



# Inclusive Education Cameroon: Peer-led Research: Phase 1

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# Acronyms

CBPR	Community-based participatory research
DPO	Disabled people's organisation
FGDs	Focus group discussions
LMICS	Low and middle income countries
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
WHO	The World Health Organization

# Executive summary

## Background

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The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimated that in 2011, 6.4 per cent of children aged 0 to 14 years in the Africa region had moderate or severe disabilities. Evidence from low and middle income countries (LMICs), including West African countries, show that many children with disabilities are often subject to discrimination at various levels. Data collected by Plan International in four West African Countries in 2013 highlighted negative social attitudes towards disability rooted from cultural and religious beliefs; practical obstacles in accessing health and education institutions, the lack of infrastructure and deficiencies in teacher training. As a result, disability has an impact on school enrolment, the quality of education and graduation. Although disability affects education of both boys and girls with disabilities, there are gender related differences in education experiences and outcomes.

This research conducted by Sightsavers with the financial support from Irish Aid contributes to the existing knowledge base on disability and education; it aims to provide evidence and support the development of contextually appropriate and gender-responsive approaches to supporting education for girls and boys with disabilities in Cameroon.

The study was nested within the Inclusive Education project supported by Sightsavers through a grant from Irish Aid in selected areas of Cameroon. This phase of the study was conducted at the beginning of the project, where project stakeholders were asked to describe their current situation and the opportunities they saw for improvements in education of children with disabilities. A specific aspect of this research was gender differences in the experiences of children with disabilities.

## Methods

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Our primary research question was:

*How do children with disabilities, teachers and parents/carers experience or perceive disability in six schools in Cameroon; and what are the implications of these perceptions for the school participation and learning of boys and girls with disabilities?*

The study drew on the community-based participatory research (CBPR) methodology, which involve respectful collaboration with the community to capture lived experiences of community members around a particular issue. This methodology implies shared decision-making and ownership of findings, where members of the community are involved in planning, gathering evidence, analysing and sharing what is discovered. As well as asking specific research questions, the design of this kind of research seeks to break down social injustice and helps everyone to rethink power structures and related issues. Approaching research this way, helps programmes to identify both enablers of and barriers to effective inclusive education as perceived by children with disabilities, their parents and teachers. It also helps men, women, boys and girls with disabilities to explore their potential through voice, agency and participation.

Focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews were used to collect data; data collection was facilitated by peer researchers (schoolteachers and community members) who were linked to the project areas. A community researcher is someone who lives in the local area where the research is taking place, cares about the research topic and is not a

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professional researcher. Peer researchers work alongside a professional researcher, interviewing community members and observing professional situations, enriching the research with their unique understanding of the context.

The interviews and FGDs were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The verbal and written consent of each participant was obtained before the interview/FGD. An ethical clearance was obtained from the National Ethics Committee for Research and Human Health, Cameroon.

Sightsavers trained six teachers and six members of the community, who facilitated a total of 15 teacher, pupil and parent focus groups in three schools. Originally there were six schools in the research. However, due to a difficult political situation in Southwest Cameroon, only three schools in the Far North and the Central region were open at the time of phase 1 of the study. Where possible, gender balance between the respondents was sought. Two schools were day schools and one offered boarding.

Peer researchers identified the key themes that arose from the data and led the analysis with the support from the lead researcher. The gender lens was considered during the analysis; there were no specific questions about gender for this first phase to allow for any gender evidence to emerge naturally without steering. Specific gender questions will be posed for phases 2 and 3 of the study. A schedule of interview questions is available on request.

## Findings

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### Children, parents and teachers value inclusive education

- There was consistent evidence that the pupils in this study wanted to learn. They regularly expressed that they liked listening to the teacher, and they voiced confidence and a desire to succeed.
- Pupils often spoke in a way that indicated a positive outlook on their disability but expressed more often by girls. Boys expressed a lack of knowledge about what had caused their impairment, when asked. Girls seemed surer, with varying accuracy.
- Most children, particularly girls, said that they received help from family members at home and from their teachers and classmates at schools. A few pupils specifically expressed feeling valued at school by staff and pupils. In terms of gender, girls tended to express more than boys that they could tell their teachers when they were struggling in the classroom and would need help. Girls also expressed that they received help from their friends in school. Boys seemed to be more reluctant to ask for help and were more vulnerable to being left out of school activities. However, these experiences were not universal across the schools.
- Male teachers and male pupils raised the subject of morning being a better time to learn when talking about classroom experiences.
- Girls with visual impairments talked more about wanting low vision devices and white canes than boys with visual impairments when asked what could make their school experience better. In a few cases girls reported that they had to give their assistive device to a boy or that their assistive device had been stolen.

- There was significant buy-in of inclusive education from teachers. In addition, since more children with disabilities had come to the schools, many teachers expressed a new understanding that a child's disability can create expert skills in other areas and surpasses teachers' and their own expectations. Several parents noted the commitment of staff at the school and their availability to children with disabilities. Teachers understood that care from the school shifts wider attitudes in the community. Female teachers said they were working to motivate pupils by going slowly, giving rewards (sweets) for good effort, and appealing to senses like touch and taste. Female teachers also shared examples of situations which helped female students gain confidence, receive encouragement and feel valued at school.

### **Integration and social connection are a key benefit of inclusive education, for children and parents.**

- Pupils described interactions with other children and society as a primary motivation to go to school. Parents said that their children had developed greater social connections since being at the school. They were convinced that school was helping children with disabilities to socialize and develop in ways similar to other children, to become more autonomous and to improve their well-being. However, some students reported violence and rough physical behaviour from other schoolmates, outside the school and at home.
- Parents acknowledged their own need for integration within the community, as well as that of their child. There were examples across study participants of community members showing support for school attendance and that this was important to them. Girls talked about sympathetic views in the community more than boys. Mothers more than fathers reported that they experienced sympathy and moral support in the community.

### **Many children with disabilities experience physical or emotional distress at school.**

- A high number of boys and girls with disabilities reported that they experienced pain related to their impairment and did not know how to relieve it.
- There were fears of violence and abuse. Both boys and girls with disabilities expressed fears and stories of violence and abuse from their schoolmates. They were also the targets of unkindness and abuse, both physical and emotional, from other children outside the school. Boys tended to report rough physical behaviour. Girls were more likely to talk about emotional abuse and there were concerns about their safety in the dormitories.
- Emotional challenges were often great. There was an expression of emotional challenge in the lived experiences of children with disabilities, their parents and teachers in relation to disability-inclusive education. Some parents felt very discouraged, predominately female parents.

### **Teachers and parents need more support to ensure education is fully inclusive.**

- Some parents of children with disabilities did not have much knowledge of their child's condition. Some had negative beliefs about disability rooted from their religious beliefs. Many parents were eager to help their child to deal with their impairment but did not know what to do and felt hopeless. Most parents did not know braille or sign language and

were not able to communicate with their child or help them with their studies at home. Emotional difficulties with children were also expressed by both mothers and fathers, with difficulties **being more** frequently reported in relation to boys with disabilities.

- Teachers also noted experiencing difficulties with some students with disabilities, whose behaviour was thought to be disruptive. Some teachers also found it difficult to teach reading and writing braille. Teaching mathematics to students with visual impairments was also a challenge. Teachers did not have an opportunity to give extra classes to students with disabilities. Female teachers were more likely to talk about the lack of time and specific difficulties in teaching students with visual impairments, while male teachers were more likely to talk about the lack of educational materials. Disruptive behaviour in the class was mentioned in relation to both boys and girls with disabilities, but the incidents seemed to be more frequent with boys.

### **The current barriers to fully inclusive education are physical, financial and political.**

- Several issues were identified within the school environment. The number of assistive devices and education materials was often insufficient. Many textbooks were not available in braille. Moving and finding things in inaccessible classrooms was difficult for some students.
- Poverty hindered progress. Some parents and particularly single mothers reported financial difficulties; they could not afford tuition fees or the costs of education materials and assistive devices. Some students travelled long distances and lack of school transportation was a big problem.
- The system sometimes worked against them. Teachers shared that inclusive structures set up by the government are not as they seem: the translation from policies on paper to practice was lacking.

Study participants made a number of suggestions for improving the education of children with disabilities and their experience of being at school:

#### **School-based interventions**

- Participants expressed a need for more information and training for parents on i) their child's impairment, related needs and how to support them; ii) braille and sign language.
- There was also an expressed need for regular communication between the parents and the school, including regular reports and phone and email contacts
- Teachers spoke about a need for more capacity building activities and support for classroom teachers, including i) specialist knowledge of disability; ii) regular visits from itinerant teachers; iii) continuing professional development including gender; iv) exchange of experiences; and v) specific guidance for teachers on how to build children's confidence and self-esteem, as well as guidance on how to engage and motivate children who are reluctant to participate in school activities
- Teachers also spoke about more time for preparing and integrating children with disabilities into classrooms

## Community-based partnerships

- There was no expressed need for more awareness training and community sensitisation to address stigma and social exclusion – including the additional vulnerability of girls
- Participants also highlighted a need for better collaboration with other community organisations to provide physical and emotional support for parents

## Policy and advocacy

- Teachers highlighted a need to improve working conditions and salaries to enhance teachers' motivation
- Schools wanted more basic and specialist educational resources and a better alignment between the resources procured and the needs of the school
- Participants further expressed a need of improved classroom environments and school infrastructure, including fewer students per class, group-based activities for learners, safer play areas and study rooms, availability of medicines in schools and changing facilities for students with disabilities
- Parents spoke about a need for financial assistance for parents to cover school fees and costs of educational materials
- They also wanted improved school transportation
- Participants also called for advocacy with the government for better educational materials and medical assessments

## Conclusion

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The findings from this community-based participatory research in Cameroon show that the factors that influence the experiences of children with disabilities at school, are multiple and extend far beyond the classroom. The findings suggest both challenges and opportunities for the Sightsavers supported school-based inclusive education project. We structured the implications for the project along three broad areas: i) school-based interventions, ii) community-based Disabled People's Organisation (DPO) partnerships, and iii) policy and advocacy opportunities.

This research also confirms that gender influences the experiences of children with disabilities at school, as well as at home and in the community. But these influences do not necessarily disadvantage one group of children over the other. Boys and girls with disabilities may experience their impairments and functional difficulties differently; they may have different needs and may be vulnerable in different ways. The findings of the study once again reiterate the importance of heterogeneity and diversity when addressing the needs of children and adults with disabilities. Future research projects should aim to better understand how gender influences all aspects of education for children with disabilities, as well as their teachers and caregivers. There is also a need to further explore gender aspects of disability-related violence and discrimination as well as issues related to financial and food insecurity.

By focusing our efforts on the themes outlined in this study, we have the opportunity to demonstrate the far-reaching value of inclusive education and the potential it has to improve

the quality of life for children with disabilities and their families, in spite of the enduring challenges of the existing systems and their everyday life.

# Background

The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimated that in 2011, 6.4 per cent of children aged 0 to 14 years in the Africa region had moderate or severe disabilities (WHO, 2011). Evidence from low and middle income countries (LMICs), including West African countries, show that many children with disabilities are often subject to discrimination at various levels (Nanoo, 2011; UNICEF 2013). Negative attitudes towards disability are often rooted from cultural and religious beliefs. The type of disability, its severity and the sex of the child are also key factors influencing stigma and discrimination (United Nations 2011; UNICEF, 2013).

With regards to education, discrimination against children with disabilities has also been aggravated by practical obstacles, including limited accessibility of education infrastructure and deficiencies in teacher training. Disability has an impact on school enrolment, the quality of education and graduation. There are also reported gender differences in the education experiences of children with disabilities (Filmer 2008; Singal, 2008; Gottlieb et al 2009).

This research conducted by Sightsavers with the financial support from Irish Aid contributes to the existing knowledge base on disability and education. It aims to provide evidence and support the development of contextually appropriate and gender responsive approaches to supporting education for girls and boys with disabilities in Cameroon.

The study was nested within the Inclusive Education project supported by Sightsavers through a grant from Irish Aid in selected areas of Cameroon. This phase of the study was conducted at the beginning of the project, where project stakeholders were asked to describe their current situation and the opportunities they saw for improvements in the education of children with disabilities. A specific aspect of this research was gender differences in the experiences of children with disabilities. The study aimed to explore whether there were any specific gender related patterns either in the perception of the current situation or in the view on the opportunities for improvements.

# Methodology

The primary research question for this study was:

*How do children with disabilities, teachers and parents/carers experience or perceive disability in six schools in Cameroon; and what are the implications of these perceptions on the school participation and learning of boys and girls with disabilities?*

The study drew on the community-based participatory research (CBPR) methodology, which involves respectful collaboration with the community to capture lived experiences of community members around a particular issue. This methodology implies shared decision-making and ownership of findings, where members of the community are involved in planning, gathering evidence, analysing and sharing what is discovered. Men and women with disabilities are also actively encouraged to participate in becoming community researchers.

As well as asking specific study questions, the design of this kind of research seeks to break down social injustice and helps everyone to rethink power structures and related issues. Approaching research this way identifies both enablers and barriers to effective inclusive education as perceived by children with disabilities, their parents and teachers. It also helps men, women, boys and girls with disabilities to explore their potential through voice, agency and participation. The overall aim of CBPR is to increase knowledge and understanding of the situation being studied together, to construct meaning together and to integrate this with interventions and policy change to improve the quality of life for the school community.

The research is built on ethical principles that are recommended for CBPR by the Centre for Social Justice and Community Action and National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (CSJCA and NCCPE, 2012 cited in Greenwood et al., 2016). These are:

- Mutual respect– for example, being prepared to listen to the voices of others, accepting that there are diverse perspectives;
- Equality and inclusion– for example, seeking actively to include people whose voices are often ignored, challenging discriminatory attitudes and behaviours and ensuring information, venues and formats for meetings are accessible;
- Democratic participation– for example, acknowledging and discussing differences in the status and power of research participants, working towards sharing power more equally, using language everyone can understand;
- Active learning– for example, ensuring time to identify and reflect on learning and sharing responsibility for interpreting the research findings and their implications for practice;
- Making a difference– for example, debating what counts as positive change and building it in as a goal;
- Collective action– for example, agreed visions and goals that meet partners' differing needs for the research and for how to share knowledge and power more equitably;
- Personal integrity– for example, accurate and honest analysis and reporting of research, being open to challenge and change and prepared to work with conflict.

Focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews were used to collect data; data collection was facilitated by peer researchers (schoolteachers and community members)

who were linked to the project areas. A community researcher is someone who lives in the local area where the research is taking place, cares about the research topic and is not a professional researcher. They work alongside a professional researcher, interviewing community members and observing professional situations, enriching the research with their unique understanding of the context. The interviews and FGDs were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The verbal and written consent of each participant was obtained before the interview/FGD. An ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant Ethics Committee of Cameroon.

## Research process

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Sightsavers trained six teachers and six community members to facilitate focus group discussions with boys and girls with disabilities, their parents and teachers. Where focus group discussion groups were not possible, individual interviews were held. Where possible, gender balance among the respondents and peer researchers was sought. Originally there were six schools in the research. However, due to a difficult political situation in Southwest Cameroon, only three schools in the Far North and the Central region were open at the time of phase 1 of the study. Two schools were day schools and one offered boarding.

Peer researchers led the analysis of the collected data, where they identified the key themes which were arising from the data. The gender lens was considered during analysis; there were no specific questions about gender for this first phase to allow for any gender evidence to emerge naturally without steering. Specific gender questions were posed for phases 2 and 3 of the study. A schedule of interview questions is available on request.

# Research findings

A number of key themes were identified in the research findings. These have been separated into those related to 1) perceptions and experiences of the current environment; 2) considerations for improvement; and 3) observations of gender patterns. These are presented below.

## Perceptions and experiences of the current environment

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Participants described a range of experiences and perceptions related to their current relationship with the education system. Although a broad range of views were expressed, several key messages were clearly articulated that allowed us to summarise the findings into key themes. Discrete but interlinked themes included the value placed on inclusive education by children, parents, and teachers; the integration and social connection for children and parents; physical or emotional distress while at school; the barriers to fully inclusive education; and the support needed by teachers and parents to provide inclusive education.

### Children, parents and teachers value inclusive education

There was consistent evidence that the pupils in this study wanted to learn. They regularly expressed that they liked listening to the teacher, and they voiced confidence and a desire to succeed.

***'I want to study, and I know that if I graduate from school well, it will help me ahead'***  
(girl, visual impairment, School 1).

***'Whenever the teacher lecture, I love listening attentively and putting it into practice'***  
(boy, School 2).

***'My lessons help me be able to do something even if it is at home'*** (boy, visual impairment, School 1).

Pupils often spoke in a way that indicated a positive outlook on their disability, although expressed more by girls. Most children said that they received help from family members at home and from their teachers and classmates in school. A few pupils specifically expressed feeling valued at school, by staff and pupils. In terms of gender, girls tended to express more than boys that they could tell their teachers when they were struggling in the classroom and would need help.

***'If there is something that is not moving on well, I tell my teachers and they solve it'***  
(girl, visual impairment, School 1).

Girls in particular expressed that they received help from their friends in the school. Boys seemed to be more reluctant to ask for help and were more vulnerable to being left out of school activities. However, these experiences were not universal across the schools.

Male teachers and male pupils raised the subject of morning being a better time to learn when talking about classroom experiences.

***'Well, lessons are taught better in the morning when the weather is fresh, and the sun is not high. Especially for the visually impaired, because when places are hot, they have difficulties in seeing what is on the board'*** (Male teacher, School 2).

Girls with visual impairments talked more about wanting low vision devices and white canes than boys with visual impairments when asked what could make their school experience better. In a few cases girls reported that they had to give their assistive device to a boy or that their assistive device had been stolen. Boys expressed a lack of knowledge about what had caused their impairment, when asked, or sometimes misinformed.

***'What caused it is that I watched TV too much. Yes, I was so close to the screen. That's how it started and also when I started reading textbooks'*** (Male student, School 2).

There was significant buy-in of inclusive education from teachers. In addition, since more children with disabilities had come to the schools, many teachers expressed a new understanding that a child's disability can create expert skills in other areas and surpasses teachers' and their own expectations. Several parents noted the commitment of staff at the school and their availability to children with disabilities.

***'Since he is closely supported by the personnel, he can not only progress in learning, he can evolve'*** (Parent, School 1).

Teachers understood that care from the school shifts wider attitudes in the community. Female teachers said they were working to motivate pupils by going slowly, giving rewards (sweets) for good effort, and appealing to senses like touch and taste. Female teachers also shared examples of situations which helped female students gain confidence, receive encouragement and feel valued at school. Male teachers did not offer such examples.

***'A happy situation I want to share is that of pupil who has speech impairment. When schools resumed, she was even afraid to talk. She was afraid to read, to talk. Or lessons like speaking, she had difficulties in pronouncing words. But with encouragement and the work that we have done, I noticed that she reads already, she reads. She even had problems in reciting the alphabet. But now she does it very well. She can now read some words it's a joy for me'*** (Female teacher, School 2).

***'The way I see when I am in service, these children really want to work, they have the desire to work like others. When they hear the voice of the teacher saying do this, do that, they desire to do it.'*** (female teacher, School 1)

Parents also expressed being able to see changes happening as a result of their child being in school.

***'I am very happy because my child, I can already see a little change on him. When he gets back home during holidays as he loves to, he always wants to learn. His books and I don't know what to say, he even talks already, and he did not use to talk. He speaks well and he loves learning. Everything that is done in school there he always wants to teach his younger brothers'*** (Parent, School 3).

## **Integration and social connection are a key benefit of inclusive education, for children and parents.**

Pupils described integration with other children and society as a primary motivation to go to school. Parents said that their children had developed greater social connections since being at the school. They were convinced that school was helping children with disabilities to socialise and develop in ways similar to other children, to become more autonomous and to improve their well-being.

***'What I love when I am in school, is that I love being with my mates' (Boy, School 2).***

***'Before she was not integrated to sit with children but now, she can sit and write things as others do. She can play with others and makes the effort to write in her book. That is the main reason why her mother is encouraging me to take her to school' (Parent, School 1).***

***'The fact that the child goes to school it makes him socialise with his class mates who see and those who are blind and he is happy being in school, he learned Braille and he can really school like other children of his age and he is improving in class like all the other children of his age' (Female parent, School 3).***

Parents acknowledged their own need for integration within the community, as well as that of their child. There were examples across study participants of community members showing support for school attendance and that this was important to them. Girls talked about sympathetic views in the community more than boys. Mothers more than fathers reported that they experienced sympathy and moral support in the community.

***'Assistance is based on our attitude that we have with our neighbours. If as a parent you are isolated no one can realize your problem to help you but if you are associate to others surely, they can help you since they know your problem' (Parent, gender not specified, School 1)***

***'They see me the same way they see themselves and often walk with me (school friends)... if I want to look for water they accompany me, if I want to get in the car they accompany me' (girl, visual impairment, School 1).***

***"There is a difference because before you could not see her sitting with children but now, she can sit and discuss with other children. She is now having courage, she can write something in her book while playing with children" (Parent, School 2).***

## **Many children with disabilities experience physical or emotional distress at school.**

A high number of boys and girls with disabilities reported that they experienced pain related to their impairment and some expressed they did not know how to relieve it.

***Pupil: I have problems with my leg***

***[Peer Researcher: does it often disturb you in school?]***

***Pupil: Yes, it hurts inside.***

***[Peer Researcher: it still hurts when you are in class?]***

***Pupil: Yes***

***[Peer Researcher: Does the teacher often knows when it hurts?]***

***Pupil: No***

***[Peer Researcher: why don't you tell him when it hurts?]***

***Pupil: It's for nothing (Female student, School 2).***

***'The others (teacher and classmates) don't even know that my eyes are hurting.'*** (Male student, School 2).

***'I often fall when I jump the rope' (Female student, school 2).***

***'What I don't like is when I don't see, maybe if I fall in a hole the teachers are there to look, they don't tell me that there is a hole there'*** (Female student, School 3).

There were fears of violence and abuse. Both boys and girls with disabilities expressed fears and stories of violence and abuse from their schoolmates. They were also the targets of unkindness and abuse, both physical and emotional, from other children outside of school. Boys tended to report rough physical behaviour. Girls were more likely to talk about emotional abuse and there were concerns about their safety in the dormitories.

***"I don't like when they put spit on the head of people... I don't like when they take pencils and put on the ears of people... I don't like when they spit on people, I don't like when they carry dust and put on people, I don't like brutal games, I don't like fights...I don't like games with dangerous objects, I don't like playing with dangerous things"*** (Male student, School 3).

***"I don't like.... playing with boys... (because) I don't like when am being bitten."***  
(Female student, School 3)

***'When I say that he is my friend, he beats me here (not recorded where he points)***  
***[Peer Researcher: why does he beat you?]***

***Pupil: maybe because I tell him I don't want to play***

***[Peer Researcher: Why don't you want to play?]***

***Pupil: because I am occupied, because there is no ball and I don't want to play other games, maybe because I don't tell him my choice of games*** (Male student, School 2).

Emotional challenges were often great. There was an expression of emotional challenge in the lived experiences of children with disabilities, their parents and teachers in relation to disability-inclusive education. Some parents felt very discouraged, predominately female parents.

***'There is even sometimes in the community people take these children as fools so like children who have to be hidden in the depths of the village so it's a bit that. They demoralise us at all level'*** (Female parent, School 3).

When asked what made school difficult for them, two girls at the same school shared about having their canes taken away:

***"I had a white cane, but I was told to give it to a boy who is at the centre who had no cane"*** (girl, visual impairment, School 1).

***"I was given a white cane and it had a problem, but I gave it to be fixed and the person says it got missing"*** (girl, visual impairment, School 1).

## **Teachers and parents need more support to ensure education is fully inclusive.**

Some parents of children with disabilities did not have much knowledge of their child's condition. Some had negative beliefs about disability rooted from their religious beliefs. Many parents were eager to help their child to deal with their impairment but did not know what to do and felt hopeless. Most parents did not know braille or sign language and were not able to communicate with their child or help them with their studies at home. Emotional difficulties

with children were also expressed by both mothers and fathers, with difficulties being more frequently reported in relation to boys with disabilities.

***‘My surrounding thinks that this child has no right to go to school since it is money wasted. Because of his disability they say he has no right to go to school because they consider that it is money that is being wasted.’*** (Parent, gender not specified, School 3).

***“People just discourage us only. According to them when a child is invalid (disabled) so not like other children have to be, they just have to stay at home. They see that we who send such children to school are wasting our time. But we have hopes in the almighty God who was and is school.”*** (Female parent, School 3)

***“Well with me I just want a moral support. I will like that you the teachers communicate with me that you should be able to get to me and tell me the positive or negative things you see in my child so that he can succeed since all that counts in my heart is that this child is that I want this child to succeed, that may he be a valid child like the others.”*** (Parent, School 1)

Teachers also noted experiencing difficulties with some students with disabilities, whose behaviour was thought to be disruptive. Some teachers also found it difficult to teach reading and writing braille. Teaching mathematics to students with visual impairments was also a challenge. Teachers did not have an opportunity to give extra classes to students with disabilities. Female teachers were more likely to talk about the lack of time and specific difficulties in teaching students with visual impairments, while male teachers were more likely to talk about the lack of educational materials. Disruptive behaviour in the class was mentioned in relation to both boys and girls with disabilities, but the incidents seemed to be more frequent with boys.

***“To me it’s not really a difficulty per say, it’s fear. When I have sports with them, there are exercises that when she tries to do, I am afraid. Because I think that she is going to break her leg. With time, I discover that she does it so well, without problem. That is it. Initially I was first afraid to work with her, but I discover that it is okay, she overcomes it without problem.”*** (Female teacher, School 2)

***“We also face some difficulties with the pupil with intellectual impairment. He does not know the time at which he should be in class and the time to close. When he wants, he will just go back, especially during break and at times when he goes, he does not come back. He stays two to three days... We called a meeting with those parents and they came, and we asked them to always remind the child to come to school. At times he comes only when they sent pupils to his house to call for him. He comes but after two or three days he disappears.”*** (Female teacher, School 2)

***“It’s difficult when there are tables, we have to explain the graphs especially to the blind ones, it’s very difficult for them because you first of all have to say, to draw, to explain, write what you did to draw the table for example for charts how do they present themselves? Sometimes when we see water current, can we do charts? It is something difficult especially when you want to do a table reading sometimes it’s difficult. For the charts we can explain, and the blind will hear but when you must explain how we do it, how do those square on the table.... it is very complicated and sometimes the child tells you he has not understood you have to come back, come back, come back for many days after to explain and re-explain.”*** (Female teacher, School 3)

***“Children with disability have a lot of problem and it causes a lot of slowdown in the classroom because it takes a lot of time to explain to them such that they can understand. In so doing we are always behind and this causes problem to those who are able to those who understand faster, but they need to understand at the level of those who have disability and it now causes a lot of problems to them.”*** (Male teacher, School 3)

***“At every moment at all times we should renew our training continuously. That we may better train ourselves so that we may better handle disabled children.”*** (Female teacher, School 1)

***“To help in the follow up of children with disabilities, it’s first to increase refresher sessions. And to us teacher, provide for ways and means. They are real methods because for example, to teach a deaf child, you need to learn signs. We, we do not know sign language. If you need to use Braille sign, for writing or reading, we don’t know.”*** (Female, Assistant Head Teacher, School 2)

***“These pupils often have the problem of shyness, they are too shy, so to teach lessons like singing, it is difficult because they are always quiet in one place and to make them get out of there, is a little difficult.”*** (Male teacher, School 1)

## **Key current barriers to fully inclusive education is physical, financial and political.**

Several issues were identified within the school environment. The number of assistive devices and education materials was often insufficient. Many textbooks were not available in braille. Moving and finding things in inaccessible classrooms was difficult for some students. Poverty hindered progress. Some parents and particularly single mothers reported financial difficulties; they could not afford tuition fees or the costs of education materials and assistive devices. Some students travelled long distances and lack of school transportation was a big problem.

***“I can also say most at times these parents don’t have sufficient means. You ask for a meeting and a parent knows he has to spend 1000 FRS to come to the meeting and he tells himself that that 1000frs can help him give food money to the child for classes and he makes no effort to go to the meeting.”*** (Colleague, School 3)

***“Again, the didactic material we talked of are many, there is the braille slate that cost 30,000frs, the stylus that cost 5000frs and other material that cost extremely expensive. For a parent to find that is not easy and the organisations that produce these are not found here in the country. That is why it is a little difficult that we have these things. So, education for the disabled is really expensive.”*** (Female teacher, School 3)

There were also reported challenges with the existing policies and systems. Some participants said that they felt the system sometimes worked against them. Teachers shared that inclusive structures set up by the government were not as they expected; the translation of policies into practice was lacking.

***“To prepare the lesson, you must have the necessary documents, because without them you will always have to get someone to help you translate. For example, for the braille, you have to get someone to translate the writings to ordinary language, because the documents are not translated, then prepare your lesson. That is where the problem lies, so at this level I point fingers at the government directly, because***

***how can you train teachers and not put concrete materials at their disposal on the market?"*** (Female teacher, School 1)

***"We see others play but we because of our disabilities we can't also play like them"***  
(Male student, School 1)

## Considerations for improvements

Parents and teachers made numerous suggestions on how to improve inclusive education practices for children with disabilities.

First, parents wanted more information about their child's condition and how they could help. Parents wanted to do a good job and were well aware of their knowledge gaps. Parents requested a training session on parenting a disabled child and how to follow up on their progress. Several parents also wanted emotional and psychological support training.

Both parents and teachers saw parental involvement in school matters as vital in building inspiration and resilience. They wanted more information sharing between the school and the family. Many wanted regular email reports and phone calls, rather than one-to-one meetings with the teacher, as this approach would save them money and time. Many suggested training courses for parents to teach them braille and sign language.

Teachers suggested that more work was needed on parent sensitisation. Teachers noted that in their views, some parents passed their parental responsibility to the school. These parents required a better understanding of their role in their child's learning process. Teachers wanted more engagement from the parents and more responsibility for their child's progress outside the school. Teachers however also recognised that many parents did not have financial resources to regularly travel to the school. Some suggested that the teacher or another designated member of staff could visit the families, where possible.

***"The school should also work with the parents. The school should always call the parents and work with them and tell the parents exactly what they should do with the children."*** (Male teacher, School 3)

Another area for improvement was training and capacity building for teachers. Parents wanted teachers to have more specialist knowledge about disability. Teachers wanted continuing professional development, support visits from itinerant teachers and opportunities for sharing information between themselves. Some teachers argued that teacher motivation and creativity was vital and there was a need to address issues of teachers' working conditions and remuneration.

***"We always worry about the training of the teaching personnel because we today, we talk of inclusive schools. It's true that in our school, our teachers are trained in braille, but you see how I come from far. There are nearby schools, I could not register my child in these schools because there is no teacher and the headmistress cannot even take a child of this kind because there will be no one to manage them at that level. We are obliged to walk kilometres to register these children because inclusive schools are rare."*** (Female parent, School 3)

***"We have to organise pedagogic activities, which will enable the teacher to acquire much knowledge on the usage of special didactic materials for the disabled child. So, we need to organise pedagogic activities to make the teachers improve and experienced."*** (Male teacher, School 1)

***“For improvements in teaching of braille, all we need to do is to may be attend seminars on how to better teach and assist the pupil, and we also need to from time to time, put into practice what we learned at the seminar and also revise. Yes, to better adapt and to better improve from time to time.”*** (Female teacher, School 1)

***“All what I can ask for is that we should also be trained on how to teach children with visual impairment because some see a bit. We need to be further trained on how to teach the blind. Even if they are not here at the moment, with time, when parents become aware that this is an inclusive school, they will bring the children. So, they can even bring blind children even children with very poor intellectual capacity. We need training to be able to support in this light. Train us in such a way that we can now use Braille slates, and then teach children, and some techniques to follow up children with serious problem.”*** (Female teacher, School 2)

Children with disabilities wanted to be more autonomous; they argued it was important for their quality of life. Teachers believed that it was very important for students with disabilities to build their social skills and self-esteem. Teachers also felt that it was important to find ways to encourage and motivate students with disabilities without being patronising. Teachers also suggested more discussions and guidance on how to motivate students, who did not want to participate in classroom or social activities. Teachers further argued that time was needed to prepare children with disabilities for school. One male teacher for example, called it a period of integration and preparing children with disabilities to joining the school.

A need for adequate specialist educational materials was the most common concern. Teachers argued that without these, they could not provide quality education. It was pointed out that educational materials were costly, and some were not available in the country. For example, one teacher said that the materials promised to their school had not arrived, but the ones that had arrived were not useful. Some teachers had to purchase educational resources themselves. Teachers also needed basic materials in their classrooms, including blackboards and chalk. Students also requested more equipment and materials, including computers, assisting devices, a braille embosser, braille paper and tablets.

***“Again, the didactic materials we talked of are many; there is the braille slate that costs 30,000 francs, the stylus that costs 5000 francs and other materials that cost, extremely expensive. For a parent, to find that is not easy and the organisations that produce these are not found here in the country. That is why it is difficult that we have these things. So, education for the disabled is really expensive.”*** (Female teacher, School 3)

***“To get the braille paper in the market is not easy, you need to place your order in Europe, which is a problem.”*** (Male teacher, School 1)

Teachers also suggested more adaptations to the school infrastructure and classroom environments. They wanted fewer students per class and flexibility with grouping children according to their educational needs. They also suggested safe and accessible play areas and supervised game and study rooms. One teacher recommended nominating a member of staff responsible for monitoring the implementation of inclusive education policies.

***“Access to the school should be improved because when it rains the disabled children have terrible problems to get to their classrooms. For example, there is mud on the other side of my class. I think people saw the disabled child fall while trying to get to my class and this child is already frustrated because of that. There is a blind pupil, a girl who asked me: Don’t you want us in your institution again? You behave***

***like this, when you know that there are blind children here”. There is really this issue of school accessibility.”*** (Female teacher, School 3)

***“I have a conversational approach, wherein we talk, I ask them what the problem is, and they tell me exactly how they feel, so I can get a better seat or position for them in class. It is through discussion. For example, I take the girl to an angle of the classroom and I ask her if she sees better from that angle. Well at least I try to change seats and ask her the best position where she sees better, and at that moment she sits where she is best able to continue the lesson.”*** (Male teacher, School 2)

Parents wanted financial support to cover costs of school fees and educational materials. Several students requested bus transportation to school. They also wanted meals to be available in school, both to purchase and free of charge. Some teachers also said that students with disabilities could stay in schools longer if medicines and change clothes were available in the school.

Further improvements were proposed with regards to community sensitisation, including addressing myths and stigma related to disability and raising awareness of inclusive schools. Parents wanted more inclusive schools. Some participants however argued that making schools more accessible alone, did not tackle the problem of educational exclusion because there were problems with accessing medical services, travelling to school and community participation. Some participants suggested that schools and community organisations could advocate to the government on their behalf regarding educational materials and medical assessments; others proposed more collaboration with other community organisations.

***“I think that we could put in place some campaigns of sensitisation that will permit us to sensitise all the parents of the community, of our community, on the acceptance of children with special needs, that these children cannot be marginalised. We could develop communication through media, yes through media, equally do posters that talk of inclusion everywhere on the streets. We could do door-to-door sensitisation. We could equally pass some communiqués in churches, a bit everywhere. In short, we could do a big sensitisation on this subject and not only sensitise the whole community but also school children. They should be sensitised at the beginning of the school year, about their classmates who have specific needs that they learn to love them from the start, to accept them, like every other child and that they should not see in them their disability as a problem. There should not be a gap between the two, the two categories of children.”*** (Female teacher, School 3)

***“The laws that have been put, pertaining to people with disabilities should be respected. For instance, the 2010 law that stipulates many activities in favour of persons with disabilities in schools is not being respected. For instance, we say education is free for persons with disabilities and children of parents with disabilities. But you see that in many schools this law is not respected because these children are being denied education, which is supposed to be free since they don't want to take them free, they deny them education. The government laws should be imposed, the law must be respected.”*** (Male teacher, School 3)

## Box 1: Areas for improvements proposed by study participants

- More information and training for the parents on i) their child's impairment, related needs and how to support them; ii) braille and sign language; iii) emotional and psychological support
- Regular communication between the parents and the school, including regular reports and phone and email contacts
- More capacity building for the teachers, including i) specialist knowledge of disability; ii) regular visits from itinerant teachers; iii) continuing professional development; and iv) exchange of experiences
- Better motivation of teachers, including better working conditions and better remuneration
- Guidance for teachers on how to build children's confidence and self-esteem and how to engage and motivate children who were reluctant to participate in school activities
- More time for preparing and integration of children with disabilities into classrooms
- More basic and specialist educational resources, and a better alignment between the resources procured and the school needs
- Improved classroom environments and school infrastructure, including fewer students per class, needs-based groups of learners, safe play areas and study rooms, medicines and changing facilities for students
- Financial assistance for parents to cover school fees and costs of educational materials
- School transportation
- More awareness training and community sensitisation to address stigma and social exclusion
- Advocacy to the government regarding educational materials and medical assessments
- Better collaboration with other community organisations

## Observation of gender patterns in perceptions and experiences

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There were various gender specific aspects of disability experiences identified in this study. More girls with disabilities than boys with disabilities reported that they felt comfortable to communicate to their teacher that they were struggling in the classroom or that they needed help. More girls asked for and received help from their friends in school. Boys seemed to be more reluctant to ask for help and were more likely to be left out of school activities. However, these experiences were not universal across the schools. Some teachers experienced no problems with boys' learning, while educating girls was more challenging due to specific delays in development in the early years of life.

***“I don't have problems with boys, but the girls are not easy at all, the level remains weak. We have difficulties in understanding what they say, and all this is from the foundation, the base was baffled.”*** (Female Teacher, School 3)

Although both boys and girls indicated that they needed more assistive devices, two girls reported that they had to give their assistive device to a boy or that their assistive device had been taken.

Girls tended to express an acceptance of their disability, and the female teachers interviewed shared examples where girls experienced feeling confident, encouraged and valued. Boys tended to show a lack of knowledge about what had caused their impairment.

Girls talked more about sympathetic views in the community than boys. Mothers were also more inclined than fathers to report that they experienced sympathy and moral support in the community. More girls than boys shared that they did not do any specific education activities at home, and it remained unclear from the transcripts whether this was because girls were not encouraged to study at home or because they were busy with other domestic chores. Fathers talked less about sympathy or support from the community, but they were more aware of assistance from community organisations.

***“Yes, unfortunately we notice that parents who have children with disabilities more often find themselves taking some initiatives alone. So, there is nothing such as community support.”*** (Male parent, School 3)

Both boys and girls expressed fears of violence and abuse from schoolmates both inside and outside the school. Boys however reported more rough physical behaviour. Girls tended to report emotional abuse and there were concerns about their safety in the dormitories. Boys tended to report violence at home from their brother, father or mother.

With regards to male and female teachers, there were no differences in their experiences, but female teachers tended to talk about the lack of time and specific difficulties in teaching students, while male teachers talked about the lack of educational materials. More male teachers shared that they had to buy teaching resources themselves, whereas female teachers reported buying small gifts or sweets. Financial remuneration was mentioned mainly by female teachers, but it remains unclear whether it is related to the differences in pay between male and female teachers.

Disruptive behaviours in the class were mentioned in relation to both boys and girls with disabilities, but the incidents seemed to be more frequent with boys.

When talking about students dropping out of school study participants could not identify any major gender patterns. Both boys and girls were at risk of dropping out of school.

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Emotional difficulties with children were also expressed by the parents, both mothers and fathers, but the difficulties were more frequently reported in relation to boys with disabilities. Also, while mothers talked about emotional difficulties during the focus groups discussions; fathers expressed these concerns only during one-to-one interviews, (which were undertaken with a small number of parents after a poor recording of a focus group discussion).

Mothers, particularly single mothers, reported financial difficulties with paying school fees and covering costs of educational materials and assistive devices. Some mothers reported barely any means to support their child, and they often had to prioritise education fees over food expenses.

***“The first difficulty is financial, since it is a school that is excessively expensive for me, I am the only parent and my means are limited for his education.”*** (Female parent, School 3)

***“I will struggle, I will struggle... As I always struggle with them. They have no father, nothing, I am the one who is always there”.*** (Female parent, School 2)

We did not identify any cases of single fathers in this study and although fathers did tend to talk about the lack of transportation to school, families with the fathers seemed to be more financially stable and could support their children expenses.

***“The distance I cover is about 40 minutes to get here. I have the means. Every day, they (my children), go to school. I give them 200 francs, 100 francs for the bike, 100 francs for their needs.”*** (Male parent, School 2)

# Conclusion

The findings from this community-based participatory research in Cameroon show that the factors that influence the experiences of children with disabilities at school are multiple and extend far beyond the classroom. The findings suggest both challenges and opportunities for Sightsavers' school-based inclusive education project. We structured the implications for the project along three broad areas: i) school-based interventions, ii) community-based DPO partnerships, and iii) policy and advocacy opportunities.

## School-based Interventions

School-based areas for improvements should continue focusing on more accessible infrastructure and adequate numbers of specialist educational resources. There is a need to continue building capacity of both mainstream teachers and children's parents. There is also a need for more regular communication between the parents and the schools. Further, there should be more time available for preparing the integration of children with disabilities into classrooms and there is a need to explore better incentives and remuneration for teachers working in inclusive schools.

## Community-based support and DPO Partnerships

The findings of this phase of the research suggest that inclusive education can promote social cohesion and increase participation of children with disabilities in society. It also has potential to build the confidence of children with disabilities and their parents. There is however a need for further community sensitisation to address stigma and improve collaboration between different community organisations.

## Policy and advocacy opportunities

At the policy level there is a need for stronger advocacy for resources required to support inclusive education practices and more specifically, teacher training and incentives, smaller class sizes and more inclusive infrastructure. There is also a need to find mechanisms to subsidise costs of school fees and transport for children with disabilities.

## Gender implications

This initial research confirms that gender influences the experiences of children with disabilities at school, as well as at home and in the community. But these influences do not necessarily disadvantage one group of children over the other. Boys and girls with disabilities may experience their impairments and functional difficulties differently; they may have different needs and may be vulnerable in different ways. The findings of the study once again reiterate the importance of heterogeneity and diversity, when addressing the needs of children and adults with disabilities. Mainstreaming gender will be important in future research projects to better understand how to effectively respond to this diversity in the context of specific education projects. Future research projects should aim to better understand how gender influences all aspects of education for children with disabilities, as well as their teachers and caregivers. There is also a need to further explore gender aspects of disability-related violence and discrimination as well as issues related to financial and food insecurity.

By focusing our efforts on the themes outlined above, we have the opportunity to demonstrate the far-reaching value of inclusive education and the potential it has to improve

the quality of life for children with disabilities and their families, in spite of the enduring challenges of the existing systems and their everyday life.

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