



Inclusive education, Senegal: Phase 2 research summary

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Introduction

The Social Framework Act adopted by the government of Senegal in 2010, provides for the promotion and protection of the rights of children and adolescents with disabilities to free education in mainstream schools close to their homes. The government also aspires to make schools fit for children in all their individuality and has strived to achieve quality and equity in access to education without discrimination on the grounds of sex, social origin, or disability.

Despite these efforts, studies from Senegal show that children with disabilities are twice as likely to have never attended school, and children accessing education have poorer attainment and learning outcomes than children without disabilities.

Sightsavers, in partnership with Senegal's Ministry of Education, has implemented an inclusive education project, which focused on strengthening the education system and developing school-level inclusion practices. Project activities addressed barriers to educational participation and included identifying children with disabilities who were missing out on or excluded from education, to training schoolteachers, motivating parents, educating, and mobilising the local communities and physically adapting schools' infrastructures. The study presented here was an integral part of the project and was conducted in two phases. The first phase took place in 2017-2018¹ and the second was conducted in 2022. The second phase explored how project participants experienced the project and what challenges in the delivery of inclusive education could and could not be addressed.

¹ Inclusive education, Senegal. Phase 1 Findings Report. March 2020.

https://research.sightsavers.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Inclusive-education-in-Senegal_Phase-1-study-report.pdf

Objective:

This study aimed to explore the experiences of inclusive education by boys and girls with disabilities, their carers, and teachers in the inclusive education schools supported by Sightsavers in Senegal. More specifically, this study aimed to understand:

1. The experiences of children with disabilities in accessing and remaining in education, including during the COVID-19 pandemic
2. The experiences of parents/carers of children with disabilities and other community members on inclusive education practices; and education of children with disabilities in local schools
3. The perspectives of teachers and education stakeholders on inclusive education practices; and explore how gender affects experiences and learning of boys and girls with disabilities.

Why is this study important?

This research study contributes to the existing knowledge base on disability inclusion in education in Senegal and similar contexts. Additionally, it provides vital evidence on how leveraging knowledge from project participants and beneficiaries can develop and refine contextually appropriate and gender-responsive approaches in education and, thus, contribute to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.

How did we conduct the research?

The research used community-based participatory (CBPR) methodology and was conducted in five schools in Senegal spread over three regions: in Dakar: Pikine 23 B school in Guédiawaye, Malick Diop in Thiaroye, and Sherif 1 in Rufisque; in Kaolack region: Alioune Cissé school and in Louga region: regional school 1. An ethical approval was obtained from the Senegal National Ethics Committee.

We trained five teachers and five members of the community as community-based researchers to facilitate parents', teachers', and students' focus groups. The community-based researchers were either members of the parent association or other interested members of the community, all living near the inclusive schools. Community-based researchers conducted three focus group discussions in each school, with Sightsavers staff supporting the process. All data collected was analysed using the thematic analysis approach. Community-based researchers and stakeholders also validated study results and drew recommendations.

What is community-based participatory research (CBPR)?

CBPR involves members of the community in planning, gathering evidence, analysing it, and sharing what is discovered. The overall aim of CBPR is to increase knowledge and understanding of the situation being studied, to construct meaning together and to integrate this with interventions and policy change to improve the quality of life for the community.

What do the research findings tell us?

Summary

Eight key themes were identified in the focus group discussions with students with visual impairments, their teachers, and their parents.

Enrolment of children with disabilities

- Both students with visual impairments and their teachers argued that access to education for children with disabilities improved in project areas during the course of the project. But the children who primarily benefited from this initiative were those with visual impairments, as project schools pro-actively worked to identify and support this group of children. The project did not manage to address barriers to education for children with other disabilities, such as severe mobility impairments, hearing impairments and learning impairments.

Adaptations of school environment to the needs of children with disabilities

- Students with visual impairments pointed out that physical accessibility of facilities in and around the project schools, especially in the classrooms and toilets, has improved. Students who received mobility orientation for key school locations said that the accessibility adjustments and training boosted their confidence and independence. However, the number of toilets available in the schools was thought to be insufficient for the increased number of children with disabilities. Toilets designated for children with disabilities were lacking.
- Furthermore, while the number of children enrolled in the project schools has grown during the course of the project, the classroom space has not substantially increased; the small classroom size has posed mobility challenges for children with visual impairments, who had to rely on other children when moving within the school. Teachers also pointed out that the increased number of children with disabilities in project schools was not matched by the available space, resulting in more crowded classrooms and other school areas.
- Students in all five schools argued that having eating facilities in schools facilitated their learning because children no longer had to go home for lunch and return to school. This was especially important for children with visual impairments, particularly girls, as it took them longer to go home during the school break than other children. Teachers from the schools which did not provide regular lunches, as limited lunch was sold only at small stalls within the school facility, noted that children with disabilities often struggled to find food around the school. As a result, many did not attend school regularly, which subsequently led to their drop out.
- Provision of vision screening and assistive devices facilitated the enrolment of children who were previously out of school.

Commute to schools

- Students from the schools that provided motorbikes and other vehicles for the school commute pointed out that this initiative cut down their travel time and improved their school attendance and retention. However, road safety remained a major challenge. Drivers in many areas could not identify children who had visual impairments and expected them to get out of their way, like other children do. This was highlighted as one of the major risks for children who walked to schools. A need for visible warning signs like white canes or visibility vests was raised by all students, parents, and teachers. However, during a validation event, stakeholders shared that despite road safety remaining a major challenge that needs immediate addressal, use of white canes may not be contextually appropriate for Senegal as the children using them may be mistaken for street beggars. Parents also expressed concerns about the safety of their children while commuting to school as children with visual impairments did not know which direction the vehicle was coming from, and some had been hit in road traffic accidents.
- Students who lived far away from the school and had to take a public bus did not have very positive experiences, as they had to leave home very early and return home late in the evening. Some children did not have money to pay the bus fare; so, they had to walk to school and often arrived late. All children who used public buses highlighted a need for a school bus and argued that this would improve their school attendance and learning.

Adaptations to teaching and learning process and education materials in schools

- Project schools have reported improvements in clarity and understanding of how to adjust lessons to the needs of children with visual impairments. Teachers adapted teaching speed and simplified explanation methods.
- Participation of children with visual impairments in lessons has also improved in some schools, where teachers adapted inclusive teaching methods and improved ways of including children with visual impairments in classroom discussions with their peers and teachers. Some of these techniques included snapping or clicking fingers to encourage visually impaired children to raise hands to answer teachers' questions. In some schools, teachers allocated a first and second line of desks for children with visual impairments so they could hear and hear lessons better. However, not all project schools managed to adapt these kinds of techniques.
- Also, children with visual impairments noted challenges in understanding lessons based on numerical and pictorial information, as teachers and their non-disabled peers did not explain what they were writing on the board. As a result, while learning outcomes for subjects like history and geography have reportedly improved, mathematics, and especially geometry, remained a challenge for children with visual impairments, largely due to the drawing techniques used during the lessons and the lack of accessible tools to support the lesson. Children interviewed recommended verbalising every step of the lesson, especially when solving maths problems or explaining science diagrams on the board.
- Access to braille books has reportedly improved in classrooms leading to enhanced learning of children with visual impairments. However, due to the insufficient number of braille materials available in schools, students with visual impairments could not take their books home.

- Teachers in some schools also said that French and mathematics textbooks they received from the government were not in braille, leaving visually impaired children without textbooks, which affected their learning.
- Time allocated for tests and examinations was the same for all children; this time was insufficient for children with visual impairments as braille reading and writing required longer. Such unequal availability of time has led to children with visual impairments achieving lower marks in the assessments, which undermined their academic progress.

Learning at home

- Children with visual impairments, whose family members knew braille and who supported them at home, reported improved academic progress and better learning outcomes, while those who did not receive support at home said that they were struggling in school too. Parents interviewed expressed a need to learn braille to be able to help their children with home learning and requested that the project ensured the necessary resources were available.
- The lack of access to braille books at home was reported to be a major barrier to home learning. Due to being unable to take braille books home, children with visual impairments reported to be disadvantaged in their homework assignments compared to children without disabilities.
- Study participants noted that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry of Education developed materials and strategies for home learning called, 'Learning at Home'. The materials included videos and audio lessons broadcasted through television and radio channels, with a manual in braille, and lessons and homework shared via WhatsApp. Additionally, Sightsavers, in collaboration with the Directorate of Elementary Education, organised distance learning courses for visually impaired students, commonly called, teleworking.
- Study participants further explained that learning for students with visual impairments during the school closure was supported in several ways, including in-person tutors and the use of digital technology.
- Schools that engaged with mothers in parent-teacher meetings reported improved home learning support and increased confidence of their children compared to those that engaged fathers only.

Self-esteem and relationships with others

- Engagement of children with visual impairments in sports activities, which has significantly improved during the project, contributed to positive attitudes and respect from other children, and increased children's self-confidence and self-esteem.
- Children with visual impairments reported that they experienced better relationships with others in their community and felt more confident to learn from their non-disabled peers. The project has carried out a lot of community outreach activities to promote and support inclusive education. This has led to a better understanding of the needs of children with disabilities and, as a result, children with disabilities were receiving more support from the community.
- Parents of children with disabilities said that their relationships with teachers and other parents have improved throughout the project, which contributed to a better understanding of their children's learning needs. For example, the project provided parents with telephone credit cards to allow for regular communication and catch ups.

Teachers' training and competencies

- Teachers felt that one or two training sessions in inclusive education was not sufficient to fully develop the skills and competencies needed to support children with visual impairments in mainstream schools. They identified a need for continuous training and mentoring, with a focus on a diverse range of disabilities.
- Teachers who received training felt that all teachers and support staff in their schools should receive disability training to ensure more inclusive and accessible teaching and learning environments.
- Teachers also pointed out that they did not follow up on children who dropped out of school because they did not know how to and did not have time to do it. Stakeholders and policy makers during the validation workshop highlighted the need for a study on reasons for drop out so they can design future interventions to address the issue.
- Teachers also identified a need for a platform to share successes, challenges, and learnings with other inclusive schools.

Specific issues on girls' education

- Both teachers and parents interviewed noted that the project made specific efforts to identify and enrol girls with visual impairments and ensure their regular attendance and academic progress.
- Adaptations in the school environment were reported to be particularly valuable for girls, as they started feeling more confident and independent while using toilets, and the school playground.
- Provision of sanitary supplies helped to ensure regular attendance and retention of girls with disabilities in schools. However, the quantity of sanitary supplies was not sufficient to meet the demand.
- School commute was particularly difficult for girls with visual impairments because of safety concerns due to teasing and mocking by people on the route to school. They appreciated the provision of free school lunches, which meant that they did not have to go back home during the lunch break.
- In some schools, girls' relationships with their non-disabled peers continued to be difficult, as they faced mockery from other children, especially boys. Intervention from parents and headteachers reportedly helped in reducing abusive behaviour and promoted more positive attitudes among the peers.
- Teachers who received gender training from the project reported to better understand the needs of girls and deployed more gender-sensitive strategies to facilitate girls' participation and learning. Knowledge on safeguarding and gender-based violence was also perceived to be valuable by the teachers.
- Introducing inclusive school clubs in project schools provided space for discussions about gender issues and helped to make Education Action Plans more gender sensitive.
- Girls with visual impairments reported that the support they received at home from their parents and siblings improved throughout the project. However, they were more likely to report that they had less access to home learning materials than boys with visual impairments.

Approaches/interventions that worked well in the project and facilitated inclusion and learning

- Accessibility adjustments in the classrooms and other school areas.
- Building more toilet facilities.
- Provision of transport or transport allowances.
- Provision of school lunches, which allowed children to stay in school during the lunch break.
- Training of teachers and adaptations of lessons and teaching methods, including teaching speed, simplified explanation methods and using voice and sounds to attract children's attention and encourage them to answer questions.
- Adaptation of sports and outdoor activities to allow participation of visually impaired children.
- Provision of assistive devices and accessible education materials, including braille books and tactile materials.
- Mobility orientation for key school locations at the start of each academic year.
- Pairing children with visual impairments with their non-disabled peers for support in the classroom.
- Allocation of the first few rows of desks to children with visual impairments and their supporting peers.
- Deployment of more gender-sensitive strategies, including encouraging girls with disabilities to answer questions, inviting them to the front to share their learning and praising them for sharing their views.
- Training for parents and siblings in disability and specific skills, such as reading braille.
- Provision of online resources to encourage parents' communication with the teachers and WhatsApp groups for learning during the COVID-19 school closure.
- Social clubs for children with disabilities; some specifically for girls.
- Provision of sanitary kits for girls with disabilities.

Areas that require further improvements

- Classroom sizes and other school premises have not been adjusted to accommodate the increased number of students with disabilities, resulting in large classes, overcrowded facilities, and noise during the lessons.
- Similarly, the number of toilets and WASH facilities are not sufficient for the increased number of students. Most project schools do not have toilets designated for children with disabilities. The number of sanitary kits provided to girls with disabilities is not sufficient to meet the demand.
- The project made provisions primarily for children with visual impairments. Barriers to education of children with other disabilities, such as severe mobility impairments, hearing impairments and learning impairments, remain, resulting in the inability of most of these children to attend schools.
- Not all schools made provisions for transport for children with disabilities. In some schools, allowances available are not sufficient to cover transport costs. The timing of public buses is not adequate, with only a few buses available during the day, resulting in a long commute for children who live far from the school.

- Road safety remains a critical concern for children with visual impairments who walk to school. Specific concerns were raised regarding girls with visual impairments, who are often subject to teasing and abuse on their way to school.
- The number of training sessions for teachers was not sufficient to fully develop the skills and competencies needed to support children with visual impairments in mainstream schools. Teachers also requested i) training on a diverse range of impairments and educational needs; ii) training for all staff in inclusive schools, including management and school administration; and iii) a platform for mentoring and exchange of experiences and learnings with other teachers and schools.
- Teachers and schools lack the mechanisms and resources for follow-up on children who systematically miss classes or drop out of school.
- Teaching lessons based on numerical and pictorial information as well as mathematics, geometry, geography, and sciences remain a major challenge for both teachers and students. The number of accessible teaching materials and equipment (such as geometry instruments) for these subjects is not sufficient and the teachers are lacking the necessary skills to teach these topics. As a result, children with visual impairments are discouraged to take these subject options, which undermines their future career prospects.
- The number of textbooks available in braille remains limited and children with visual impairments cannot take these textbooks for home learning, which undermines their academic performance compared to children without disabilities. Geographical maps and new French and mathematics textbooks procured by the government are not available in braille.
- Time allocated for tests and examinations has not been adapted to accommodate the needs of children using braille. Insufficient time undermines academic performance and test results of children with visual impairments compared to other children.
- Not all parents/carers of children with visual impairments had an opportunity to be trained in braille, which limits the support they can provide to their children at home.

Learn more about

The report will be available in accessible formats at a later stage. The full report will be available in Sightsavers' Research Centre at:

<https://research.sightsavers.org/project/inclusive-primary-education-in-west-africa-through-a-gender-lens/>

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