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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

## PARENTS CONCERNS REGARDING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN SIERRA LEONE

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### Abstract

The study centered on parents of children with disabilities concerns regarding their children in the regular education schools through ascertaining whether the schools are adequately equipped in terms of special learning materials, teaching methods, assistive devices and physical provisions. It was initiated against the backdrop that little attention is placed on their views in relation to their children's placement in inclusive schools. There is anecdotal evidence regarding the inadequacy of special learning materials and physical facilities for this population. This indicates an existent relating to parents' views on inclusive education. The study employed a quantitative approach. The research population consisted of parents of children with disabilities/special needs. Data analysis involved computation of numerical/statistical data. The findings revealed that the schools lacked special learning materials. It also revealed that parents were unsatisfied with the teaching methods for children. On physical provisions, findings indicated that existing structures are not disabled-friendly attributed to the absence of disabled students as a consideration preconstruction of the schools. The study concludes that, in view of the shortfalls discovered, there is dire need for provision of special learning materials and assistive devices in inclusive education settings. In addition, parents' of children with disabilities inputs, positions, or viewpoint of the inclusive environment of their children/wards are necessary to towards ameliorating their concerns inclusive practices in schools.

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### Introduction:-

Numerous international documents have addressed the rights of persons with disabilities especially children to access education. The Salamanca Statement 1994 affirmed that regular education schools with an inclusive approach provides the best opportunity to combat discriminatory attitudes towards children with disabilities. Other instruments such as the Organization of Persons with Disabilities (OPD), the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), Persons with Disabilities Act (PWD) 2011 of Sierra Leone, the Education Sector Plan (ESP) 2020–2025, and National Policy for Radical Inclusion (NPRI) 2021 and the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4–quality education; have enabled children with disabilities to attain right to quality education (GoSL, 2011, UN, 2015, MBSSE, 2021). It is pertinent to point that Inclusive Education is an off shoot of Special Needs Education. Several studies on Special Needs Education have revealed that placing children with disabilities in

special schools hurts and that there are limited benefits in placing them in a special learning environment. The failure of special education has largely ignited the debate on inclusive education. The boundaries that once separated special education from general education are becoming blurred, thereby necessitating the inclusion of children with disabilities in the general education classroom. Against this backdrop, there has been a shift towards Inclusive Education; denoting the integration of children with disabilities or special needs into the general education classrooms, rather than segregate and place them in special institutions (Wells, 2021). In practical terms, in an inclusive educational environment, children with disabilities receive their educational alongside their non-disabled counterparts in the same setting (Becker et al., 2017).

The inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream education has become a widespread practice that has resulted in remarkable changes to schools in concept and operation. The practice of inclusion in education has increased due to reported benefits. Bennet et al. (2018) averred that learner with disabilities or special educational needs are able to learn better, improve their academic skills, and develop adaptive behavior, in inclusive settings compared to special institutions. The authors are of the view that for inclusive education to be successful, schools, educators, administrators, parents and communities need to accept and adopt inclusive practices. Parents play a crucial role in the lives of their children. Therefore, those with children with disabilities are required to be fully onboard in order for inclusive education to work. Yang (2019) echoed that disability is perceived negatively by many in society to the extent that parents with children with disabilities are reluctant to send their children to school or even allow them to mingle in the community. At the same time, parents of children without disabilities tend to carry negative attitudes related to their children in the same learning environment. Such attitudes result in social exclusion, restrictions and difficulties for children with disabilities. Family members especially parents, play a major role in the education of their children. Therefore, their views need to be heard and are to be encouraged to involve in decisions relating to their children. Instead of despising them, parents should be encouraged to be active participants in the education of their children (Tippet & Milford, 2017). Parents are to be seen as partners who want the best for their children (Wells, 2021). In line with Wells, (Jennings 2015) reiterated that parents should be empowered to be active participants in all aspects of the education of their children.

#### **Research Problem:-**

Despite efforts to move towards a more inclusive educational environment, challenges still exist, especially parents' concerns towards inclusion. Bonding new "inclusive" policies with prior traditional segregation policies run contrary to countries' commitment to implement Article 24 of the CRPD which affirms that states parties recognize the rights of persons with disabilities to education. It is relevant to note that whereas parents of children with disabilities are concerned regarding the availability of learning materials, teaching methods, physical provision and assistive devices, those with non-disabled children have raised eyebrows relating to their children's placement in the same learning environment. In addition, some existing policies legitimize operation of special education schools such as the School for the Blind, Deaf and Dumb. In addition, policy framework relating to disability label is deficient, dependent, and incompetent. Instead of inviting parents to participate in decisions relating to the education of their children, they are viewed as obstructionists to their education. Against this backdrop, there is existing gap in relation to parents' concerns towards inclusion, thus, it is fitting that an investigation on their concerns regarding support for, or opposition to inclusion be conducted. Also, required are parental views relating to practices that promote or hinder inclusion such as the availability of teaching and learning materials, assistive devices, physical provisions discrimination/marginalization and other forms of accommodations.

#### **The study addressed the following questions:**

1. What are parents' concerns regarding the availability of special learning materials and teaching methods for their children with disabilities in the regular education schools?
2. What are parents' concerns regarding the availability of physical provisions and assistive devices for their children with disabilities in the regular education schools?

#### **Literature Review:-**

##### **Inclusive Education:-**

In an inclusive educational environment, children with disabilities or special needs attend school and learn alongside their nondisabled counterparts. (Aboud & Proulx, 2019) echoed that an inclusive school system integrates special education and related services into aspects of its program which makes it possible to address the needs of both those with and without disabilities. Therefore, it's imperative that teachers in an inclusive educational setting have the requisite skills and training relating to special education (Chen & Wolf, 2021) and also cooperate with

paraprofessionals or special staff to support the unique learning needs of all students (Rao et al., 2022). Zubairu and Rose (2017) reechoed teachers in inclusive schools are required to have the requisite knowledge to apply different methods to meet the learning needs of all children. In addition, they should develop positive relationships among children, family members and staff to enable every child for life-long learning Ndijuye (2020). Inclusion embodies the values, policies, and practices that support the right of every child regardless of ability to participate in a broad range of activities and contexts as full members of community (Wells, 2021). The desired results of inclusive experiences for children with disabilities is a sense of belonging, membership, positive social relationships, friendships, development and learning to reach their full potential (Rao et al., 2022).

#### **Parents' Concerns on Special Learning Materials and Teaching Methods:-**

The issue of learning materials raised serious concerns for parents of children with disabilities especially the availability of text books and other materials and human resources. (Zubairu & Rose, 2017) maintained that inadequacy of instructional materials and other resource materials affect learners' academic performance. These resources are required for effective teaching and learning. Dowd et al. (2016), asserted that insufficient resources result in teachers handling subjects in an abstract manner thereby portraying things dry and non-exciting. This matter is extremely crucial regarding children with special educational needs and implementation of inclusive education. Against this backdrop (Piper et al., 2022) suggested that intervention measures are required to address provisions of instructional materials in inclusive education setting. In line with Piper, (Rao et al., 2022) reechoed that scarcity of teaching resources hamper successful implementation of inclusive education. In addition, Dowd et al. averred that suitable instructional and learning materials, teaching methods and human resources are required for successful implementation of inclusion.

According to (Wells, 2021), parents could also contribute towards the education of their children through provision of resources such as blackboards, electronic resources, books multimedia and recorded teachings. Apart from parents, institutions of learning have a role to play. In Sierra Leone, the Ministry of Basic Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE 2022) affirmed that educational institutions have both moral and legal obligation under the Persons with Disabilities Act (PDA 2011) and NPRI 2020 to provide alternative formats such as large print or Braille of documentation upon request for students with visual impairment. Whitebread (2022), maintained that simple changes and adaptations to resources would make them easy to use. Wells (2012) is of the view that making resources accessible from the onset provides a more inclusive learning experience for children and make conversion to alternative formats quicker and easier. Apart from teaching and learning materials, (Chen & Wolf, 2021) argued that for successful inclusive education, classrooms need to be colorful and interesting to enable learners to feel welcomed and enthusiastic.

Teachers are central in both special and inclusive education especially in relation to teaching methodology, Lamin (2022). They play a crucial role in implementing both approaches and without their input the entire process will be futile. It goes without saying that in an inclusive educational setting, teachers must know what inclusion entails and the same time willing to meet the learning needs of all children irrespective of their conditions Lamin (2022). Nabasa (2014) argued that because many trainings related to teacher education fail to provide the requisite skills and knowledge related to teaching methods, teachers find it difficult to meet the learning needs of all children in an inclusive educational environment.

#### **Parents' Concerns on Physical Structures and Assistive Devices:-**

It has been postulated that children with disabilities face stumbling blocks in accessing education especially in the areas of physical provisions and assistive devices. Such barriers limit their learning and achievement in different activities that take place within the classroom setting. Lamin (2022) averred that students' face physical barrier as result of encountering difficulties to access school structures such as routes, toilets, ramps and curb entrances. The author is of the view that the unavailability of these structures hamper inclusion and exclude children from society and education in general. Another area of concern for parents of children with disabilities is assistive device. It is a generic term for all systems related to the use of assistive products. According to the USA Assistive Technology Act of 1998, it is "any item, piece of equipment or system, whether acquired commercially, modified, or customized, commonly used to increase, maintain, or improve the functional capabilities of persons with disabilities". Stevens et al. (2023), posited that assistive devices can increase a person's capabilities so that their abilities balance out the effects of any disability. They could also provide alternative means to approach tasks so that disabilities are compensated. An assistive device provides an alternative for the interaction between learners with disabilities and the new device. Devices such as Braille Machine, wheel chairs, crutches, prosthesis, communicators and telecom

services compensate for functional limitations, facilitate independent living, and enable older people and those with activity limitations realize their full potential (Ndijuye, 2022). Assistive devices also include equipment and services to access information for seeing, hearing, reading, writing, interpersonal communication and control of the environment (Stevens et al., 2023).

Assistive devices are divided into low-end and high-end technologies. Low-end technologies do not require programming such as magnifiers and pencil holding devices. On the contrary, high-end technologies like computer requires programming. Wells (2021) claimed that assistive devices are categorized as low or simple device and high and complex. Low or simple devices are often low cost and easy to create or obtain. They require a simplified process for operation such as pencils, calculator loupes, paper and communication board. On the other hand, complex devices such as computers, electronic communication board, and electric wheel chairs have or incorporate technologies.

A systematic review conducted on assistive devices for learners with disabilities identified four analytical themes: assistive devices as facilitator for academic engagement; barriers to effective assistive device use can hinder academic participation; transformative possibilities of assistive devices from a psychological perspective; and assistive devices as a facilitator for participation (Manu et al., 2019). Based on the foregoing, (Chen & Wolf, 2021; Wells, 2021; Wagner et al., 2019) posited that use of assistive devices could promote inclusion, enhance learning and decrease stigma (Chen & Wolf, 2021; Wells, 2021; Wagner et al., 2019). Despite the benefits of assistive devices, (UNESCO, 2021) raised a cautionary note regarding limitations such as lack of proper training for teachers to assist children, negative attitudes, inadequate planning, assessment processes, inadequate funding, difficulties in managing equipment, and time-related barriers.

**Some requisite physical structures and mechanisms for children with disabilities in inclusive schools include:**

- Reduction of the noise level: Use carpeting on the floor, or a portion of the floor, or put tennis balls or carpet pieces on the ends of the legs of desks or chairs.
- Assessment of the soundscape of the classroom: Note bothersome noises and take steps to reduce them, e.g., buzzing or humming lights and heating pipes, the sounds of passing traffic, and noises from other classrooms.
- Providing headphones for learners to use to block sound during quiet time: Some students are unable to block out background noises and are distracted by a teacher talking with another student or even a ticking clock.
- Setting a relaxing tone: Try using relaxing music when learners are working individually at their desks.
- Considering furniture layout: Arrange classroom furniture and partitions to create traffic patterns that encourage easy mobility, discourage running, and decrease learners' tendencies to bother/disturb each other while they work.
- Reducing distractions: Consider using window coverings to reduce the effects of noise, temperature, light and visual distractions (UNESCO, 2021).

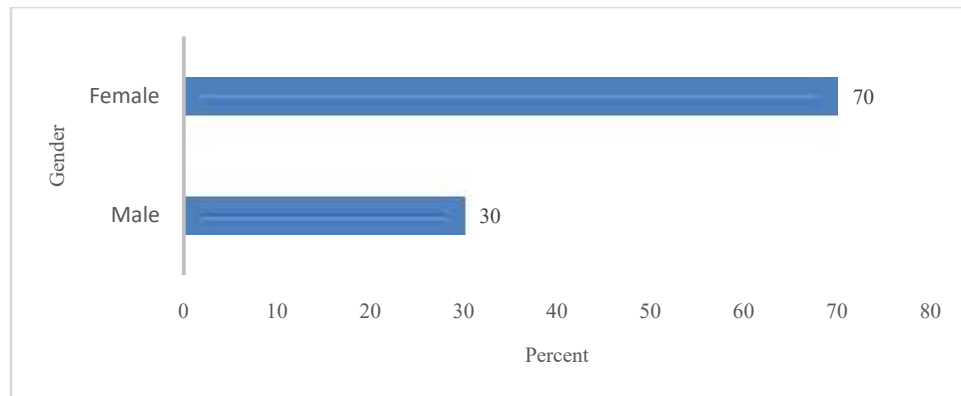
**Research Methodology:-**

The study employed quantitative method to inquire parents with children with disabilities perspectives regarding their children in the regular education classroom. Every parent of a child with disability or special needs from the four (4) targeted schools was eligible as a member of the population. Thus, the study's population comprised 800 parents. Convenience sampling was used to select respondents (parents) mainly due to their availability, willingness to participate, and accessibility to provide data during the period of the study. Correspondingly, a definite number of parents from the targeted schools who were available at the time to collect data numbering 20 individuals constituted the sample, and resultant respondents to the research tool, which was a standardized questionnaire that was subjected to content validity and consistency (Cronbach Alpha coefficient = 7.5). Prior to data collection, the researcher obtained the consent of respondents before administering the questionnaire. Data analysis involved computation of statistics, mainly relative frequencies and percentages. The analyzed data were presented and interpreted via visual means using tables and charts. Ethical considerations adhered to included voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, and scientific honesty.

**Data Analysis and Interpretation:-**

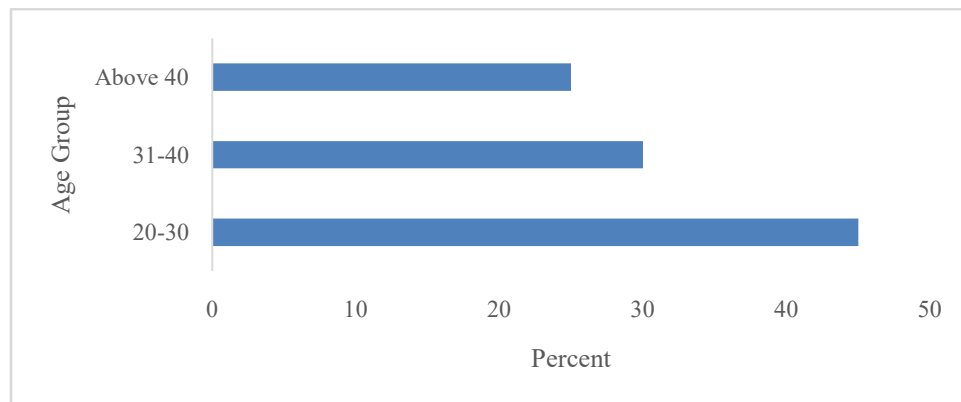
**Demographics:-**

Several demographic variables were taken into consideration in the investigation; these include gender, age and marital status. The ensuing is a presentation of the results



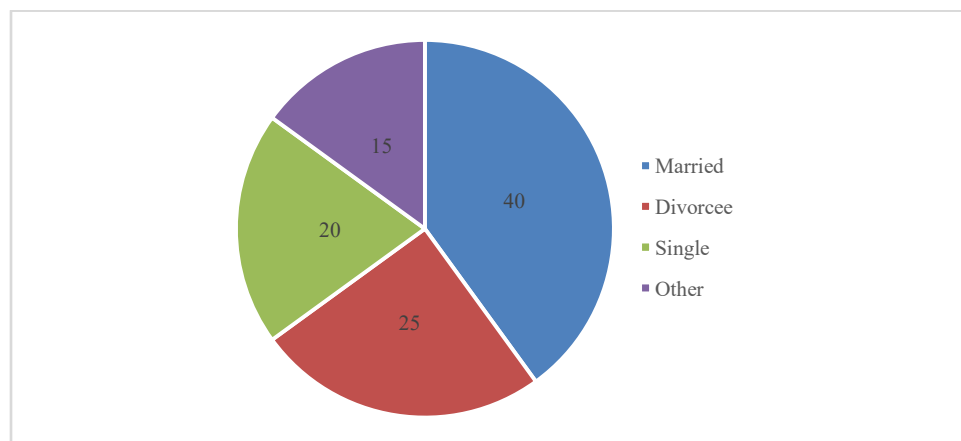
**Figure 1: Gender Representation of Respondents**

According to Figure 4.1, there were more females than males in the sample. Female representation is 70 percent, compared to males at 30 percent.



**Figure 2: Age representation of Respondents**

The ages of respondents were categorized into three groups: 20-30, 30-40, and 40 and above. Between 20-30 is the highest representation at 45 percent; 30-40 at 30 percent; and 40 age group a representation of 25 percent (Figure 4.2).



**Figure 3: Marital Status of Respondents**

There were four categories on this variable. Respondents who are married have the highest frequency at 40 percent. Those who were divorced constituted 25 percent and single couples at 20 percent, and other category (cohabitation) constituted 15 percent.

### Special Learning Materials and Teaching Methods:-

The study investigated parents' perspectives in relation to special learning materials and teaching methods. Table 1 indicated that most i.e., 65 percent, a large number of parents affirmed inadequate learning materials for their children with disabilities in the schools. Conversely, 35 percent of them assented to availability of special learning materials.

**Table 1: Special learning materials**

Variable/Item	No. of Respondents	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Availability of special learning materials	13	65	65
No availability of special learning materials	7	35	100
Total	20	100	

**Table 2: Teaching methods**

Variable/Item	No. of Respondents	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Use of special teaching methods	16	80	80
No use of special teaching methods	4	20	100
Total	20	100	

Table 3 highlighted that most of the respondents had serious doubts in relation to the impact of the education provided to their children in the inclusive schools especially on teaching methods– they aren't satisfied with teaching methods. Respondents with an unsatisfactory viewpoint constituted 70 percent, whereas those who are satisfied or trust education delivery constituted 30 percent.

**Table 3: Satisfaction with education delivery**

Variable/Item	No. of Respondents	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Satisfied w/education delivery	14	70	70
Not satisfied w/education delivery	6	30	100
Total	20	100	

### Physical Structures and Assistive Devices:-

The study inquired parents' concerns regarding physical structures and assistive devices for their children with disabilities. In relation to accessing physical structures such as classrooms, toilets and buildings, 60 percent of them concurred that their children encountered difficulties to access structures since they are not disabled-friendly. On the contrary, 40 percent were of the view that it was easy for their children to access the schools' structures (Table 4).

**Table 4: Physical structures**

Variable/Item	No. of Respondents	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Easy access to structures	12	60	60
No easy access to structures	8	40	100
Total	20	100	

In terms of spatial accommodation, Table 5 indicates that 65 percent of the respondents agreed that classroom space is inadequate (to allow appropriate sitting arrangement or placing of assistive devices) to accommodate and foster ease of movement for their children in the classrooms. 35 percent had a contrary view regarding classroom space (ease of moving about, sitting arrangement, and using assistive devices) (Table 5).

**Table 5: Spacious classroom**

Variable/Item	No. of Respondents	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Spacious classroom	13	65	65
No spacious classroom	7	35	100
Total	20	100	

In relation to assistive devices such as wheelchairs, braille writers and recorders, all of the respondents (100 percent) reported that the schools lacked these devices. In this case, the onus is on the parents and government to provide the devices for the children since the schools are unable to provide them.

Variable/Item	No. of Respondents	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Availability of assistive devices	20	100	100
Non-availability of assistive devices	0	0	100
Total	20	100	

## Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations:-

### Discussion:-

Parents registered different views around special learning materials and teaching methods. A majority of them attested to inadequacy in special learning materials. Their concerns are in line with Lamin (2023) relating to inadequacy in teaching and learning materials for children with disabilities in inclusive schools. However, the majority of responses affirmed that teachers employ special teaching methods based on reports from their children. Findings also reveal that two thirds of respondents are dissatisfied with the quality of education delivered to their children. On the issue of physical structures and assistive devices, more than half of the respondents reported that their children encountered difficulties accessing physical structures. In addition, parents reiterated that the classrooms are not spacious to ensure seating accommodation and easy movement for their children. In line with their views, Wells (2021) agreed that children with disabilities experience challenges in accessing physical structures due to the fact that disability issues were not in mind during the construction phase. In addition, report indicated unavailability on assistive devices leading to previous findings on dearth of equipment/devices to facilitate teaching and learning in both inclusive and special schools (Lamin, 2020; 2022)

### Conclusion:-

The study sought the viewpoints of parents with children with disabilities regarding special learning materials, teaching methods, physical provisions and assistive device in the regular education schools. It was generally premised on ascertaining parents' concerns. Findings revealed variable and divergent views. It was apparent that most of the schools lacked special learning materials and assistive devices required to facilitate inclusive learning. These tools if available could accelerate the learning processes for children with disabilities. In relation to accessibility and accommodation, the existing school buildings are not disabled-friendly. That said, the promulgation of legal framework to promote inclusion requires adaption of physical structures such as classrooms to enable access especially for those who are physically challenged. It would be extremely difficult to carry a wheelchair bound student up a set of stairs within the school premises. In addition, it also hampers seating accommodation and arrangement and free movement in the classroom. Also, concerns were raised in connection to teaching methods. In general, participants were unsatisfied with education delivery. From the foregoing discourse, it is evident that the drawbacks highlighted are crucial matters that need to be addressed. Against this backdrop, school authorities and duty bearers need to tackle them urgently to ensure successful implementation of inclusive education.

### Recommendations:-

**Based on the findings derived, the following recommendations to address parents' concerns regarding the education of their children with disabilities in the regular education schools are proffered:**

- Provision of special learning materials and assistive devices, such as wheelchairs, braille, lens, crutches and other aids, to facilitate effective teaching and learning. Due to the quantum of investment and most parents limited income, this investment has to be championed by the government, or development/charitable partners, or school proprietors.
- Teacher training and in-service are required for them to acquire the requisite skills to teach successfully in an inclusive educational environment
- Easy access to school structures and appropriate classroom accommodations thereby catering to the mobility of children with disabilities.
- As a core partner in implementing education, schools are required to partner with parents, incorporating their viewpoints and empowering them to address disability issues at home and community level. Parents need to have knowledge of their children's disability and the benefits derived from inclusion.

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