

ASSESSING THE IMPLEMENTATION AND OUTCOMES OF SIERRA LEONE'S RADICAL INCLUSION POLICY FOR MARGINALIZED LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

The Sierra Leone National Policy on radical inclusion in Schools was created to deal with inequalities in the education of pregnant girls, teenagers, children with disabilities, and rural and lower-income students. This paper evaluates the implementation of the policy, the disabilities that hinder its effectiveness, and the impacts on marginalized learners by conducting a qualitative desk-based review of government reports, peer-reviewed articles, international agencies' reports, and recent research on inclusive education in Sierra Leone. Results indicate that radical inclusion has helped to reinforce the legislative framework, enhance advocacy, increase opportunities for pregnant learners to return to school, and enrich provisions for learners with special needs. Nevertheless, there is still a lack of effective implementation, including incompetence in inclusive and special needs instruction among teachers, inadequate facilities, ineffective data systems, cultural stigmatization, and economic constraints affecting rural and disadvantaged populations. Ongoing challenges within the Education Management Information System (EMIS) undermine effective monitoring of inclusion indicators. Given that the study relies more on sources of secondary data, the findings present patterns of implementation and reported results instead of empirical evidence from schools or learners. Despite its limitations, the policy has clear potential when supported by strong school leadership, meaningful community involvement, and also sustained long-term investment. The findings of this study demonstrate that the radical inclusion policy marks a very important step toward achieving equality in the educational system of Sierra Leone, but fulfilling these promises requires deliberate and targeted actions to remove systemic barriers, empower teachers, and strengthen data-driven accountability systems.

Keywords: *Radical inclusion, sierra leone, marginalized learners, inclusive education, policy implementation*

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INTRODUCTION

The education system in Sierra Leone has long been characterized by profound inequalities, with disadvantaged learners, such as adolescent mothers, learners with disabilities, and rural or low-income children, being overrepresented in the system. The structural vulnerabilities have been magnified by national crises, including the civil war, Ebola, and COVID-19, which derailed schooling, reinforced social exclusion, and impeded access to educational resources (Braima, 2025; Lurvink & Pitchford, 2023; Smith, 2021). It has been shown that, in particular, pregnant learners and children with disabilities were impacted because of stigma, a lack of school reintegration programs, and low teacher preparedness (Hayes & Bulat, 2017; Lamin, 2022). Independent monitoring reports further confirm that, despite policy reforms, enforcement gaps and school-level discrimination continue to undermine girls' access to education in Sierra Leone (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Similarly, insufficient infrastructure, remote locations, and lack of qualified educators are common challenges for rural learners, which further reduces participation (Bou Zeid & Abouché, 2025).

To handle these challenges, the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE, 2021) proposed the National Policy on Radical Inclusion, the country's first policy attempt at structurally embedding and addressing the social, cultural, and economic facets of pluralism in the Sierra Leonean educational system. The policy's main aims are educational access, retention, and attaining successful outcomes for marginalized constituents such as adolescent mothers, learners with disabilities, and children of economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The radical inclusion policy is designed in coherence with the pledges made by the Sierra Leonean government to the UNESCO Education 2030 Framework for Action and the UNICEF Framework for Inclusion, and the policy embodies a right-to-education approach by prioritizing learner-centered pedagogy, addressing the continuum of educational gender inequalities, and closing access gaps (Ainscow, 2020; Braima, 2024; UNICEF, 2024).

It is important to note that while the goals of radical inclusion are ambitious, there are still gaps that remain unfilled, which exist in the North-South divide and the Global South in terms of the framing of policy intention and policy actions. The high dropout rates of adolescent mothers, the continued exclusion of disabled learners, and the low equitable participation of students from rural backgrounds demonstrate gaps in systemic teacher capacities, school leadership, and monitoring frameworks (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Lamin, 2022; Marah et al., 2025). Also, it is due to the system and tools such as the Education Management Information System (EMIS) that the institution is unable to capture and track data disaggregated by disability and adolescent mothers' age, which means the policy/action design is not rooted in the needs of the population (Kaindaneh et al., 2024; Yu & Wyness, 2025). The focus of the system design should rest on the horizontal and vertical integration of policies and socio-economic structures in order to stimulate real change in educational outcomes.

Although research recognizes the value of inclusive education, it has been noted that there is little evidence correlating policy design, implementation, and learner outcomes in Sierra Leone (Sungeh, 2021; Osborne et al., 2025; Joong & Gibbs, 2025). Most of the existing research documents exclusion of different groups of learners mainly through descriptive accounts, and in doing so, fails to assess the effectiveness of radical inclusion in any meaningful way or to suggest concrete steps to improve policy implementation.

This study aims to fill this gap by focusing on: (1) the extent to which radical inclusion has increased access, participation, and improved outcomes for marginalized learners, (2) the barriers to the implementation of radical inclusion, and (3) the experiences of disadvantaged learners, including adolescent mothers, learners with disabilities, learners from rural areas, and low-income learners. With the combination of policy analysis, literature synthesis, and systems thinking, the study aims to offer evidence-based recommendations for improving inclusive education systems, monitoring of data, teacher training, and community participation in Sierra Leone.

The primary consideration for this study is that while radical inclusion has developed a more advanced constructive, rights-based, inclusive approach, compounded structural, socio-cultural, and economic barriers, including those related to monitoring, continue to stifle more equitable outcomes, resulting in more disparate implementation across schools and geographic areas (Ainscow, 2020; Braima & Borway, 2023; UNESCO, 2021). The research contributes to the body of knowledge by linking the design of the radical inclusion policy, its implementation processes, and learner outcomes to support the advancement of more equitable education in Sierra Leone.

This paper will be guided by two fundamental theoretical perspectives, *inclusive education theory* and a *rights-based education framework*. The theory of inclusive education focuses on eliminating the potential barriers to the system, pedagogy being learner-centered, and fair inclusion of all learners in mainstream educational systems, especially the historically marginalized ones through disability, gender, poverty, or geographic location (Ainscow, 2020; Kotor-Kamara, 2024). In line with this view, the rights-based education framework views education as a human right, and the state has the duty of ensuring access, retention, participation, and meaningful learning outcomes of all learners, irrespective of their social or economic status (UNESCO, 2021; UNICEF, 2024). Combined, these paradigms offer an analytical tool to understand the structuring, execution, and results of the radical inclusion policy in Sierra Leone by connecting the intent of the policy with the capacity of the institution, the socio-cultural environment, and the outcomes at the level of learners. In this integrative approach to the theoretical view, the research understands the effectiveness of policy within the context of access to schooling, sustained participation, school retention, and enhanced academic and social learning experiences of marginalized students. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual

framework that connects radical inclusion, processes of implementation, systemic obstacles, and learner outcomes.

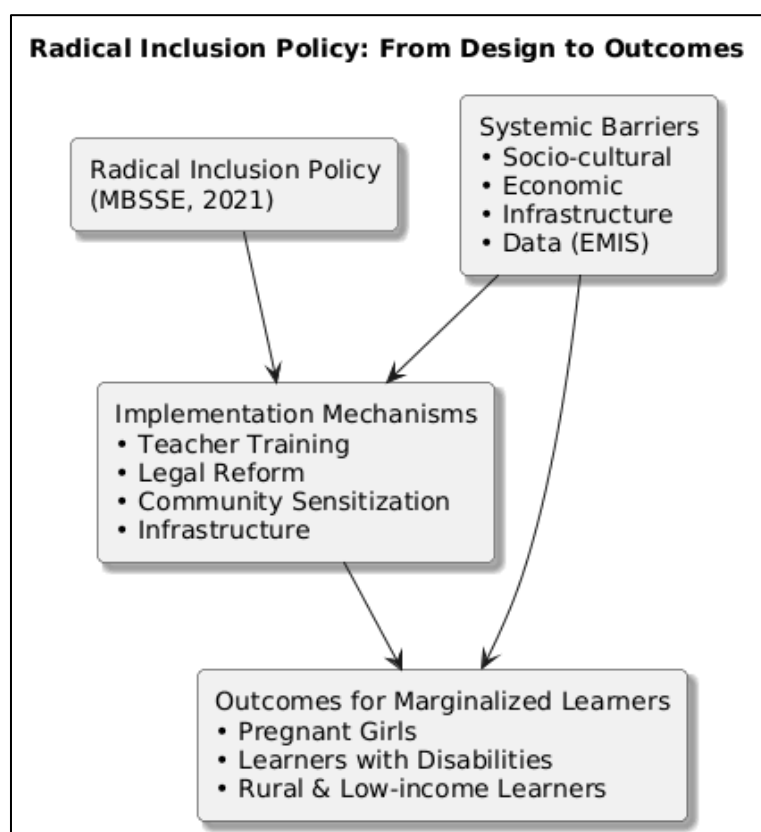


Figure 1.

Conceptual Framework of Radical Inclusion Policy Implementation in Sierra Leone
Source: Author's illustration (2025)

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative and descriptive approach that illustrates and captures the effectiveness of the radical inclusion policy and its impact on the education sector in Sierra Leone. A qualitative approach is best suited for this case given the type of questions that arise from the issues of educational inclusion, the implementation of the policy, and the experiences of the learners, which involve a great deal of interpretation and context, and therefore require detailed evidence as opposed to mere numbers (Braima & Borway, 2023; Ainscow, 2020). This approach combines the analysis of documents and policies with an integrative literature review of peer-reviewed articles, reports from governmental and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), dissertations, and publications from international organizations. This approach is justified because it attempts to analyze the objectives of the policy against the realities of its implementation, with respect

to various groups of learners in different educational settings (Marah et al., 2025; Osborne et al., 2025).

The four clear indicators used to determine policy effectiveness in this study are (1) access, (2) retention, (3) participation, and (4) learner outcomes, which are widely applied in inclusive education research. Access refers to the ability of marginalized learners to enroll or re-enter school; retention captures their capacity to remain in school over time; participation reflects engagement in mainstream learning environments; and learner outcomes denote academic and social learning achievements.

Table 1.
Policy Effectiveness Indicators Used in the Study

No.	Indicator	Operational Description
1.	Access	Enrollment and re-entry opportunities for marginalized learners
2.	Retention	Continuity of schooling and reduced dropout
3.	Participation	Engagement in mainstream classrooms and school activities
4.	Outcomes	Reported academic and social learning results

Source: Author's compilation (2025)

Thematic analysis focuses on and captures issues such as stigma, access, inequitable resources, teacher preparedness, education monitoring, and learner outcomes. The study is centered on four categories of marginalized learners, which the policy identifies as the primary focus: (1) Pregnant girls and adolescent mothers, who have historically been excluded from the formal school system; (2) Children with disabilities who face various physical, pedagogical, and attitudinal barriers; (3) Learners from economically disadvantaged families and households, whose education is often interrupted by poverty; (4) And also, Students from rural and remote areas who are disadvantaged by distance, inadequate infrastructure, and a shortage of teachers.

The scope of the research is national, focusing on the basic and senior secondary education merged systems of the MBSSE in Sierra Leone, and also concentrating on rural districts, particularly Mongo, Falaba, and Koinadugu, where exclusion is most evident. Considering that the objective is to evaluate the effectiveness of national policies, the study will use secondary data only, and the absence of primary data collection, such as interviews or observations of individual schools, is due to ethical, logistical, and resource challenges, as well as the local narrow sample's tendency to over-represent particular occurrences while under-representing the systemic reality (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Crouch & DeStefano, 2017). For triangulated policy analysis, the government reports, EMIS data, peer-reviewed articles, and publications from NGOs provide sufficient evidence (Bou Zeid & Abouché, 2025; Kaïndaneh et al., 2024; Osborne et al., 2025).

The process of data collection involved the use of a combination of keywords to systematically identify and assess relevant documents. Such keywords in combination include Sierra Leone, radical inclusion, disability, education policy, adolescent pregnancy, and marginalized learners. Documents were examined to determine their relevance in relation to the implementation, challenges, outcomes, and context of the policy.

Data analysis incorporated thematic coding, comparative policy analysis, and triangulation. Initial codes were grouped into higher-order themes, such as access, stigma, teacher competence, resources, policy awareness, and EMIS data quality, which were then synthesized into a coherent narrative aligned with the research objectives. Applying comparative policy analysis made it possible to situate Sierra Leone's radical inclusion policy within the context of international best practices (Ainscow, 2020; Braima, 2024; UNESCO, 2021).

Reliability was established through triangulation of the data, which minimized bias and increased the validity of the findings. Table 2 summarizes the categories of marginalized learners addressed by the radical inclusion policy.

Table 2.

Marginalized Learner Categories under the Radical Inclusion Policy			
No.	Category	Key Characteristics	Main Barriers
1.	Pregnant girls & adolescent mothers	School interruption, stigma	Dropout, childcare needs
2.	Learners with disabilities	Physical, sensory, cognitive	Infrastructure, teacher capacity
3.	Rural learners	Remote locations	Distance, teacher shortages
4.	Low-income learners	Poverty-affected households	Fees, materials, transport

Source: Author's compilation (2025)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are structured around four indicators of policy effectiveness: access, retention, participation, and learner outcomes.

1. Expanded Access and Legal Protection under the Radical Inclusion Policy

The radical inclusion policy states that all learners, including previously excluded groups such as adolescent mothers, learners with disabilities, and learners from low socioeconomic or rural communities, should have equal educational opportunities. MBSSE (2021) intends to reverse educational exclusion due to pregnancy, improve/promote disability-inclusive education, and strengthen EMIS (MBSSE, 2022; UNICEF, 2024). Policies of this nature, internationally, have been described as inclusive and equity-based, with transformative potential; they fit with international commitments on inclusive education (Ainscow, 2020; Braima, 2024). When framed as such, the policy indicates considerable transformative potential in

the education system in Sierra Leone. The emphasis on laws and regulations, systemic change, and community participation to promote and protect learning opportunities for all is groundbreaking. The policy aims to provide transformative potential in the education system in Sierra Leone for the first time, as evidenced by the emphasis on laws, systemic change, and community participation to advocate for and protect learning opportunities for all. Table 3 compares major achievements with key implementation constraints.

Table 3.

Implementation Achievements vs Constraints			
No.	Policy Area	Achievements	Constraints
1.	Legal framework	Reintegration rights	Weak enforcement
2.	Teacher capacity	Limited training	Skills gaps
3.	Disability inclusion	Increased awareness	Resource shortages

Source: Author's compilation (2025)

2. Systemic Barriers Affecting Policy Implementation

The obstacles in the implementation of the policy, although bearing unresolved policy intentions, suggest that the policy has been influenced by institutional, socio-cultural, economic, and infrastructural factors. Figure 2 outlines the key barriers affecting policy implementation.

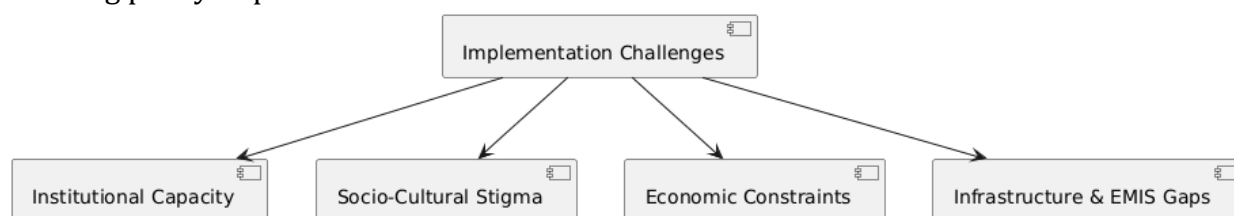


Figure 2.

Barriers to Radical Inclusion Implementation

Source: Author's illustration (2025)

Institutional and Capacity Constraints

The successful implementation of these strategies relies heavily on the knowledge and readiness of educators. (Korkie et al., 2025) notes the absence of relevant and specialized training for many educators in the area of inclusive pedagogy. Additionally, Lamin J. (2022) emphasizes the lack of special educators at both the primary and secondary school levels. There is also a significant discrepancy in school administration/leadership. For instance, in schools with more effective and stronger management, there seems to be greater adherence to inclusion practices (Marah et al., 2025; Korkie et al., 2025). From these systemic constraints, we can say that the radical inclusion framework is most effective when the implementation of its principles stretches the boundaries of existing human capital, regardless of the policy and legal provisions (Sungeh, 2021). Broader systemic challenges within Sierra Leone's education sector including weak teacher incentives, governance

deficits, and examination malpractice further constrain the effective implementation of inclusive education reforms (Dumbuya, 2023).

Socio-Cultural and Economic Mediators

The implementation of these initiatives is also affected by socio-cultural and economic factors. Stigma and discrimination against adolescent mothers and their reintegration into the school community is a direct violation of the legal right to education, and even legislative protections do not seem effective in changing these socio-cultural constructions (Braima & Borway, 2023; UNESCO, 2021; United Nations Girls' Education Initiative [UNGEI], 2023). Negative attitudes of society towards learners and individuals with disabilities remain present; this is also the case even in schools with the right levels of accessibility (Shah, 2016; Lamin J., 2022). Additionally, transport fees, school uniforms, and learning materials create economic barriers to school attendance and education for children from poor families. Thus, inclusion becomes more than policy; it becomes a social and economic challenge (SL Ministry of Finance, 2023; Osborne et al., 2025).

Infrastructure and data system barriers

The completion of inclusion operationalization is dependent upon infrastructure and data systems. Although some schools have adopted disability-friendly constructions and assistive devices, such coverage is inconsistent, and rural district areas are particularly lacking (Marah et al., 2025). Although EMIS is made available for monitoring inclusion indicators, as EMIS reports data, the improvement of data quality and the ability to disaggregate data remain constraints, and thus monitoring progress and outcomes for marginalized learners continues to be more difficult (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Crouch & DeStefano, 2017; Kaindaneh et al., 2024). The monitoring and infrastructure deficit portrays the overwhelming response to policy gaps, the lack of systemic capacity and local accountability. (Kaindaneh et al., 2024; Lurvink & Pitchford, 2023; Yu & Wyness, 2025).

3. Uneven Access and Retention Outcomes for Marginalized Learners

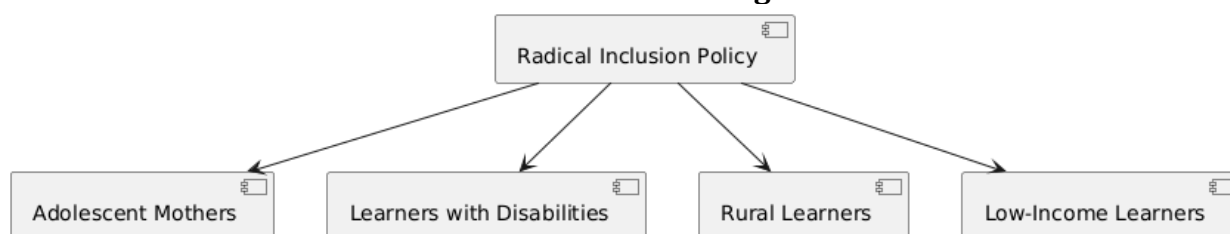


Figure 3.

Illustrates Policy Outcomes Across Marginalized Learner Groups

Source: Author's illustration (2025)

Adolescent Mothers

In terms of access and retention, Policies have positively impacted urban district schools in terms of pathways for adolescent mothers to enroll and return to school

(UNESCO, 2021; Braima, 2024). However, the situation is more nuanced, as there is still a high rate of school dropout, and support systems appear to be inconsistent, as they are more prevalent in some schools, creating a phenomenon that speaks to the contextual success of the system. Effective reintegration into school occurs when there is collaboration with the local community and families, which demonstrates that positive policy outcomes are dependent on community engagement (Bou Zeid & Abouchdid, 2025; Lamin, 2022).

Learners with Disabilities

Regarding participation and learning outcome, the inclusion of learners with disabilities is beginning to improve. Marah et al. (2025) noted an increase in participation in general education classes after teachers received additional training. However, there are still gaps in learning outcomes because of teacher shortages, lack of appropriate educational materials and assistive technology, and negative community attitudes (Lamin J., 2022; Shah, 2016; Sepadi, 2025). Schools with strong leadership and regular evaluation of school practices have better academic and social outcomes, which demonstrates the importance of specific school practices for measurable outcomes.

Rural and Low-Income Learners

With respect to access, retention, and outcomes there are still unequal resources and attainment levels among learners of low socioeconomic backgrounds, especially in rural areas (SL Ministry of Finance, 2023; Osborne et al., 2025). These situations are characterized by deep and entrenched structural inequities. Additional cultural and logistical barriers (e.g., distance to schools, inadequate transportation) increase exclusion, reinforcing the need for more adaptable policies and practices that are sensitive to the context of remote areas.

Table 4.
Summary of Learner Outcomes

No.	Learner Group	Access	Retention	Outcomes
1.	Adolescent mothers	Improved	Uneven	Context-dependent
2.	Learners with disabilities	Moderate	Low	Limited gains
3.	Rural learners	Low	Low	Persistent gaps

Source: Author's compilation (2025)

4. Gaps Between Policy Intent, Implementation, and Learner Outcomes

The evidence points to a disconnect among policy intent, implementation steps, and outcomes. Although radical inclusion creates a tangible legal/rights framework, outcomes are always a function of the prevailing institutional, socio-cultural, and economic environments. Schools with better-trained personnel, strong administrative leadership, and a committed teaching community have reported improvements across all learner categories (Ainscow, 2020; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Joong & Gibbs, 2025; Townend et al., 2025). On the other hand,

under-resourced and poorly supervised regions continue to be characterized by exclusion and unequal educational outcomes.

This analysis illustrates that policy effectiveness hinges less on the legal framework and far more on situational implementation and contextual adaptation. Specific focus on teacher training, strengthening EMIS, and community mobilization are critical to closing the gap between policy intent and learning outcomes (Kaindaneh et al., 2024; Yu & Wyness, 2025).

5. Policy Effectiveness Depends on Contextual Capacity and Adaptation

In general, the evidence shows that the effectiveness of the policy depends not only on the design of the formal policy but also on contextual capacity and adaptation. Although the radical inclusion policy creates a solid legal and rights framework, the performance of this program differs depending on institutional preparedness, the quality of leadership, community involvement, and the availability of resources. Schools where trained staff, effective leadership, and adaptive implementation practices have been applied depict stronger results among the learner groups, while under-resourced and poorly supported settings remain characterized by exclusion and uneven educational outcomes. Strengthening teacher training, the functionality of EMIS, and community mobilization are thus key to adjusting policy implementation to local conditions and enhancing equitable learning outcomes (Ainscow, 2020; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Joong & Gibbs, 2025; Townend et al., 2025; Kaindaneh et al., 2024; Jalloh, 2024; Yu & Wyness, 2025).

CONCLUSION

This study examined the effectiveness of the National Policy of Radical Inclusion in Sierra Leone based on four indicators, which include access, retention, participation, and learner outcomes. The results show that, although the policy has enhanced the legal and normative underpinnings of inclusive education, it is still inconsistent in its effectiveness across learner groups and geographical settings. School access has increased, especially among adolescent mothers and students with disabilities in urban and better-endowed schools, but retention, attendance, and the quality of learning remain limited due to structural and contextual factors.

The analysis also shows that policy intent alone does not determine policy effectiveness; rather, it is defined by contextual capacity and local adaptation. Institutional limitations, such as lack of teacher training and unequal school administration, constrain inclusive classroom participation. Economic and socio-cultural issues, including stigmatization, poverty, and caregiving responsibilities, also inhibit sustained attendance, especially among adolescent mothers and rural learners. Additionally, the lack of infrastructure and robust data systems, particularly the inability to disaggregate EMIS data and utilize high-quality data, hinders effective monitoring and evidence-based decision-making. Collectively,

these factors create persistent discrepancies between policy intentions and learner outcomes.

This research has a number of limitations. First, it is based mostly on policy documents, secondary literature, and system-level data, which do not allow for the tracking of longitudinal learner trajectories. Second, large-scale quantitative outcome measures were not analysed, reflecting broader limitations in the education system. These limitations emphasize the need for improved data collection and disaggregation to enable more robust evaluations of future inclusive education policies.

Despite these limitations, the study has significant implications for policy and practice. Enhancing teacher training on inclusive pedagogy, strengthening school leadership capacity, increasing community involvement, and reforming EMIS to produce high-quality disaggregated data are essential to improving implementation outcomes. More broadly, institutional investment and context-specific adjustments should be integrated into inclusive education policies in resource-constrained settings to translate legislative promises into equitable learning opportunities.

Conclusively, the radical inclusion policy of Sierra Leone is an important step toward educational equity. However, meaningful and sustained inclusion will only be achieved by aligning policy design with implementation capacity and local realities.

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