

Making inclusion count: Findings from the feasibility study testing tools for collecting disability data in schools in Sierra Leone

Research Summary

October 2023



Teacher training in Bombali district

Introduction

This phase of the feasibility study was conducted in collaboration with the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE), the National Commission of Persons with Disability (NCPD) and the Sierra Leone Union on Disability Issues (SLUDI). The objective of this study was to assess the feasibility of teachers using the Washington Group Short Set Questions (WG-SS) and the Child Functioning Module Teacher Version (CFM-TV) to generate reliable information on children with functional difficulties in schools in Sierra Leone. The study was conducted in Bombali and Karene districts in the northern and northwestern regions respectively of Sierra Leone, where Sightsavers is currently implementing three projects in education, eye health and citizens participation in political processes.

Components of the study included the initial testing of tools to understand applicability, a co-creation workshop with stakeholders to design and plan activities, teacher training and school-based data collection. Results and learning will contribute to disability data management in the education sector.

This study was funded by Sightsavers.

Why is this issue important?

Accurate data on the functional difficulties of children in schools is crucial to enable the MBSSE and other stakeholders in the education sector to formulate sound policies and programmes to address disability issues in schools. Currently, obtaining this data is a challenge. This study tests the feasibility and acceptability of class teachers using either the WG-SS and CFM-TV to assess functional difficulties of children in their classrooms as a way to generate this vital information.

What do the research findings tell us?

Key messages

1. Class teachers know the children in their classrooms more than other teachers in the school. When supported with the right knowledge and skills, they can use the WG-SS or the CFM-TV to generate data on functional difficulties on children in their classrooms.
2. Both the WG-SS and CFM-TV were generally acceptable to teachers, and the use of either tool by teachers was feasible in the context of a research study. However, some concerns were raised about the length and complexity of the CFM-TV.
3. The CFM-TV generates more information than the WG-SS, covering difficulties across a broader range of developmentally important domains. experienced difficulties in interpreting questions in some domains (cognitive, behavioural, and psychosocial) and the response options for the anxiety and depression domains.

Summary

Background

Millions of children around the world are living with functional difficulties, most of whom are in low- and middle-income countries (LMIC). Most of these children have limited access to social services including basic education. The lack of standardised approaches to collecting and interpreting disability data within educational systems makes it difficult for governments to plan and monitor progress towards achieving the global intention of Education for All. Measuring disability continues to pose challenges in LMICs, where childhood functional challenges remain undetected and unaccounted due to limited access to paediatric diagnostic services. Disability-related stigma poses further difficulties.

To address challenges with measurement of disability, the Washington Group on Disability Statistics (WGDS) advocates for the use of tools designed to collect internationally comparable data on functional difficulties in census and large-scale population data. Use of WG-SS is now widespread, but due to its brevity it misses many developmental and behavioural difficulties experienced by children. The Child Functioning Module (CFM), developed jointly by UNICEF and WGDS, responds to the need for a tool which identifies difficulties most frequently experienced by children, but must be administered to a parent or caregiver. In response to the need for a tool to identify children with functional difficulties within schools, UNICEF/WGDS have developed the CFM-TV, which now requires validation. In this study, we tested the use of two tools, the WG-SS and CFM-TV, by teachers to collect data on children with functional difficulties in schools in Sierra Leone.

Childhood disability is a significant issue in Sierra Leone, where disability-related stigma remains widespread, and children with disabilities often have limited access to social services, including education. The 2017 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) found that 23.1% of children aged 5-17 years had at least one functional difficulty. The government has taken several measures to increase school attendance for children with disability. Among others, MBSSE recently launched the National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools to increase attendance for marginalized children, including those with disability and to monitor their retention and progression in school.

The objective of this study was to assess the feasibility of teachers using the WG-SS and the CFM-TV question sets in school settings, to generate reliable data on children with functional difficulties, for use in the Education Management Information System (EMIS) database. In this research, we set out to provide answers to the following research questions.

1. What is the acceptability and feasibility of using either the WG-SS or the CFM-TV by teachers in schools in Sierra Leone?
2. What does the completion of the WG-SS or the CFM-TV by teachers tell us about prevalence, type, and severity of disability amongst children attending schools?
3. How useful is the data collected in schools for teachers and local education stakeholders with regards to a) children's educational support and b) education sector planning and budgeting?

Methods

The study was conducted in Bombali and Karene districts, in the northern and north-western regions of Sierra Leone respectively. The study used a multi-stage, mixed methods design, with each stage informing and shaping the subsequent stages. Stages included initial testing of tools to understand their applicability, co-creation workshop with stakeholders to plan data collection, teacher training and school-based data collection.

Findings

In the initial testing of tools, 90 children (51 boys and 39 girls) were assessed using WG-SS and 180 (85 boys and 95 girls) were assessed by CFM-TV. The prevalence of functional difficulty produced by the tools was 2% for WG-SS and 15% for CFM-TV. Teachers found the WG-SS questionnaire, with only six questions, easier to use, while the CFM-TV, with 18 questions, was more difficult to use.

School-based data collection was done in eight study schools. After training, 30 class teachers in four schools completed the WG-SS for each child on their register, while 35 class teachers in the other four completed the CFM-TV. Overall, 3,306 children were assessed, 1,830 using the CFM-TV (55.4%), and 1,476 WG-SS (44.6%). The prevalence of functional difficulty produced by WG-SS was 1.8% while that the CFM-TV was 14.7%. Data from both tools identified very slightly more girls than boys with functional difficulties. For both tools, prevalence of functional difficulty increased with child age. Domains where functional difficulty was most frequently identified by WG-SS were vision, mobility, cognitive and hearing (0.5% each), while for CFM-TV, these were anxiety (5.3%), depression (4.0%), remembering (2.9%), accepting change (2.8%) and learning (2.6%).

Limitations and suggestions for future research

This study was conducted in two districts and covered children in only eight schools. All study schools have received support (including training teachers in disability and inclusive education) from Sightsavers. Teachers in study schools may have initially had a higher awareness of disability and data collection compared to teachers in non-Sightsavers supported schools.

Implications of the study

This study established the acceptability and feasible of class teachers using the WG-SS and CFM-TV to collect data on functional difficulties of children in their classrooms. The study further established that the CFM-TV collects more detailed data on a wider range of functional difficulties. The CFM-TV generated prevalence figures more closely aligned to those generated by the MICS survey in 2017.

Learn more about

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Read the full report here.
