical considerations were integrated throughout the research process. Participation in the study was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all teacher-participants before data collection. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the nature of their involvement, and their right to decline participation or withdraw from the study without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by avoiding the use of participants' names and

other personally identifying information in the reporting of findings. The information obtained from the interviews was used strictly for academic purposes. The researcher also sought the necessary institutional permissions before conducting the study in the selected schools.

RESULTS

The participants were secondary school teachers working in the selected inclusive schools in Freetown. They are qualified to teach, majoring in the various subject areas of art, science, and commerce. Most of them teach at least two subjects.

Teachers Perspectives on Teaching in Inclusive Education Classrooms in Secondary Schools

The findings on the perspectives on teaching in inclusive secondary school classrooms in Sierra Leone are presented in relation to three research questions: teachers' perceived competence in meeting the educational needs of learners with disabilities; the effects of workload and class size on teaching and learning; and the adequacy of resources and physical provisions in inclusive secondary schools.

Teachers' Perceived Competence in Meeting the Educational Needs of Learners with Disabilities

The study sought to establish how teachers perceived their competence in meeting the educational needs of learners with disabilities in inclusive secondary schools in Sierra Leone. The findings revealed concerns regarding teachers' knowledge and skills in using assistive technologies, adapting instructional materials, communicating with learners with hearing impairments, managing classroom behaviour, and applying inclusive teaching strategies.

The participants particularly expressed limited competence in using Braille and other assistive devices to support learners with visual impairments. One participant explained:

We have blind students and I don't know anything about the use of the special device they use. My ability in operating special devices is zero because I am not aware of using any special devices that may support these students with special needs, for example, Braille. I don't know how to adapt materials, for instance, translating them into Braille (KII 1, 2026)

Similarly, another participant stated, "I don't have skills in Braille." These accounts indicate that some teachers perceived themselves as lacking the knowledge and practical skills required to use Braille and adapt instructional materials for learners with visual impairments. Such limitations were particularly evident when preparing notes, tests, homework, and other learning materials.

Another participants also expressed a broader lack of preparedness to teach learners with disabilities. One participant remarked:

Can you imagine dealing with disabled students when I don't have skills in training and using devices? As I said, I lack skills to deal with these students with disabilities. It is so hard and overwhelming, especially when I have to translate tests, homework, and quizzes into Braille or sign language (KII 2, 2026)

This account reflects the participant's perceived inadequacy in applying specialised instructional techniques and adapting assessment materials to meet the needs of learners with disabilities.

Communication with learners with hearing impairments was another area in which teachers reported limited competence. The participants indicated that they lacked adequate proficiency in sign language, which affected their ability to communicate effectively during instruction. KII 4, 2026 had the following to say: "It is very difficult to work because talking and using sign language simultaneously is very hard and would be time-consuming since I didn't master sign language. Talking while at the same time trying to use sign language becomes a problem."

KII 3, 2026 also acknowledged limitations in delivering lessons using sign language: "I can teach one of the units without using sign language. Sign language is not easy for everyone, hence making communication between teachers and students unproductive."

These accounts suggest that inadequate sign language proficiency constrained teachers' perceived ability to communicate lesson content effectively to learners with hearing impairments. Consequently, teachers found it difficult to ensure that learners with and without disabilities received equitable instructional support.

The participants further reported limitations in their ability to manage classroom behaviour while attending to the needs of learners with disabilities. One participant explained:

The main problem that I face is the management of discipline, especially among students with disruptive behaviour. For instance, if a blind student falls on a chair in the classroom without my knowledge, and at the same time some students start distracting the whole class, it becomes difficult for me to handle. Managing students with disabilities alongside their peers without disabilities, especially those with disruptive behaviour, is difficult (KII 14, 2026).

This account indicates that the participant perceived difficulties in simultaneously managing classroom discipline, ensuring the safety of learners with disabilities, and maintaining an orderly learning environment.

In relation to instructional strategies, KII 12, 2026 pointed out the following, “I am not familiar with many teaching strategies that may enhance the learning of students with disabilities.”

Another participant expressed concern about the adequacy of specialised training:

I am not qualified to teach those students with disabilities. If I teach in my own way, the way I teach normal students, it means that those students will face problems because I do not have the capacity to teach them. When I set the exams, they cannot perform well or succeed because of my way of teaching them. Those students need teachers who are qualified in special education or trained well to teach them (KII 10, 2026).

This account suggests that some teachers perceived a gap between their existing instructional preparation and the specialised knowledge required to support learners with disabilities. The participant further associated the use of non-adapted teaching and assessment approaches with possible difficulties in learners’ academic performance.

The participants also identified challenges in maintaining the engagement of all learners during lessons. One participant observed:

Blind students use Braille machines in writing. When they tap them, the machines make sounds in the class. Other students cannot hear well when they tap the machines, and it makes a lot of noise. Some become distracted, and it is hard for me to manage students in class during that situation (KII 7, 2026).

This account reflects the participant’s perceived difficulty in managing classroom activities in ways that accommodate assistive technology use while maintaining the attention of other learners.

Workload, Class Size and Teaching and Learning in Inclusive Secondary Schools

The study also examined the extent to which workload and class size affected teaching and learning in inclusive secondary schools in Sierra Leone. The findings revealed that participants perceived inclusive teaching as demanding additional time and effort, particularly when supporting learners with disabilities alongside their peers without disabilities. Large class sizes and inadequate staffing were also reported to increase teachers’ instructional and assessment responsibilities.

The participants described the additional time required to meet the diverse learning needs of students with disabilities. KII 6, 2026 explained the following: “The big challenge, you know, the more students with disabilities, the more time we need. We need extra time, and as there are not many teachers, we do not have enough time to support these students with disabilities because of being overloaded. Being with these students is a challenge.”

This account suggests that the number of learners with disabilities, combined with insufficient staffing, increased the demands placed on teachers and limited the time available for individualised support.

Another participant described the workload associated with addressing the learning needs of all students in an inclusive classroom:

The workload is too much because we need to focus on those learners with disabilities and, on the other hand, those learners without disabilities. For everyone, we need to prepare something that can help them achieve the common objective that we have set. It is hard work, and it is like double work (KII 3, 2026).

The participant's account indicates that teachers perceived inclusive teaching as requiring additional preparation to accommodate different learning needs while pursuing common instructional objectives. This was described as an increased workload compared with teaching learners whose educational needs were more uniform.

Large class sizes were also identified as a factor that affected teaching, assessment, and feedback. KII 8 stated that: "The classroom size is another challenge because if we have a big number in the class, teaching and assessment become tough. Teachers also do a lot of preparation, evaluation, and marking, which is also tiresome for us."

KII15, 2026 also elaborated that, "The big size of a class, here I mean a big number of students in a class, means that giving them work and getting feedback to them requires too much time. Even placing them in different groups is not easy. It is not easy work."

These accounts suggest that large classes increased the time and effort required for lesson preparation, classroom organisation, assessment, marking, and feedback. The participants perceived that these demands made it more difficult to provide timely and appropriate instructional support to all learners, including those with disabilities.

Adequacy of Resources and Physical Provisions in Inclusive Secondary Schools

The study also sought to establish whether resources and physical provisions were adequate in inclusive secondary schools in Sierra Leone. The findings indicated that participants perceived significant inadequacies in specialised personnel, teaching and learning materials, assistive devices, communication support, and accessible school infrastructure.

The participants identified the absence of specialised teachers and inadequate teaching materials as important institutional challenges. KII 6, 2026 explained the following:

Lack of special teachers—teachers trained to support inclusion—and inadequate teaching materials in our school may probably mean teaching and learning through a challenging environment. It means that ordinary teachers will not be able to help learners with disabilities and special educational needs successfully. Secondly, students too will not feel comfortable learning in these types of schools. Thirdly, some learning materials will not be used to help learners because of the limited knowledge and skills of teachers in special education and in using some tools in teaching and learning.

This account indicates that participants perceived a shortage of specialised teachers and inadequate instructional materials as limiting the schools' capacity to support learners with disabilities. The participant also associated these inadequacies with difficulties in using available learning materials effectively.

The participants further reported that various assistive devices and specialised learning resources were unavailable or inadequate. These included Braille machines, Braille books, magnifiers, light sticks, digital recorders, crutches, adapted teaching materials, and other teaching and learning aids. The absence of sign language interpreters was also identified as a barrier to supporting learners with hearing impairments. These reported gaps suggest that schools lacked some of the material and human resources necessary to facilitate accessible and inclusive learning.

Physical infrastructure was another area of concern. The participants indicated that some school environments were not sufficiently adapted to accommodate learners with disabilities, particularly those with mobility and visual impairments. KII 4, 2026 lamented, "Infrastructures in our school are not suitable to help students at all. Our school does not have good infrastructure to help disabled students, and they should be improved. There are no pathways that help disabled students to move from one area to another."

KII 13, 2026 stated: "When you have blind students and those who use wheelchairs, they need pathways or passageways to get into their classes."

These accounts suggest that inadequate pathways and other accessibility provisions created difficulties for learners with disabilities in moving around the school and accessing classrooms. The participants perceived that disability-inclusive considerations had not been adequately incorporated into the construction and adaptation of school facilities.

DISCUSSION

The study explored whether inclusive education can help remediate the learning needs of children with disabilities through ascertaining teachers' perspectives regarding their experiences in mainstream inclusive schools. The findings revealed challenges that inhibit their ability to meet the education needs of children with disabilities thereby denying them their right to education

stipulated in international documents such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Salamanca Statement. Their incompetence in sign language and braille use for students with hearing and visual impairments poses a serious learning barrier. This same issue was echoed by the Canadian Hearing Society (Ainscow, 2020) that teachers' lack of sign-language proficiency means that access to education, is in essence, being restricted for students with hearing impairment. The same conclusion can be drawn for Sierra Leone. Kaufmann and Badar (2020) is of the view that teachers are required to have significant potential to deal with all the challenges and issues that may arise while teaching in an inclusive educational environment.

Access to sign-bilingual education appears to be one of the remedies to guarantee learning for students with serious hearing impairments. This would require that teachers also be fluent in both sign-language and spoken language (Loefler, 2020). Unfortunately, teachers in mainstream schools are not acquainted with sign-language skills, hence, they teach without it thereby creating a learning barrier to those students. However, it is relevant to note that being fluent in sign language takes a long time due to the language's demanding complexity (Miller, 2019). The author maintains that teachers who are confident that they can learn sign-language within a short period of time, apparently do not grasp fully the time it entails to acquire the necessary language fluency.

In relation to work load, class size and accessible classrooms, findings reveal that teachers are overwhelmed. Being overburdened with work and high student-to-teacher ratio are challenges that contribute to teachers' burnout in developing societies (Ainscow, 2020). Atkan (2020) is of the view that the most important skill teachers should acquire is to manage the teaching and learning environment. Mitchell (2020) maintained that teachers being the main pillar of the education system and constitute the core of good quality education are required to possess high level of pedagogical skills. Against this backdrop, teachers in inclusive schools need assistance through co-teachers and teaching assistants to share tasks and run classes together.

One can infer that even though inclusive education provides opportunity for learners who have been excluded from educational opportunities such as those with special needs, more needs to be done in order to help remediate some of the challenges that this cohort face. Against this backdrop, teachers are required to have the requisite knowledge, skills and training to enable them to operate in an inclusive educational setting. In addition, issues relating to class size, work load, class size, spacious classrooms and physical provisions need to be adequately addressed.

CONCLUSION

The investigation addressed teachers' perspectives regarding the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream inclusive secondary schools. Based on the findings derived, it could be inferred that the schools' infrastructures are not reflective of an inclusive educational environment wherein the learning needs of all students are met especially those disabilities. These schools are not adequately resourced in terms of teaching and learning materials, sign-language interpreter, braille, teaching aids and other assistive devices. Against this backdrop, it incumbent on the government, school administrators and stake holders to address concerns relating to infrastructures especially appropriate pathways for mobility and teaching and learning materials. In conclusion,

for successful implementation of inclusive education, teachers ought to be adequately trained to enable them to meet children's diverse educational needs especially those with disabilities.

Based on the findings, the study recommends that the government and school authorities provide appropriate teaching and learning resources, specialised support services, assistive devices, and an adapted curriculum to facilitate the effective inclusion of learners with disabilities in mainstream secondary schools. The establishment of a national resource centre for learners with special educational needs is further recommended to coordinate the provision of specialised materials, technical assistance, and regular training programmes in special needs education, inclusive teaching practices, curriculum adaptation, and the monitoring of learners' progress. These services should be complemented by ambulatory or visiting specialists who can respond promptly to teachers' needs. In addition, school authorities should reduce class sizes, provide spacious classrooms to minimise teachers' workload and burnout, and improve school infrastructure through the construction of ramps, accessible stairways, and other structural modifications to facilitate the safe and independent movement of learners with disabilities.

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