

Exploring the challenges faced by Disadvantage Students in Schools in Sierra Leone: Case study -Marginalized Students from Low-income Families

Abstract

The Sierra Leone National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools is the first attempt by the Government of Sierra Leone to provide a roadmap for the day-to-day work of schools and the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education. Disadvantaged student refers to vulnerable, marginalized, and excluded children from accessing free, quality, and inclusive education. This study explores the challenges disadvantaged students face, specifically marginalized learners from low-income families. The study participants were marginalized male and female students from low-income families and their classroom teachers. The data for this study was obtained from primary and secondary sources. Secondary data sources for this study were obtained from published and unpublished sources. From the results, it was concluded that marginalized students from low-income families are significant in inclusion education. The result also indicates that more female participants are taking part in the study, marginalized students from low-income backgrounds are faced with challenges attending school and attending lessons, faced with challenges in participating in lessons, completing homework or exams, feel left out, and unsafe in school. It was recommended that School authorities make the school safe by declaring and ensuring zero tolerance to the use of canes, School Related Gender-Based Violence, train teachers in inclusive learning, boost female students to attend school, participation by including all marginalized students, and decrease exclusion, ensure that girls have the opportunity to receive free primary and secondary education, improve on electricity across the country, and enforce total ban on extra lessons, school picnic, and other activities that could be possible barriers to impede students learning.

Keywords: Exploring, challenges, disadvantage students, low-income families, school, marginalized students

Introduction

Secondary education is the third level and lasts about six years after primary school. The policy was commissioned by President Julius Maada Bio in 2018 and promises free education from kindergarten to junior and senior high school and all external examinations. The Sierra Leone National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools is the first attempt by the Government of Sierra Leone to provide a roadmap for the day-to-day work of schools and the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (Kallon Kelly, 2023). A positive experience for all is ensured for students, regardless of social status (Vetoniemi, & Kärnä, 2021). Radical inclusion means that these implicit exclusionary policies, moral positions, formally declared policies, institutional regulations, national laws, and institutional frameworks should be deliberately and urgently removed to achieve inclusion (Shojo, 2022). Radical inclusion, as defined by the Minister of Primary and Secondary Education, is “the intentional inclusion of those who are directly or indirectly excluded (from education) through the actions or omissions of individuals, societies, or institutions” (Afia, 2023). The number of teenage pregnancies and child marriages in Sierra Leone is the highest in the world, and UNICEF has stated that up to 13 million more girls may be forced into early marriage by economically strapped parents in the next decade (Kpagoi, et al., 2023). In Sierra Leone, radical inclusion policies and poverty are among the biggest barriers to education, resulting in girls being the most affected, with issues such as sexual abuse, early marriage, and the burden of being a caregiver through heavy work maintaining the family (Banlanjo, et al., 2024). Thus, the policy was determined based on insights from dialogue with constituents across Sierra Leone (Weible, 2023). People, including families, communities,

teachers, and students, have explored ways to resist destructive norms and policies and have imagined ways for pregnant students and their parents to continue to learn, grow, and thrive as children with disabilities. , children from poor backgrounds and in remote rural areas can enjoy the same educational facilities as their wealthier, non-disabled urban counterparts (Higgins, & Novelli, M 2020).

The policy places special emphasis on including historically marginalized groups such as pregnant girls and learning parents, children with disabilities, children in rural and underserved areas, and children from low-income families. According to the objectives, the policy aims to support access to sexual and reproductive health services, including sexuality education in schools and communities, and engage communities in ways that allow schools to support all learners (Zoker, et al., 2023)

Disadvantaged student refers to vulnerable, marginalized, and excluded children from gaining access to free, quality, and inclusive education (Bhatt, 2024). The focus of the study is to provide an understanding of the challenges they face in learning and develop plans for their inclusion in inclusive learning in schools (Ní Bhroin, & King, 2020). Disadvantaged students can be categorized into: pregnant girls, teenage mothers, learners with disabilities, and learners from low-income families (Okumu, J. 2020). Among these categories of disadvantaged students, this study focuses on one of the disadvantaged groups, the priority group. The priority group for this study is students from low-income families/backgrounds. Since this group is large, the researcher limited the investigation to Junior Secondary School (JSS) 1 students at Ernest Bai Koroma University Experimental Secondary School.

Aim/Objectives

The aim of this study is to explore the challenges faced by disadvantaged students, specifically marginalized learners from low-income families in Makeni, Northern Sierra Leone

Methodology:

Study design

The study used a descriptive research design using quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. This approach was chosen because it is time-saving and cost-effective as well as applicable to the entire population. Data collection sources included both primary and secondary sources. Primary data allowed for personal contact and interviews with respondents while secondary data focused on theoretical insights and literature from other authors.

Study area

The study was conducted at the Ernest Bai Koroma University Experimental Junior Secondary School Makeni, in the Northern Region of Sierra Leone. As a science and technology-focused institution, the university strives to provide students with the skills and knowledge they need to meet the challenges of a rapidly evolving world. Our teachers are renowned experts in their fields and our facilities are state-of-the-art. We are proud of our diverse community of students, departments, and staff who come from all walks of life and bring unique perspectives and experiences to the school. We believe that diversity strengthens our institution and prepares our learners to be global citizens.

Population

A population is a complete group of individuals, cases, or objects with observable characteristics, whereas a target population is a population that is the subject of the study to generalize the results (Pandey & Pandey, 2021). The subjects of the study were male and female marginalized students from low-income families, and the class teacher in the Ernest Bai Koroma University Experimental Junior Secondary School in Makeni city.

Sample and sampling methods

Sampling methods

Mishra, S. B., & Alok, S. (2022), and Vockell, (2021) define a sample as a small group of individuals selected from a population from which the researcher needs to obtain information and conclusions. The sampling technique refers to collecting a sample of research participants from a population. In this study, random sampling and purposive sampling were used to select the respondents.

Sample

According to Bekele, & Ago, (2022) sampling is everything. Research is not all about observing or interviewing people. Sampling can also be about environments, social processes, and procedures. In case studies, a clear decision must be made and individual cases must be included in the study. To make the study relevant, a population sample of 21 participants, 10 male and 10 female, and 1 teacher from the class were selected to express their opinions on the phenomenon under study.

Table 1 showing Sample size for the study

Description	of	Number	of	Sample size	Percentages
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Respondents	Respondents		
Teacher	1	1	4.8
Male students	10	10	47.6
Female students	10	10	47.6
Total	21	21	100

Source of Data: Field research 2024

Data Collection Method

The data for this study was obtained from two sources: primary and secondary sources.

Primary Data Source

Primary data was collected using questionnaires for interviews observations, and focus group discussions.

Primary data was collected through:

a. Interviews: Conducting semi-structured interviews with stakeholders such as students, and the class teacher allows the researcher to gain insight into the personal stories and experiences of boys, and girls. The interviews included questions about the teacher adapting her style to include marginalized learners, the inclusive practices seen during the lesson, did the pupil speak to the whole class (eg answering questions) during her lesson?, Did the pupils work with peers during this lesson?, Did you observe any problems for the pupils in this lesson? etc

b. Focus group discussions: Organizing focus group discussions with a diverse group including girls, boys, and the class teacher allows the researcher to explore shared perceptions and social

dynamics regarding gender equality in education. These discussions provided valuable insights into the barriers and challenges the students face.

c. Observation: The researcher may observe the classroom environment, school practices, and implementation of radical inclusion policies to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of students from low-income families in the Sierra Leonean education system. Observing classrooms may reveal gender bias, discrimination, and the inclusivity of the overall learning environment.

Secondary Data Sources

Secondary data consists of existing knowledge on the topic being studied. Secondary data provides important material that guides and supports the researcher in determining the research objectives. The secondary data sources for this study were obtained from published and unpublished sources. This includes computer-based data, project documents, magazines, newspapers and textbooks on the research topic.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Data Presentation

Percentages and tables were used to present the data collected through the questionnaire. The result statements were used to present the data collected through interviews, focus group discussions, and observations.

Data analysis

The collected data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) program (version 25.0).

Results:

Demographic characteristics

This section presents the demographic characteristics of the people involved in the study. The data collected was useful to the researcher as it provided information about the age group of the respondents, and gender of respondents

Age of Respondents

Table 2 displays the age category of respondents. The age of the students was determined based on the academic age for JSS1

Table 2: Age of respondents

Respondents	Age in years
Teacher	47
Male students	13
Female student	13

Source: field data 2024

The results shown in table 2 indicate that the age of the respondents ranged from 13 to 47 years. The results show that the respondents with 47 years of age had a frequency of 1, making up 4.8% of the total number of respondents. The age 13 years of age represented a frequency of 20, making up 95.2%. The result in table 1 show that more respondents seem to belong to the age category 13 years of age, with a total of 20 respondents making up 95.2%.

Gender category of Respondents

The results of respondents' gender status are presented in table 3.

Table 3: Gender of respondents

Description of Respondents	No. of respondents
Female Teacher	1
Male students	10
Female students	10

Source: Field data 2024

The results in Table 3 show the gender of the respondents. In the gender category, it is shown that there is a frequency of 10, which represents 47.6% of male respondents, and a frequency of 11, which represents 52.4% of female respondents. This shows that more female participants participated in the study. The researcher included both male and female respondents to explore the opinions of both genders regarding the phenomenon under study.

Exploring the challenges faced by marginalized learners from low-income families

The objective of this section is to explore the challenges faced by marginalized learners from low-income families

Responses of respondents to the question “Do you have any challenges attending school and attending lessons?”

The students responded yes, they face challenges attending school and attending lessons. They went further to describe these challenges which includes: “I live far away from school so I

walking long distance to school, no school bus to drive them to school, lack of money to pay transport fare to school, no food to eat in the morning before going to school, they often miss the first lessons in the morning because they arrive late”. (see table 4 below):

Table 4: Responses of respondents to the question “Do you have any challenges attending school and attending lessons?”

Challenges faced in attending school & lessons	Responses		Percentage Responses
	All Male	All Female	
Walk long distance to school	Yes	Yes	95.2%
No bus to drive to school	Yes	Yes	95.2%
Lack of money to transport fare	Yes	Yes	95.2%
No food to eat in the morning before going to school	Yes	Yes	95.2%
I miss first lessons in the morning	Yes	Yes	95.2%

Source: Field Data 2024

Results indicate students’ responses of to the question “Do you have any challenges attending school and attending lessons. This shows that all the male with frequency 10, all female with frequency 10 responded “Yes” which represents 95.2 % of respondents. The result suggests that all of the marginalized students from low-income background are faced with challenges attending school and attending lessons.

Responses of respondents to the question “Do you have any challenges participating in lessons?”

The students responded yes, they face challenges participating in lessons. They went further to describe these challenges which includes: “teachers not allowing me participate”, and “even if the teacher ask me a question, I don’t answer correctly”, “because I don’t answer questions correctly my colleagues will laugh and I feel shy” (see table 5 below)

Table 5: Responses of respondents to the question “Do you have any challenges participating in lessons?”

Challenges faced in participating in lessons	Responses		Percentage Responses
	All Male	All Female	
Teacher don’t ask me to participate	Yes	Yes	95.2%
I don’t answer questions correctly even if she does	Yes	Yes	95.2%
I feel shy because colleagues laugh at me	Yes	Yes	95.2%

Source: Field Data 2024

Results show students’ responses of to the question “Do you have any challenges any participating in lessons”? This shows that all the male with frequency 10, all female with frequency 10 responded “Yes” which represents 95.2 % of respondents. The result suggests that all of the marginalized students from low-income background are faced with challenges in participating in lessons.

Responses of respondents to the question “Do you have any challenges completing homework or exam?”

The students also responded yes, they face challenges completing homework or exam. They went further to describe these challenges which includes: “I don’t have complete note, and I don’t have electricity at home to complete homework and to study. ” (see table 6 below)

Table 6: Responses of respondents to the question “Do you have any challenges completing homework or exam?”

Challenges faced completing homework or exam	Responses		Percentage Responses
	All Male	All Female	
I don’t have complete note	Yes	Yes	95.2%
I don’t have electricity at home to complete homework and to study	Yes	Yes	95.2%

Source: Field Data 2024

Results furthermore show students’ responses of to the question “Do you have any challenges completing homework or exam? This shows that all the male with frequency 10, all the female with frequency 10 responded “Yes” which represents 95.2 % of respondents. The result suggests that all of the marginalized students from low-income background are faced with challenges in completing homework or exam.

Responses of respondents to the question “is there any activity at school that makes you feel left out?”

Here, the students responded yes, there are activities at school that makes them feel left out. They proceeded to describe these challenges which includes: “extra classes, and school picnic which they should pay to attend. ” (see table 7 below)

Table 7: Responses of respondents to the question “is there any activity at school that makes you feel left out?”

is there any activity at school that makes you feel left out?	Responses		Percentage Responses
	All Male	All Female	
Extra classes	Yes	Yes	95.2%
School picnic	Yes	Yes	95.2%

Source: Field Data 2024

Results again show students’ responses of to the question “is there any activity at school that makes you feel left out?” This shows that all the male with frequency 10, all the female with frequency 10 responded “Yes” which represents 95.2 % of respondents. The result proposes that all of the marginalized students from low-income background have activities at school that makes you feel left out such as extra lessons school picnic they should pay for

Responses of respondents to the question “Do you ever feel unsafe in school

The students responded yes, they do feel unsafe in school. They went further to describe these challenges/barriers which includes: “I feel unsafe in school due to practices like the use of cane, and School Related Sexual Based Violence (SRGBV). (See table 8 below):

Table 8: Responses of respondents to the question “Do you feel unsafe in school?”

Challenges faced due to unsafe practices in school	Responses		Percentage Responses
	All Male	All Female	
Use of cane	Yes	Yes	95.2%

SRGBV	Yes	Yes	95.2%
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Source: Field Data 2024

Results show students' responses of to the question "Do you feel unsafe in school"? This shows that all the male with frequency 10, all female with frequency 10 responded "Yes" which represents 95.2 % of respondents. The result suggests that all of the marginalized students from low-income background feels unsafe in school

Discussion:

As shown in Table 2 more respondents seem to belong to the age category 13 years of age, with a total of 20 respondents making up 95.2% which demonstrate that marginalized students from low-income families are significant in the inclusion education. The results in Table 3 show the gender of the respondents. In the gender category, it is shown that there is a frequency of 10 which represents 47.6% of male respondents, and a frequency of 11 which represents 54% female respondents. This indicates that more female participants are taking part in the study. The researcher included both male and female participants to elicit the opinions of both men and women on the occurrence under study. The result in Table 4 suggests that all of the marginalized students from low-income background are faced with challenges attending school and attending lessons. The result in Table 5 furthermore submits that all of the marginalized students from low-income background are faced with challenges in participating in lessons. The result in Table 6 moreover proposes that all of the marginalized students from low-income background are faced with challenges in completing homework or exam. The result Table 7 offers that all of the marginalized students from low-income background have activities at school that makes you feel

left out such as extra lessons school picnic they should pay for. The result in Table 8 advocates that all of the marginalized students from low-income background feels unsafe in school.

Conclusion

The objective of this study is to explore the challenges faced by disadvantaged students, specifically marginalized learners from low-income families within the framework of the national policy on radical inclusion in schools.

It can be concluded that marginalized students from low-income families are significant in the inclusion education.

However, result indicate that more female participants are taking part in the study although the margin shows no significant different.

The researcher included both male and female participants to elicit the opinions of both men and women on the phenomenon under study.

Findings also implied that all of the marginalized students from low-income background are faced with challenges attending school and attending lessons.

Result furthermore submits that all of the marginalized students from low-income background are faced with challenges in participating in lessons.

Moreover, result concludes that all of the marginalized students from low-income background are faced with challenges in completing homework or exam.

Again, result offers that all of the marginalized students from low-income background have activities at school that makes you feel left out such as extra lessons school picnic they should pay for.

The result more also supports that all of the marginalized students from low-income background feels unsafe in school.

Recommendations

Established on the result, it is recommended that:

The Sierra Leone National Policy on Radical Inclusion presented by the government be spread in schools to raise consciousness among education stakeholders and students. If the radical inclusion policy is not understood as being in everyone's interest, it will be hard to realize meaningful results from the implementation of the policy.

It is recommended that the drivers of the radical inclusion policy to train teachers, students, other school staff, parents, the community, and other service providers to crate the consciousness to accept, implement, and practice inclusion education

School authorities are to make the school safe by declaring, and ensuring zero tolerance to the use of cane, and SRGBV.

Government, and other service providers should ensure that school buses are available in the rural communities to drive students to and from school

Also, school administrators must boost female students to attend school.

Teachers should increase students' participation by including all marginalized students, and decrease exclusion

The government should also ensure that girls have the opportunity to receive free primary and secondary education.

Government should also improve rural electrification, and electricity supply in the cities so that electricity is available in every home to enable student to study at home and complete homework

Education stakeholders must announce, and enforce total ban on extra lessons, school picnic, and other activities that could be possible barriers to impede students learning.

Disclaimer (Artificial intelligence)

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Author(s) hereby declare that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc.) and text-to-image generators have been used during the writing or editing of this manuscript.

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Details of the AI usage are given below:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

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