

Positive deviance among Sierra Leone's secondary schools

A deep-dive study into pockets of effective learning among secondary schools in Sierra Leone

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Table of contents

Acknowledgements.....	i
Preface: Message from the Minister’s Desk	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Executive summary	Error! Bookmark not defined.
List of abbreviations.....	v
1 Introduction	1
1.1 Why do we need a qualitative deep-dive study?	1
1.2 What do we mean by ‘positive deviance’?.....	2
2 Study methodology	6
2.1 How did we select districts and schools?	6
2.2 What data collection methods did we use?	7
2.3 How did we organise fieldwork?.....	8
2.4 How did we analyse the data?	9
2.5 What are some potential limitations of this study?.....	10
3 Pupils’ ability to attend school and learn.....	12
3.1 How do parents and communities support learning?.....	12
3.2 How does household poverty impact learning?	12
3.3 How do communities hold volunteer teachers to account?.....	13
3.4 How do cultural practices affect learning?.....	15
3.5 Does language of instruction matter?.....	17
3.6 How do we support our girls to attend school and learn?	19
4 Learning environment in the classroom.....	21
4.1 How are schools managing large class sizes and overcrowding?	21
4.2 What learning materials are available in the classroom?.....	24
4.3 How much class time is devoted to learning?	25
4.4 Are schools able to cover the syllabus?	26
4.5 What role do classroom assessments and examinations play?.....	27
5 Managing the teaching workforce.....	31
5.1 How do we recruit more trained and qualified teachers?.....	31
5.2 Are extra classes a financial lifeline for teachers and schools?	33
5.3 How do we manage volunteer teachers?	35
5.4 How do we provide pre- and in-service training?.....	37
6 School leadership and management	41
6.1 What constraints do principals face in managing their schools?.....	41
6.2 How do parents and communities hold schools to account?	42
6.3 How do districts and MBSSE hold schools to account?	45
6.4 What role do SSOs play? What lies ahead for them after LWL?	46
7 What can positively-deviant schools teach us?	49
Annex A Qualitative research matrix	54

List of tables and boxes

Table 1: Key themes identified from LWL theory of change and DFID “doughnut”	4
Table 2: Ranking of districts in SGLA III	6
Table 3: Instruments administered for each participant group	7
Table 4: A typical day during deep-dive data collection	8
Table 5: School codes for anonymity	10
Table 6: Some ideas for change: what can positively-deviant schools teach us?	51
Table 7: Research matrix: core areas to probe and sources of information	54
Box 1: Parental community support: What are better-performing schools doing differently	14
Box 2: Cultural practices: What are better-performing schools doing differently?	16
Box 3: Language barriers: What are better-performing schools doing differently	18
Box 4: Girls’ safety: What are better-performing schools doing differently	20
Box 5: Infrastructural challenges: What are better-performing schools doing differently	23
Box 6: Increasing instructional time: what are better-performing schools doing differently	26
Box 7: Covering the syllabus: what are better-performing schools doing differently	27
Box 8: Classroom assessments and exams: what are better-performing schools doing differently ...	30
Box 9: Teacher recruitment: What are better-performing schools doing differently	33
Box 10: Teacher salary concerns: What are better-performing schools doing differently	35
Box 11: A Teacher Reflects on why they joined the teaching profession.	36
Box 12: Managing volunteer teachers: What are better-performing schools doing differently	37
Box 13: A Teacher Reflects on LWL LPM In-Service Training	38
Box 14: Pre- and in-service training: What are better-performing schools doing differently	40
Box 15: Limited Autonomy of DDEs and principals over teacher recruitment	42
Box 16: CTA Engagement: “it takes a village to raise a child”	43
Box 17: CTA’s Plea for Female Teachers & Agents of Change	44
Box 18: CTAs holding schools to account: what are better performing schools doing differently?	44
Box 19: DDE’s Share Transport and Logistics Woes.....	46
Box 20: SSO mandate.....	46
Box 21: SSO feedback	47
Box 22: How do schools engage SSOs: What are better-performing schools doing differently?	48

List of abbreviations

BECE	Basic Education Certificate Examination
CCT	Child Centred Teaching
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
CTA	Community Teacher Association
DDE	Deputy Director of Education
DEO	District Education Office
ED	Education Forms
FAWE	Forum for African Women Educationalists
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FGM	Female Genital Mutilation
FQSE	Free Quality School Education
GEC	Girls Education Challenge
GoSL	Government of Sierra Leone
HTC	Higher Teachers' Certificate
JSS	Junior Secondary School
KN1	Kono School 1
KN2	Kono School 2
KN3	Kono School 3
KR1	Karene School 1
KR2	Karene School 2
KR3	Karene School 3
LPM	Lesson Plan Manual
LWL	Leh Wi Lan
MBSSE	Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education
MoFED	Ministry of Finance and Economic Development
NPSE	National Primary School Examination
OPM	Oxford Policy Management

PH	Pupils Handbook
SGLA	Secondary Grade Learning Assessment
SLL	Sierra Leone Leones
SSO	School Support Officer
SSS	Senior Secondary School
TSC	Teaching Service Commission
US\$	United States of America dollar
WAEC	West African Examinations Council
WASSCE	West African Senior Secondary Certificate Examination
WR1	Western Rural School 1
WR2	Western Rural School 2
WR3	Western Rural School 3

1 Introduction

Leh wi Lan is a UKaid-funded programme, supporting the Sierra Leone Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) to achieve sustained improvements in girls' education and secondary grade learning outcomes. In order to understand and track changes in the state of pupil learning achievement, teaching practices, and the school's learning environment, Leh Wi Lan conducts an annual secondary grade learning assessment (SGLA) survey in schools across the country. The SGLAs also support Leh wi Lan in making data- and evidence-driven changes in its design and implementation strategies. The first SGLA I survey was conducted in 2017, with a follow-up SGLA II survey in 2018, and the latest SGLA III survey conducted in all 16 districts of Sierra Leone over May-June 2019. SGLA IV was planned for May-June 2020 but had to be postponed due to COVID-19 school closures. It will be rescheduled when schools re-open.

1.1 Why do we need a qualitative deep-dive study?

To bring about meaningful improvements in girls' education and learning outcomes at secondary levels in Sierra Leone, the SGLAs provide an annual national- and district-level "health check" on the status of teaching and learning in secondary grades, and then track this status for progress on an annual basis. All three rounds of the SGLAs have highlighted that the current reality of secondary education in Sierra Leone is not on track to meet its education sector goals. In particular:

- Overall learning outcomes in secondary grades are very poor.
 - For instance, only 7 and 12 per cent of JSS2 students in Sierra Leone are performing at grade level respectively in maths and English; and
 - Close to no SS2 students are performing at grade level in both subjects.
- There is a general decline in both English and maths learning outcomes from 2017 to 2019.
- There is limited improvement in test scores as students progress from JSS2 to SSS2 – the additional 3 years of education between these three grades adds very little additional learning;
- Girls typically perform worse than boys in the SGLA;
- Children from poorer households typically perform worse than children from wealthier households;
- Children from rural schools typically perform worse than children from schools in district headquarter towns;
- Teachers are not always able to effectively apply the new lesson plans despite apparent process compliance;
- Schools are very often difficult places for girls and children with disabilities; and
- There are significant regional differences in pupils' performance – pupils in Western Urban, Kono and Western Rural perform better than the national average while Falaba, Karene and Pujehun perform significantly worse than the national average.

However, this quantitative evidence from SGLA, whilst very informative, does not provide deeper insights into underlying *mechanisms* driving the results. Therefore, there was a need to accumulate lessons through contextual qualitative analyses on crucial *why* questions. One of the recurring recommendations of the annual SGLAs has been to undertake complementary qualitative studies to support and augment our quantitative understanding of why learning levels are so low. To quote the SGLA recommendations:

“Undertake complementary qualitative studies: Throughout this report, several quantitative results were discussed whereby it was felt that, while these findings are useful, more information is required before moving to concrete recommendations, especially qualitative research in the areas of teacher management and motivation, effectiveness of lesson plan/pupil handbook usage, learning from “success stories” in

the system (e.g. Kono) and diffusing these lessons across the system for performance improvement. Specific qualitative research questions should be identified and undertaken as complementary deep-dives as part of SGLA III.

As such, the objectives of this deep-dive qualitative research are to:

- **Augment the quantitative survey results** by providing a richer and more nuanced account of important themes already covered by the quantitative survey (for example, what do teachers spend their time doing during class? Why do girl pupils perform worse than boys? What are the drivers of low instructional time?);
- **Investigate themes which are not covered by quantitative surveys** (especially themes that are not amenable to quantification, for example, we see high percentage of self-reported lesson plan and pupil handbook usage in the SGLA, but what is the effectiveness of these materials towards learning?);
- **Explore the underlying mechanisms** due to which some schools are demonstrating relatively better learning and teaching than others in the same district, and whether any lessons from these pockets of learning can be diffused and replicated in other districts within Sierra Leone;
- **Provide Leh wi Lan (LWL) with vital qualitative evidence** (to complement SGLAs and Tangerine) on the relevance, appropriateness, and implementation of its key interventions (SSOs, lesson plans, teacher professional development, pupil handbooks) to influence programme learning and adaptation, but also start to build a body of evidence for the programme's contribution towards teaching and learning; and
- **To build a body of evidence re. the LWL theory of change (TOC)** and test the strength of a range of assumptions underlying the TOC, which could ultimately support DFID (and other development partners) in conceptualising future support to education in Sierra Leone.

1.2 What do we mean by 'positive deviance'?

The research questions for this deep dive study are in three parts:

- (a) Where in Sierra Leone's secondary education system can we identify pockets of (relative) effective learning, i.e. cases of positive deviance?**
- (b) In these schools, what are the underlying causes that contribute to relatively better pupil learning in some of these positively deviant cases?**
- (c) To what extent are lessons and ideas from these relatively better-performing schools replicable in other secondary schools of Sierra Leone?**

We adopted three principles to guide this deep dive study, namely:

- **We studied each school as a complex system** which moves from inputs into learning (e.g. infrastructure, government subsidies, etc.) to produce the final impact of delivering learning – all the while balancing the incentives of multiple actors in the school system and various distractors which could disrupt the production of learning. Taken together, these questions required us to sample a set of well-performing and poor-performing schools and get an in-depth understanding of each school as a 'complex system' where learning takes place with varying degrees of effectiveness. Teaching practice, school leadership and management, parental support, community engagement can all be topics of research, but unless these were studied in an inter-

connected fashion within each sample school, it didn't not allow us to understand the mechanisms that contribute to relatively better pupil learning in some of these positively deviant cases.¹

- **We studied existing practice and replicable 'positive deviant' ideas:** Existing practice (whether good or bad, whether enabling or inhibiting learning) was studied in detail, particularly focussing on differences between high and low performing schools to understand why a school system is delivering learning or not. Particularly, when looking at high performing schools and factors which make a school high performing, it was important to differentiate between factors which are part of the school's context ("it is what it is") and are therefore difficult to replicate beyond the immediate context (e.g. a school in an urban, well-to-do community where parents are able to invest significantly in their children's education) vs. factors which are extraneous to the context with potential to be tested in other schools (e.g. a school and community which has managed to use innovative ideas to retain teachers in a rural school; or a school which has set up mechanisms for lowering gender-based violence, leading to enhanced learning for girls). Positive deviance, in our case, relates to ideas that are already being acted upon in some secondary schools (they are thus possible), and that yield positive results (addressing the problem of poor learning in our case, and thus being technically correct), but are not the norm across many schools (hence the idea of deviance). Taking an example from public health, for example, in every town with high levels of infant mortality, one can identify a household where no children die; they are the positive deviants, doing something that others are not doing but that is effective in addressing the problem in the context. In our case, this could be a school in, say, Karene district (one of the lowest-performing districts in all three rounds of SGLA) which has managed to get similar results to some of the better Western Urban schools. As part of this deep dive search for policy and reform ideas, we needed to find these positive deviants, examine their successful practices (i.e. determining why they are different), and diffuse the core principles of their success more broadly. This is how different parts of an education system learn from each other, for gradual and continuous performance improvement. It was vital for us to identify where a certain practice might qualify as a positive deviant idea and whether these ideas might be technically, administratively and politically feasible to replicate in other contexts within the system.

¹ Positive deviance can be defined as "an uncommon practices that confer advantage to the people who practice it compared with the rest of the community. Such behaviours are likely to be affordable, acceptable, and sustainable because they are already practiced, they do not conflict with local culture, and they work."

- We used the recently revised LWL TOC along with the DFID Learning Framework “[doughnut](#)” (2013, Pg. 5) to identify a broad list of what inputs go into ‘producing’ pupil learning (as shown below) which guided our focus areas of research within each school. While not all areas of the doughnut were within the direct scope of this deep dive (e.g. role of unions, role of media, etc.) the key themes identified from the DFID framework and LWL TOC (adapted to the focus of this study) are listed below.

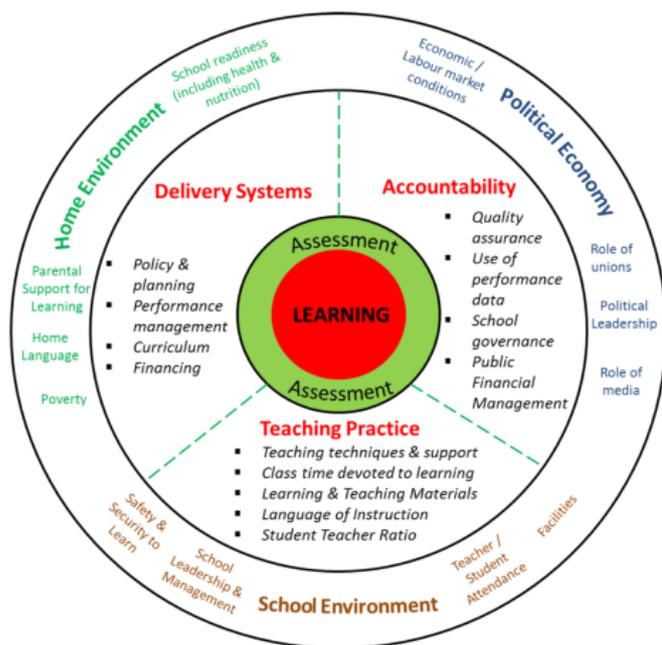


Table 1: Key themes identified from LWL theory of change and DFID “doughnut”

Home environment	School environment	Teaching practice	Accountability	Delivery Systems
Poverty, early marriage, teenage pregnancies, cultural practices (e.g. secret-societies)	Girls safety in schools	Low instructional time	External quality assurance (inspectors/supervisors/SSOs)	Performance management for GoSL, district, local councils
Legacy of poor learning in primary grades	Infrastructure and facilities	Teacher performance management	Use of performance data to guide action	Use of data to guide policy action
Parental support to learning	School leadership and management	Teaching techniques and support	School governance	School financing
Health and nutrition	PTR, class size, language of instruction	Teaching and learning materials		Curriculum and examinations
Economic and labour market opportunities		Classroom assessments		

Home environment	School environment	Teaching practice	Accountability	Delivery Systems
		Teachers own motivation, subject knowledge, pedagogical skills		

Using the LWL TOC and DFID framework has some advantages. By setting out the suggested causal pathways through which improved learning is assumed to take place, the TOC is a useful starting point for an exploratory analysis of why and how some schools achieve results, and how variation in context and existing practices may explain variation in results. It will also lend the findings of this study a framework or structure that can be directly mapped onto the TOC (i.e. in terms of output, outcome, intermediate impact) therefore starting to build an evidence base for LWL's own impact story on learning and how this might be explained by variation in context across schools. Themes identified from the existing TOC and DFID learning framework has been turned into a deep-dive research matrix which guided all our data collection tools for this study. This is shown in an Annex at the end of the report. Specifically, TOC assumptions have been explicitly identified, and then reformulated in terms of specific questions to be included in the deep dive interview tools.

2 Study methodology

2.1 How did we select districts and schools?

This deep dive study uses in-depth school case studies to explore contextual circumstances that characterise the schools at high or low performance levels. Case study schools were selected based on the average pupil test scores on SGLA III conducted in May-June 2019, as well as how rapidly some schools had improved their average pupil scores from one SGLA to the next. This focus on deviant cases is valuable for generating findings for the 'how' and 'why' questions discussed in the previous chapter. The chapter explains the process of selecting a sample of districts, schools, teachers and pupils for the study.

Selection of districts: Three districts were purposively selected. Within each district, two high performing and one low performing school was sampled, therefore giving us a total sample of 9 schools for this study. Given the purpose of this study to understand pockets of effective learning, districts were sampled with a focus on better performing districts in the SGLA pupil test results. Roughly, the ranking of districts by pupil performance is as shown below (which varies slightly based on whether we are looking at English or maths, but Western Rural/Urban and Kono remain steady on top, and Falaba, Pujehun and Karene at the bottom in both rounds of the survey). It was decided to pick two top performing and one poor performing district. Top performing schools in the poor performing districts will yield examples of schools which are doing well despite broad-based low learning in their district. Ultimately, based on logistical and other considerations, Western Rural, Kono and Karene were selected as the three districts for inclusion in this study.

Table 2: Ranking of districts in SGLA III

Ranking	Districts
1	Western Rural
2	Western Urban
3	Kono
4	Bombali
5	Moyamba
6	Koinadugu
7	Port Loko
8	Kambia
9	Kenema
10	Bonthe
11	Bo
12	Kailahun
13	Pujehun
14	Tonkolili
15	Falaba
16	Karene

Selection of schools: In each of these three districts, two high-performing schools and one low performing school were sampled, with performance levels being determined by the school's performance in the SGLA pupil tests. This sampling process was expected to provide valuable evidence and interesting contrasts between schools, thereby allowing for comparability across and within cases. Pupil-teacher ratio (PTR), location and school ownership were implicitly considered to allow for a broad range of school types. There are some limitations of this sampling approach. In particular, this sampling method implies that the school's performance category in respect of the SGLA pupil test is *relative to other schools in*

the district. It is therefore possible that an average or even low-performing school in one district (say, Western Urban) has in fact higher scores than high-performing schools in another district (e.g. Karene).

Selection of teachers and pupils: Wherever possible, we sampled the same teachers who were interviewed as part of the SGLA survey, i.e. teachers who teach English and maths in JSS and SSS grades. If these teachers were not available in school on the day, teachers with similar profiles were purposively sampled for the focus-group discussions. Speaking to this profile of teachers, who are recipients of lesson plans, SSO mentoring and LWL’s continuous professional development (CPD) programme, also meant we could gain insights and feedback on LWL’s suite of interventions. One teacher from this group was purposively sampled for an in-depth case study in each school. This teacher was provisionally selected in advance of visiting the school based on the SGLA quantitative data. In each district, research teams coordinated to ensure that case study teacher profiles are varied across schools in terms of age, gender, and subjects taught, based on the SGLA quantitative survey data at hand. As for pupils, FGDs were carried out separately for boys and girls with the same set of eight pupils who had been randomly selected for the SGLA pupil test. However, if some of these pupils were available on the day, a random selection of pupils were included to ‘top up’ the FGD sample from the same grade.

2.2 What data collection methods did we use?

We used three main research instruments – key informant interviews (KIIs), FGDs, and lesson or school observations. The table below summarises the types of instruments used to collect information from different participants in this study.

Table 3: Instruments administered for each participant group

Instrument	Principals	JSS/SSS teachers	Case study teacher	Pupils (girls)	Pupils (boys)	DDEs	SSOs	SBMC/CTA members	Central level meetings: MBSSE, TSC, LWL ²
KII	X		X			X	X		X
FGDs		X		X	X			X	
Lesson observation			X						
School observation									
Photo diary ³	X								

² Conducted after fieldwork in the three districts was completed

³ Research teams spent three days in each school. The principal was given a basic camera on the first day in each school and asked to take photos that would help researchers understand the school in more depth. Principals were encouraged to take as many photos as they like, and then to select 10 photos to be discussed on the last (third) day as part of a KII. The objective of the photo study was to empower principals to set the agenda of a discussion by choosing what to discuss in their photos. The aim was to elicit episodic storytelling in which each principal gives his or her own interpretation of what the photo shows by describing

Written consent to participate in this study, and to record responses, were sought from each adult participant before commencing the discussion, and from the principal on behalf of the pupils. Verbal assent was sought from all pupils. The draft research instruments were “road-tested” in some schools in Western Urban district before commencement of data collection.

2.3 How did we organise fieldwork?

The study team included six Sierra Leonean and three non-Sierra Leonean researchers. Collectively, the team demonstrated strong qualitative design, data collection and analysis skills, specialism in education policy and practice, and knowledge of the education system in Sierra Leone, previous research experience, formal training in research methods, fluency in Krio/Temne/Limba/English, and flexibility to adapt to the principles of qualitative research. At the start of fieldwork, the team was divided into three sub-teams each comprising of one international researcher and two Sierra Leonean researchers, ensuring gender and age diversity within teams. Each sub-team spent three days in one of the three schools sampled in each district. This had the advantage of teams being close enough to hold joint debriefs at the end of each day of fieldwork, and start the analysis and write-up process whilst still in the field. All researchers received intensive training to prepare them for the data collection. Training was classroom-based with presentations, interactive exercises, and a field pilot in three Western Urban schools.

Table 4: A typical day of data collection

A typical day during deep-dive data collection	
The daily schedule in each school looked approximately as follows:	
Day 1	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction: Arrive at school, meet principal, brief them about the study, introduce team members. Explain to principal that you will be at their school for 3 days and will come every morning and leave in the afternoon when lessons are over. Consent form to principal on behalf of school. (Consent forms for others as we meet them) • Selection of teachers for FGDs / observation / teacher interview • Principal interview and explain photo-diary exercise to principal • Lesson observation and case-study teacher interview • School observation • FGD with parents and community members • Return to guesthouse & joint team debrief 	
Day 2	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FGD with teachers • FGD for pupils (girls and boys, separately) • School observation • DDE interview • SSO interview • Return to guesthouse & joint team debrief 	

the events surrounding the photo. The researcher facilitated discussions using prompts and, where appropriate, encouraged respondents to think about how the events in the photos related to their school, and what it tells us about teaching and learning in the school. Such visual documentary data may enhance the ability of principals to communicate their perspectives, which may not necessarily be captured by verbal communication through a standard interview.

A typical day during deep-dive data collection

Day 3

- FGD for pupils (girls and boys, separately)
- FGD for SMC/PTA/Board of directors
- Photo diary interview with principal
- School observation
- Return to guesthouse, joint team debrief, and district presentations

2.4 How did we analyse the data?

Daily debriefs and preliminary analysis in the field: As a key part of qualitative fieldwork, the teams conducted daily preliminary analysis of emerging themes in the field itself. The aim was to conduct thorough debriefs and initial analysis in the field to both avoid any errors of interpretation as well as to discuss interesting emerging issues for further exploration. All qualitative researchers contributed in writing a fieldwork journal which fed into the daily debriefs and presentations. Debrief reports were completed for each district visited before moving to the next.

Transcription: This was the second stage in the analysis process. All qualitative interviews were recorded and these voice recordings were transcribed to English by professional transcribers.

Synthesis of Findings: Synthesis of interview notes and transcripts was structured around an agreed methodological framework for analysing issues in order to extract salient analytical insights. It followed an iterative and reflexive process, in this way, reports are up to date and reflects the reality and nuances of the field environment. Each chapter in the report is co-authored by a member from each of the three sub-teams. In addition, the qualitative research lead reviewed all chapters of the report and drafted the recommendations and executive summary.

What specific process did we use to determine what should be seen as a positive deviant practice and included in this report? To decide if a certain school activity or strategy should be discussed in the report as a strategy for other schools to consider, we used triangulation (during the interviews) and analysing the strength of evidence to support a good practice (at the reporting stage). To elaborate, when (say) a principal in a school mentions a certain management technique she uses to motivate and retain teachers, we would probe further to ask how this leads to better teaching and learning; then interview teachers and observe their lessons to verify this was the case; and similarly triangulate this with pupils', community members, district officials and school support officers. This is to convince ourselves that any good practice mentioned is verified across stakeholders. Similarly, at the analysis stage, we investigated how strong the evidence was in favour of any good practice – and managed the language of reporting accordingly (e.g. “there is strong evidence”...vs “there is some indicative evidence that better performing schools to X, Y, Z...”).

In order to protect confidentiality and anonymity of the 9 schools sampled for this study, we have used codes to refer to schools instead of their names.

Table 5: School codes for anonymity

School code	SGLA pupil test score rank within district
WR1	1 st rank out of 25 schools
WR2	3 rd rank out of 25 schools
WR3	25 th rank out of 25 schools
KR1	1 st rank out of 25 schools
KR2	3 rd rank out of 25 schools
KR3	25 th rank out of 25 schools
KN1	1 st rank out of 25 schools
KN2	2 nd rank out of 25 schools
KN3	25 th rank out of 25 schools

2.5 What are some potential limitations of this study?

Qualitative sampling and generalisability: Like many qualitative research, this study is based on a relatively small sample of schools. Selection of schools was purposive, aimed at including schools with particular characteristics, rather than representative of all schools in the three districts. This implies a challenge to generate results that have wider application beyond the nine schools that we visited. However, the qualitative research is not designed to produce results that are generalisable in the same sense as the SGLA quantitative data. As described above, the very purpose of the study is to find stories of positive deviance, i.e. pockets of effective learning within the secondary education system. The risk of visiting atypical schools and gaining an incorrect or incomplete understanding of the relevant processes remains but is mitigated by visiting several schools in different districts and by paying close attention in the analysis to ways in which the context of each school may be atypical.

Structured and unstructured research instruments: Qualitative research uses instruments (interviews or discussion guides, observational tools, etc.) which are generally less structured than those used in quantitative research, leaving scope for the interviewer and respondent to shape the research. For example, the interviewer can ask further questions that occur to her, in response to an interesting or unexpected response. This helps capture unexpected impacts or explanations, but makes qualitative findings hard to reproduce and subject to researcher bias. We managed this limitation by using a mixture of relatively structured methods (e.g. semi-structured interviews) and less structured methods (e.g. principals' photo diaries, where the principal can guide the discussion). While the dialogue may be unstructured, the researchers applied standard methods in recording and analysing the discussion, for example, through application of structured analysis framework organised by thematic categories for note-taking, and use of the research matrix (Annex A) to provide a framework for analysing the research. A reflective approach, with a mixed team of Sierra Leonean and non-Sierra Leonean researchers, as well as discussion about findings at the end of each day is intended to reduce bias from individual researchers as much as possible. But qualitative research inevitably involves greater application of the researchers' (and participants') own perspectives, and this more embodied, personal approach compared to quantitative research should be seen as a strength as well as potential limitation.

Sensitive issues: Some topics may have been sensitive for our respondents to discuss with researchers, especially within school premises. For example, principals and teachers are likely to be nervous at first about revealing potentially negative, critical, or self-damaging views or information. Similarly, for pupils especially girls, talking about issues like gender-based harassment will have been sensitive and challenging. A longer-term engagement with the participants would help to gain their trust, but is not possible given budget and time constraints. Nevertheless, continued presence in the school for three days gave researchers time to gain some trust with participants, and also allowed time for informal talk and observation as well as more structured discussions. Some questions to respondents may involve overt or tacit criticism of figures of authority if they are to be answered frankly, and it has to be acknowledged that researchers may not have received comprehensive and honest answers on these questions. Wherever the environment allowed, researchers ensured that discussions took place in private so that only the participants in each part of the research were present. Researchers also used strict codes of data confidentiality and, through a formal consent process, reassured participants that their responses will not be shared more widely. Although the qualitative research remains limited in its ability to explore sensitive issues, it is likely to be stronger in this respect than quantitative research, where there is very little time for researchers to gain trust of the respondents or to probe evasive or incomplete answers.

Language issues: Interviews were mostly conducted in Krio, Temne and (in some cases in Karene) Limba. Important points were translated on the spot for the benefit of some non-Sierra Leonean researchers to enable them to guide parts of the discussion. The research team performed preliminary analysis of the findings at the end of each day based on their interview notes and observations, but the bulk of the analysis was conducted by the international analysts after completion of data collection. Conversations were recorded and transcripts translated to aid full analysis. However, there is some risk in this process of inaccurate or incomplete translation. The inclusion in the team of a majority of researchers who were fluent in at least both Krio and English was essential in managing this risk. Researchers were mindful of the need for precision in interpretation in the field, and discussed amongst each other to ensure clear shared understanding of emerging findings. An added complication was variation in dialects of Krio language found in different districts (particularly Karene). To mitigate this risk, to the extent possible, Sierra Leonean researchers were selected on the basis of having extensive experience of working in the study districts.

3 Pupils' ability to attend school and learn

This chapter discusses findings on pupils' ability to attend school and learn, their experience of the teaching and learning process, school safety, and parental and community support towards their children's learning. A complex mix of factors related to pupils, parents, communities, language barriers and household poverty are – to varying extents – pervasive in all three districts and school types. These factors hinder pupil learning irrespective of whether it's a better or poor performing school. However, some schools are trying to confront these obstacles by bringing together the support of their teachers, school leadership and communities. We discuss what these positively deviant schools can teach us.

3.1 How do parents and communities support learning?

Children are my biggest investment. They will look after me in my sunset days. I am 100% committed to ensuring they get a good education, so I am committed to monitoring their school and following up on any action” CTA member, WR1.

Better performing schools across all district have adopted mechanisms to solicit support from parents and communities towards their children's education. The SGLA survey reports nearly all JSS and SSS schools have parent-teacher or community-teacher associations (PTA/CTA). The majority of these bodies are active, having met at least once in the previous term. However, little is known about how effectively these bodies hold the school



leadership to account, and what role they play in monitoring the school's activities. Parents in better performing schools closely monitor their children's day-to-day schoolwork. These parents, who in many cases do not read or write and have never been to school themselves, have close relationships with teachers and school leadership. For instance, in WR1, the Community Teacher Association (CTA) actively engages parents through regular school meetings through small monetary incentives and words of encouragement to parents. Communication through a CTA WhatsApp group is used to keep

parents updated on the school's progress. This forum is used to encourage parents to enquire about school activities, report any instances of bribery or other social vices, and for the school to disseminate information on action taken. Parents in this school supported their children's learning through active monitoring of self-study and homework, written tests at home, and private tuition. In one instance, the CTA chairperson visited the school to confiscate phones of pupils and deleted all inappropriate material from the devices.

3.2 How does household poverty impact learning?

“Considering the level of poverty in the community most parents allow their children to do petty trading over the weekends to raise income for the family” CTA member, KR2.

“When it's time for me to study when I have exam, that is the time my aunty will call me to do housework and that makes me not to be able to study at home” – Pupil, KN1.

“Well for me, my girl child is helping me to do domestic work at home like sweeping the compound, laundry and cooking. As a farmer I encourage her to go to the farm with me to help in the clearing of the land and carry firewood at home for cooking. I also engage her to do petty trading as this is the only way I can raise income to take care of the family in terms of school and providing medical attention” CTA member, KR2.

There is a clear link between household poverty and parents’ ability to support learning. Household poverty is pervasive and no school we visited, irrespective of location or performance level, is spared from its grip on children’s education. As the SGLA shows, pupils from the poorest households perform significantly worse than those from less poor households. Poverty at home means children, especially adolescents, must participate in various economic activities (e.g. petty trading, farming) to support their families. This leads to school absenteeism, risks the safety of children (especially girls), and leaves less time and resources for focussed learning – be it coming hungry to school in the morning, walking long distances due to no “okada money”. Similarly, to continue their education, many pupils leave their homes in rural areas and live with relatives in cities to continue their education. Such pupils must often work outside school to earn their upkeep and support their host families.

Some schools are trying to address the impact of poverty on learning by sensitising parents and community members. These schools are lobbying parents and community leaders to the burden of household chores on pupils, to leave early for school and to allow for sufficient study time after school. In WR2, the school offers a source of respite for students who are pressured to engage in petty trading to support their household. They are offered the chance to stay around school even after school so that they have some focussed time to study before they return home. In K3, for those in JSS3 class – the BECE class – parents have agreed to eliminate all forms of extra chores to allow their children to concentrate on exam preparation. In addition, in this school, community members are playing an active monitoring role to ensure pupils are not engaging in income-earning activities or generally loitering outside school during school hours. In KR3, renowned personalities in Sierra Leone who are indigenes from the local community, e.g. senior civil servants, lawyers, and political figures, are invited as role models (especially female role models) to talk to parents on the importance of education for all children, especially girls.

“This year because of the free quality education we have witnessed increased enrolment rate in the school for both boys and girls. Parents knowing fully well that they will not be asked to pay fees took the opportunity to enrol their children to the school, dropouts have reduced significantly”. CTA member, KR1.

In government and government-assisted schools, the launch of FQSE has eased fee-related pressures from parents to some extent. It has encouraged enrolment (especially among girls) and somewhat alleviated pupil absenteeism in so far as it was being driven by pupils being ‘chased away’ from school or denied their grades due to non-payment of fees. However, fees are one of several monetary components which determine a pupil’s ability to access schooling.

3.3 How do communities hold volunteer teachers to account?

“Since the inception of the school, the CTA agreed to be responsible for payment of volunteer teacher’s stipend out of our pockets which was a good move at the time to keep teachers in school. Then with time, government announced the FQSE and said they will start sending subsidies to the school. We all agreed that the salary of the teachers should come out of the subsidies” CTA member, KR2.

Volunteer teachers constitute a third of the teaching workforce in Sierra Leone and play a critical role in providing frontline teaching services in classrooms. Volunteer teachers are not on the government teacher payroll and rely on community and other monetary

contributions for their livelihood. While a rapid process of teacher approvals is underway, restricted fiscal affordability of the national treasury has meant that only a fixed number of teachers can be approved each year. As such, even where the MBSSE or TSC does not have a direct line of accountability to volunteer teachers, community contributions are one of the main levers of accountability between a volunteer teacher, and the school and community. Community contributions, whether through cash payments or in-kind (e.g. bags of rice after harvest, small parcels of land, rent-free accommodation in the community) play a key role in retaining and motivating volunteer teachers. Having said so, since the launch of FQSE, it seems parents were under the impression that they are absolved of not just paying fees but also other obligations from the school including any non-fee contributions to the school. As such, volunteer teachers complained that monetary contributions from the community had dried up since the launch of FQSE.

Box 1: Parental and community support: What are better-performing schools doing differently

Parental and community support: What are better-performing schools doing differently

Assisted self-study time in school (WR2): the school management having realised the challenging home environment and parents' inability to provide direct supervision at home, have introduced a tuition-free two-hours assisted school study time. Here, two hours (during school hours) is dedicated to student's personal study time every Wednesday and Friday. A teacher is present in the class to answer questions students might have.

Open-day and home visits (WR3): A dedicated and compulsory day for parents to visit school and interact with teachers to discuss their child's performance and what specific support they need at home. Parents who fail to attend pay a fine. In addition, two female teachers have been delegated to conduct home-visits to sensitise parents on the need to regulate household chores especially for girls.



Kid/pikin reading hut (KR2): The community has no electricity at night for students to study. They also lack a conducive and safe learning environment at home or community (a bustling 'poyo' bar in the middle of the village). A space was built at the centre of the community by PLAN International. It is an open secure space in the middle of the community where students can meet after school to study, supervised by a teacher (who gets a stipend from PLAN). It was built 3 years ago, has no electricity to light the hut in the evenings but the

community is using "easy solar" to light the hut.

CTA WhatsApp group (WR1): this forum encourages parents to enquire about school activities and channel complaints, and to keep parents informed about the school and to establish a link between parents and teachers. Small incentives are also provided to parents who attend regular CTA meetings.

After-school study time (WR2): the school offers a source of respite for students who are pressured to engage in petty trading to support their household. They are offered the chance to stay around school even after school so that they have some focussed time to study before they return home.

Using local role-models to sensitise parents (KR3): renowned personalities in Sierra Leone who are indigenes from the local community, e.g. senior civil servants, lawyers,

and political figures, are invited as role models (especially female role models) to talk to parents on the importance of education for all children, especially girls.

Retaining and motivating volunteer teachers (KR2): Community contributions, whether through cash payments or in-kind (e.g. bags of rice after harvest, small parcels of land, rent-free accommodation in the community) play a key role in retaining and motivating volunteer teachers.

3.4 How do cultural practices affect learning?

“One of the criteria to become a community chief is to be in the Poro society. That is why people go into initiations. Similarly, for women there are certain positions they cannot hold in society if they are not member of the Bondo society. For example, there was a medical doctor who aspired to become a paramount chief in his chiefdom, but he was not a member of the Poro society. He had to join the society and came back to the community before he was allowed to contest.” Principal, KN2.

“The most disheartening thing is that the initiation is done when school is in session and this has a negative effect on education” CTA member, KN2.

Bondo, Sande, Poro and Digba ‘secret’ societies and associated initiation rituals are long-established traditional practices in Sierra Leonean culture and society. Compared to Western Rural, these societies are more prevalent in Karene (mostly sande and bondo societies for girls) and Kono (mostly poro society for boys). Boys and girls, as they approach adolescence, are initiated into these societies. To discuss the merits and demerits of these traditions is beyond the scope of this study. However, we discuss the impact these traditions have on pupils’ ability to attend school and learn.

The initiation rituals often start around December and can keep pupils away from school for up to 3-4 months, at which point returning to school and trying to catch up on lost instruction time and content is extremely difficult. Consequently, pupils will either dropout of school at this point, or carry on attending without much comprehension (since they have missed much of second term) till revision lessons are held in May/June ahead of the final exams. In addition, many pupils return to school with signs of physical and psychological distress, especially since in a majority of cases, bondo society initiations include female genital mutilation (FGM).

“The Bondo society disturbs girl’s education because they sometimes take weeks or months in the bush before they complete the initiation process. Because the girls would have missed out on lessons after the initiation, most of them fail their exams as they do not have enough notes and were not in the class when the teacher was explaining”. Student, KN2.

“Once a young girl completes her initiation, she is considered ready for marriage. It is our culture and traditional practice for a girl child born in our community to go to the Bondo” - CTA member, KN1.

Particularly for girls, Bondo initiation marks the start of preparation for marriage and long absences from school, during which girls are taught how to cook, housekeep and look after their husbands and children. We found this to be highly prevalent in all three schools visited in Karene district. In Kono, on the other hand, Poro society (for boys) is more prevalent than bondo/sande societies for girls.

Some schools are trying to reduce the impact of long absences from school by sensitising parents and community members, and seeking help from NGOs like FAWE

or GEC wherever possible. This takes various forms, but in each case, it involves deeper engagement with the community and parents. E.g. Paramount chiefs and principals have been engaged to talk to sande / poro elders to conduct initiations only during school holidays. Sometimes principals play a more active role – an instance was narrated where a principal had forcibly released a female pupil from a Bondo initiation so she wouldn't miss her exams. It is still worrisome to note that, no matter what period in the year or duration these cultural practices are conducted, the psychological impact of something like FGM still stays with the child after s/he resumes school. Girls Education Challenge (GEC) and Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) are working to prevent girls from dropping out of school, afterwards, whereas PLAN Sierra Leone has girls and boys clubs that meet on alternate days to discuss issues of interest around initiation ceremonies.

In addition to traditional practices, **schools are also concerned about the influence of violent gangs and substance abuse on pupils**, especially boys. Of the three districts, this was more prevalent in Western Rural schools than Karene or Kono. For the boys, the impact of such cultural practices, apart from time lost at school, is a tendency towards truancy in school, forming gangs, violence, bullying, sexual harassment, and disrespect for teachers. In extreme cases, these gangs engage in knife crime, drugs, and terrorise teachers and the community. In two (out of three) Western Rural schools, high prevalence of illicit substance abuse (marijuana, snug, kuch, tramadol) was reported among pupils, especially boys, during or after school hours.

There are no easy solutions to these anti-social activities among pupils. In WR1, **there is a written code of conduct and behaviour to which all pupils and teachers sign up to, and its implementation is monitored strictly** by the principal and proprietors. This sets the social norms within a school for what is and isn't acceptable, why, and what the consequences for non-compliance are. Religious and moral ethics principles are repeatedly preached as foundational to everything in the school and safeguarding is taken seriously. Any deviation from the code of conduct, whether by pupil or staff, is therefore dealt with seriously including expulsion. For instance, any male teacher who perpetrates sexual harassment is immediately struck off. Similarly, in KR1, **elders in the community have been engaged to monitor activities outside the school gate** and report any actual or potential cases of violence, truancy and substance abuse.

Box 2: Cultural practices: What are better-performing schools doing differently?

How are schools tackling cultural, sexual harassment and school safety issues

Continuous community sensitisation (KR2 and many others): Across all schools, principals continue to have dialogue with paramount leaders to create awareness of the impact of such cultural practices on learning, especially for girls. E.g. speaking to paramount chiefs to reduce time spent away from school during secret society initiation rituals or only conduct these rituals during school holidays. In KR2, CTA members have had talks with parents to “take bull by the horn”, insist for this to happen only during the holiday. In WR2, parents were informed to monitor the motorcyclist that transport these girls to schools daily as ocada riders were the main culprits of sexually harassing them.

School collaboration with NGOs (KR3, KN1, KR2 and KN2): Girls Education Challenge (GEC) and Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) are working to prevent girls from dropping out of school, afterwards, whereas PLAN Sierra Leone has girls and boys clubs that meet on alternate days to discuss issues of interest around initiation ceremonies.

Written code of conduct and strict monitoring (WR): there is a written code of conduct and behaviour to which all pupils and teachers sign up to, and its implementation is monitored strictly by the principal and proprietors. This sets the social norms within a school for what is and isn't acceptable, why, and what the consequences for non-compliance are. Religious and moral ethics principles are

repeatedly preached as foundational to everything in the school and safeguarding is taken seriously. Any deviation from the code of conduct, whether by pupil or staff, is therefore dealt with seriously including expulsion. For instance, any male teacher who perpetrates sexual harassment is immediately struck off.

Community monitoring (KR1): Similarly, in KR1, elders in the community have been engaged to monitor activities outside the school gate and report any actual or potential cases of violence, truancy and substance abuse.

3.5 Does language of instruction matter?

Their first language is Temne or Limba, not even Krio. Some children even in JSS cannot read or spell and that is very challenging. And in that case, it will be very difficult for those types of student to pass BECE and you will teach in vain because they can't understand your language" – Teacher, WR3.

"When they teach in English, there are certain words that we can't understand"- student, KR2

"There are some students in this school who struggle with Krio and the principal is the only person who can translate for them (Mende)" -Teacher, WR2.



While English continues to be one of the main languages of instruction at school, a variety of local languages and mother tongues means this is a challenge for both teachers and pupils.

This limits pupils' learning and participation in the class. Krio is therefore often used as the lingua franca, with ample code-switching between English and Krio observed in classrooms. In WR3, for

instance, many children speak different languages at home; they are only exposed to English when in school. Teachers disclosed that, instructing students in the language they understand plays a very vital role in teaching the subject content. They often need to combine English with Krio in the delivery of lessons for students to be able to understand the content. In WR1 and KR3, there is a no-vernacular-speaking policy at the school and the schools have "Speak English, practice makes perfect" signs boldly written on the walls everywhere. Despite this, some students find it difficult to understand lessons and because teachers are prohibited from explaining in Krio and the concepts are not well understood in English.

With the inception of FQSE, large numbers of first-generation learners and learners from diverse language backgrounds are accessing secondary education for the first time. As the population of such students grows, English as a language of instruction continues to restrict their learning experience. This is a rather complex challenge which has no straightforward 'solution'. However, it has to be recognised in the national education policy that being a 'language minority' brings deep barriers to learning and both pre- and in-service teacher training needs to reflect this.

For example, during the CTA FGD in WR2, it became clear that Waterloo, the area in which the school is located is divided into two distinct realities, the 'Krio' part where socioeconomic realities are better than the 'Lumpa' part which is made up of petty traders from across the provinces speaking many different languages. The ethnic diversity of the students that constitute the school meant that a diverse range of languages are spoken at home, resulting in teachers often having to "come down to the student's level" repeating the same content in English and Krio.

But in some cases, even speaking Krio does not help. In KR2, pupils predominantly speak Temne at home but are taught in Krio and English in school. With many people from provinces settled here, teachers often switch between the two languages, especially using Krio to explain concepts. In KR1, teachers admitted that language barrier was significant as most of them speak Limba, even Krio was a struggle. In WR1 where there is a rule of 'no vernacular' i.e. only English or French, and no Krio or other languages, there is concern as to how poor pupils from the provinces coming to this school will survive. Kono District is one of the most ethnically diverse districts in Sierra Leone and is home to a large population of many of Sierra Leone's ethnic groups with no single ethnic group forming the majority. Kono also has a higher level of exposure to English due to foreign companies participating in the mining sector. As a result, barriers to English as the language of instruction is minimal, with most of the children able to speak and understand English and Krio fluently. In KN3, the principal said, students would prefer teaching in English (not Krio or Kono or Kissi) as English is the language, they will need later in life.

Box 3: Language barriers: What are better-performing schools doing differently

Language barriers: What are better-performing schools doing differently

Dictation, spelling bees, quizzes and debate (WR3): In WR3, to help students become familiar with English language, teachers often conduct spelling bees, set quizzes and organize debate competition. Such practice has improved spelling and handwriting skills, according to the teachers. Also, students are mandated to take turns to read out in class, words not correctly pronounced are corrected on the spot.

Supplementing teaching with local language (WR2, WR3): Teachers disclosed that, they often need to combine Krio in the delivery of lessons for students to be able to understand some complex concept. In WR3, students are pre-informed of topics to be taught in the next class so that they can read up on them and find the meaning of unclear terms. In WR2, teachers were said to "*come down to the student's level*" in recognition of the ethnically diverse population of people, lessons are also delivered in Krio and Temne where necessary.

A "no vernacular" principle (WR1, KR3): the schools operate a strict no vernacular principle to encourage student's continuous usage of English among their peers in schools. In WR1, parents were said to give their kids quizzes, tests and monitor them to practice at home providing extra support.

3.6 How do we support our girls to attend school and learn?

Almost without exception, in all nine schools we visited, the prevalence of constant day-to-day sexual harassment towards girls is high. Unfortunately, this is often perpetuated by school staff, who are meant to be the ‘guardians’ of pupils whilst they are in schools, or male pupils, or other members of the community (e.g. ocada riders, other passers-by on the way to and from school). Early pregnancy, gender-based violence, child marriage and cultural biases against girls’ education continue to propagate the cycle of gender inequality in access to education and supporting a girl through her schooling career. For example, in KR2, girls are faced with sexual advances in the community by “city dwellers” – mostly indigenes from the community who return from the cities during the holidays. They entice the girls with fancy items from the cities (e.g. phones, clothes, money, food) and by the end of the holidays, many girls find themselves pregnant. Also, on the way to school, girls come in contact with ocada riders who lure them with money and the possibility of hitching a ride to school every day. Likewise, in WR2, we were told that in other schools “girls with big buttocks will get extra marks for exams”, “harassed by teachers and principals” as the “only way to pass” (i.e. sex for grades).

The seriousness of the issue varies from school to school, with better performing schools reporting mechanisms to prevent or deal with cases. For example, in KN2, although continuous community sensitisation has made some difference, the prevalence of teenage pregnancy is still prolific. In KN3, community members have discouraged evening/night classes as it brings with it the threat of harassment for girls (from men in the community/ocada riders) and anti-social activities by boys. As described above, in WR1, there is a strict code of conduct for all pupils and teachers to guide their behaviour, and all cases of misconduct – especially of sexual harassment – are dealt with seriously. In KR2, such cases are often escalated by the principal to the paramount chief and local police authorities.

“We still have the belief that boys can think faster than girls when it comes to education and this has resulted in parents paying greater attention to boys in the community” – CTA member, KR2

A related issue is the general low expectation from girls and what changes can come about in their lives through education. This is further exacerbated by the low number of female teachers in secondary schools (about 5% as per the SGLA) and other role models in schools and communities. As already established, there is heavy reliance on girls to perform household chores, oftentimes combining cooking and cleaning responsibility with babysitting of younger siblings/relatives while both parents are out to earn a living. In some cases, these constraints result in education for boys in households being prioritised over that of the girls. These beliefs are sometimes couched in a proverb which loosely translates as “*no matter how big a cow, it always ends up in soup*” – Teacher, KR2. That is, no matter how well educated a woman is, she will end up getting married and it is her husband that will take care of her.

“...if there is a female teacher in the school, they can approach her easily and explain and the female teacher can offer advice. The school has started receiving pads for female students since last year and to me that is a very good venture to keep our girls in school when in their menstrual period” - CTA member, KR2.

“Had it not been that I am attending this school, I would have not used a menstrual pad because my former school do not supply us pads. Some of our friends do come to school now because of the supply of pads. Our teachers do teach us about menstrual period and that we should wash three times and that we should care for ourselves well”. Student, KN1.

At the school level, inadequate water and sanitation facilities are a major impediment to school attendance for girls, especially during menstruation, compromising hygiene and privacy, and absenteeism due to pain, shame, anxiety about leakage, and staining their uniforms. WR1 which is privately owned by a Christian missionary and funded through fees

and donations was the only school with a functional toilet facility with adequate water supply. Whilst at the interpersonal level, girls do confide in their mothers on issues relating to menstruation, access to support at school relating to such issue is difficult, especially when schools have only male teachers. In KR2, as a result of the plea from the CTA members, the principal brought in a female teacher who has been able to support and mentor girls better when they are in their menstrual cycle. In KN1, girls also said that sanitary pads supplied by the LWL programme was being distributed to them. For some of them, this was the first time they were having access to this. In KN1, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) has worked with the school management to establish a “mother’s club” (comprised of influential women from the community) who visit the school to talk / counsel on personal safety, hygiene, safe sex / abstinence and menstruation. This is a way of getting around the issue of very few female staff in schools whom girls can speak to confidentially and who can give them reliable advice on adolescent issues they might be facing.

In addition, in all schools visited, there were suggestion/complaint boxes mounted for students to report instances of sexual harassment from teachers and their colleagues. The general feedback was that this was not an effective method in reporting and addressing issues of sexual harassment. Such boxes are situated either in front of the principal’s office or close to the staff rooms which deter students from using them. The custodian of such boxes most often are principals/teachers themselves – often the perpetrators of the said harassment. In WR3, the former principal was removed on account of sexual misconduct with a student, the suggestion box which was directly in front of the principal’s office will be the least effective method to have tackled this.

Box 4: Girls’ safety: What are better-performing schools doing differently

Girls’ safety: What are better-performing schools doing differently

Using local role-models to sensitise parents (KR3): renowned personalities in Sierra Leone who are indigenes from the local community, e.g. senior civil servants, lawyers, and political figures, are invited as role models (especially female role models) to talk to parents on the importance of education for all children, especially girls.

Schools adhering to a strict code of conduct in WR1, WR3, KR3 and KR2: In WR1, religious and moral ethics principles are foundational to everything in the school, safeguarding is taken seriously – there is a code of conduct to which all pupils and teachers sign up to, and its implementation is monitored strictly. Any male teacher who is even suspected of sexual harassment is immediately struck off. In WR3, the current principal has put some measures in place to curb illicit drug/substance use, including expulsion of students where necessary. In KR2, apart from having strict reporting protocols established by the community where paramount chief reports sexual offenders to the police, a headmaster got a girl released from Bondo society initiation house during her exams. In WR3, the dismissal of the former principal who was removed on account of sexual misconduct with a student sent a strong message to other teachers.

Mother’s club (KN1): the school, in collaboration with IRC, has established a “mother’s club” (comprised of influential women from the community) who visit the school to talk / counsel on personal safety, hygiene, safe sex / abstinence and menstruation.

4 Learning environment in the classroom

This chapter discusses findings around the school environment. These include large class sizes, insufficient furniture, teaching technique and support, limited instructional time and incomplete curriculum coverage.

4.1 How are schools managing large class sizes and overcrowding?

“The free education has actually contributed to influx of students in all schools and congestion is common in classes compared to the time when it has not been introduced. Because of the congestion of classes, there is a lot of distraction during classes especially from those that are seating at the back and it difficult for teachers to identify them. It will surprise you to see students standing to copy note whiles others seat on top of the desk to copy. Some students seat 6 to 7 per bench making copying difficult”. Student, KN2.

“I will be honest with you, sometimes, I give the students classwork, I leave the class to go take a short walk because the class is too congested and hot” – case study teacher, WR3.



One of the biggest issues schools and teachers confront is large class sizes and overcrowding in classrooms. A combination of rapidly increasing school-aged population and free education, against the backdrop of limited funding for school infrastructure, has caused class sizes to soar. Many classrooms now regularly exceed 50 students, and it is not uncommon to find more than 100 students crammed in a single classroom, constructed with a maximum capacity of half that class size at best. Overall, this has impacted on teachers' workload, quality of delivery and learning conditions

in the classroom.

Large class sizes limit the pedagogical techniques that can be applied to enhance learning. In WR3, for instance, with a pupil-teacher ratio of 80:1 and limited space in the classroom, teachers have to adapt lesson plans to focus more on work that students can complete at their desks instead of group work or classroom activities that require more peer interaction learning. In addition, teachers often do not have enough space to effectively monitor classes. From classroom observation conducted in WR3, students were easily distracted by the beehive of activities happening outside the school which was situated along a busy path without a fence to insulate it. A few were observed copying notes and drawing at the extreme of the class when lessons were ongoing. Even when a class exercise was given, it was difficult for the teacher to move around to check exercise books on a one-on-one basis. Many of the students fell completely off the radar of the teachers' monitoring. In KN2, class sizes are very big, with over 100 pupils in a class.

Class size was reported to also impact on the effectiveness of the school support activities of the Leh Wi Lan's School Support Officers (SSOs). According to one SSO, one of his challenges at the school is the class size, some classes have up to 93 students. It is difficult for him to asses learning impact and teacher's delivery due to overcrowding and suffocation in the classrooms.

Large class sizes and overcrowding are common problems and span across better and poor performing schools. No school has quite managed to find a magic bullet to address this issue. It is interesting to note that better performing schools (e.g. WR1 and KN2) can have very different class sizes (40 and >100 respectively). Compared to WR1, a private school with maximum of c.40 per class – a class size mandated by the school management and is among the top performing schools in the country – KN2 is a government-owned school which has seen a sharp spike in class size in recent years, especially since FQSE.

Besides large class sizes, limited infrastructure also hinders teaching and learning outside the classroom. Many schools – including several better-performing schools – lacked infrastructure which includes fence, sanitation facilities, staff/classroom for teachers and students, and learning materials.



In WR3 (as shown in the adjoining picture), although the school management mandates teachers to conduct routine patrols of the school premises to minimize students loitering, the lack of a school fence makes this difficult to manage. Students were reported to sneak out unnoticed and return to school at will. Similarly, because the school is situated close to a major road, constant horn blaring and other related commercial activities disrupt students' concentration in class. Some motorists go as far as using the school premises as a public car park. Their

presence at the school exposes students to all kinds of harassment and anti-social activities. There have also been at least two instances when cars lost control on the road, only to crash into the school premises. Although no casualty was recorded, it is a potentially dangerous situation that can cause the loss of lives and property. WR3 is also situated along a busy, noisy main road that serves as a key exit route out of Freetown, and by a street stall selling music and a tyre seller located in the school compound which leads to vehicles entering the inadequately fenced compound regularly throughout the day.

“Gangs operate around here, sometimes there are big fights just outside the school compound. When police are called, we have had a few cases of them hiding in our school, inside classrooms”. CTA member, WR3

Efforts to fence the schools are incomplete due to a shortage of funds although there is hope that recent school approval and FQSE will lead to school subsidies flowing into the school to help fence the school securely and refurbish crumbling classrooms. Even if this support transpires, the proximity of the primary section of the school within the compound adds to the distractions and the compound is not big enough to coordinate simultaneous break and class times.



In KN3, a single room is being used for all 3 grades, essentially one classroom where JSS1 to JSS3 all sit and learn together, or sometimes are split into three groups but still taught all in the same room. Depending on which class is taking place, those who are not being taught turn away with their backs to the blackboard. Poorly ventilated - sun comes out and makes it very difficult to concentrate, the building is shared with a bakery and has no toilet nor water facilities. It also lacks a fence and frequent movements of motorbikes close to the school is distracting and unsafe for children.

Teachers in KR2 complained that basic teaching and learning materials such as chalk and blackboard are sometimes lacking in the school and they have to use their meagre personal resources to provide them. Sometimes, indigenes who live in the cities and abroad provide chalk and other school supplies. All the respondents report that classrooms are congested, and it is difficult to get children to concentrate especially in the afternoon when the sun is very hot. In the teachers' FGD, they mention that the ceilings of the classrooms are low which makes the rooms hot and uncomfortable for the children. As one teacher observed- *"a sound mind in a sound body; when children feel comfortable in their chair, they learn better"*; they sometimes have classes on the compound under trees so that children can feel comfortable, but this in turn exposes them to anti-social elements plying by next to the school, e.g. ocaida riders. Class sizes have sky-rocketed since the launch of FQSE and when this schools started doing well in the BECE exams and began attracting pupils from nearby community schools. Pupils complained about the congestion in the classroom *"we just can't understand anything, we feel choked, no place to sit"* student, KR2.

In WR1, an exception to the rule, school infrastructure is well maintained with the objective of providing a comfortable and hygienic learning environment. Every pupil has own desk and chair. There is a fence and a caretaker, so no thoroughfare for strangers. Toilets are clean, with soap and water. With 9 classrooms, 2 halls, a science lab and computer lab with 50 computer workstations. Computer lessons are given to students and members of community, with certificate on completion.

Box 5: Infrastructural challenges: What are better-performing schools doing differently

Tackling infrastructural challenges: What are better-performing schools doing differently

In general, almost all schools are struggling with large class sizes and infrastructural constraints.

In-school monitoring system: In KN2, where classrooms were overpopulated, the principal had appointed a teacher supervisor to assist in monitoring what goes on in the school daily and to provide regular feedback to the principal. The principal and the chairman of the CTA committee was also reported to conduct regular checks. A student reported that, teachers ensure that the class is perfectly quiet when teaching. In WR3 where the school is situated on a busy road and without a fence, the principal mandates teachers who take turns to conduct routine patrols of the school premises to minimize students loitering.

Encouraging donations from community members: Indigenes from KR2 community who live abroad make periodic donations to the school to cover for school supplies. Community members contribute money and/or their labour towards the school building, fence and furniture. CTA members in KN1 were responsible for the construction of an additional classroom in the school. In KN2, construction of two blocks of classroom was ongoing as at the time of this study which was being financed by the CTA to relieve the overcrowding situation.

4.2 What learning materials are available in the classroom?

“I am very happy for the Maths LPM and Handbook especially for JSS 1-3. If we can only go strictly by the lesson plan book provided to us, then Maths will be easy to pass. I make sure that the students go through it” Maths teacher, KN1.



Teachers appreciate the Lesson Plan Manual (LPM) supplied by the LWL programme. The training they have received and the SSOs support and feedback on the use of the 5 steps teaching method is the greatest contributor to effective teaching in schools. These methods have been adopted to teach other non-core subjects at the school. Through this feedback and reading through the LPM “before every lesson”, these teachers deliver an engaging lesson that adheres fervently to the CCTM principles that underpin the LPM.

In KR2, teacher said, structured lesson takes place and that classes are much more organized and effective than before LPMs arrived. Before LPMs they essentially had no materials to draw from and mainly used exam syllabus and previous years exam papers to teach. He also teaches Agric Science and uses

some of the LPM techniques there too and says LWL should provide LPs for other subjects too. LWL continuous professional development (CPD) and LPM training has been the only source of in-service training that some teachers are getting whilst in school. A teacher from KN2 tells us that the LPMs “helps us and helps students as we no longer just write on the blackboard and students no longer just copy notes”. Not only does it “reduce teacher workload”, it has helped to “increase participation in class” and a shift towards a more child-centred classroom. As one teacher puts it; “we now interact in the classroom, we used to just write plenty on the board”.



Pupil handbooks (PH), also delivered by LWL, were also a valued resource although there are some initial teething issues around inadequate PHs and fear of penalty among parents should any PHs get damaged. Some students disclosed that they were told that they would be jailed, some believe they would have to pay a fine of close to 200,000 Leones. All this has deterred a lot of them from coming to sign the book out. In some schools, PHs were still stacked and stored in the principal’s office and hadn’t been distributed yet (as seen in the photo below). In some other instances, because of the

rapid spike in pupil enrolment as a result of the FQSE, in about 3 out of 9 of the schools visited, the PHs were not enough for everyone in the class to have one. The insufficient handbook does not give students opportunity to go over class lessons at their own time. From observation of a language art class in WR3, students were seen to be more focused on copying text from the handbook onto their notebook rather than paying attention to the instruction being given in class. In WR2, for instance, there were around 25-30 PHs for classrooms of 50+ pupils. They were shared among students, handed out at the beginning of class and collected at the end of the class. It was not clear whether they were actually used in class and they were certainly not referred to during the entirety of the lesson observation, even if they were open. It seemed that students had not been guided on how to use the PHs and the principal and teachers were unsure about why they had not received the appropriate

amount. It is likely that the disparity between pupil enrolment figures before and after the introduction of FQSE has contributed towards this phenomenon.

Despite these challenges, private unassisted schools – which are currently not eligible for PHs and LPMs lamented their need for the same resources as government assisted schools were receiving. *“Isn’t the MBSSE the ministry of “all” schools – then why the discriminatory behaviour towards private schools when it comes to teaching and learning materials. Are we not part of the Sierra Leone education system, why are we being denied these materials? Many government schools have these materials but are not using them; just give them to us. Otherwise it’s a waste of Sierra Leone’s resources”* Principal, WR1.

4.3 How much class time is devoted to learning?

Across all districts, schools have reorganised their schedule to accommodate more learning time in the form of after-school extra classes, weekend tutoring, homework assistance or increased duration of lesson periods with the aim of providing more time to cover the syllabus and revisions for exams. These extra classes are often (though not always) paid for by parents and is an important financial lifeline for the school and teachers, especially volunteer teachers who rely on community contributions for remuneration (discussed in more detail below). In WR3, school closing time has also been moved from 1:30pm to 3pm daily. This was a new practice initiated by the new principal of WR3 at the beginning of the year to cover for the hours spent on student’s personal study time. Some teachers are not happy with this additional unpaid time spent in school, they complained that it is sometimes tiring for them to spend all day in the school and still be expected to have time to revise and prepare for the next day’s class.

Teachers’ school absenteeism is a frequently cited reason for reduced instructional time. In KR2, for instance, pupils report that there are teachers who are frequently absent; further discussions with stakeholders indicate that one has a job as a monitoring ‘officer’ for an NGO, another helps as a community health worker after school and on weekends and there are others who teach in schools in other communities. In a school where teachers (especially volunteer teachers) are not receiving regular salary, it is likely that they will take on other jobs to earn money to support their families.

Even when teachers are in school, they are often not in class and pupils are often left unattended. This is a fairly widespread problem, but some schools manage classroom absenteeism better than others through persistent monitoring by school leadership. In WR1, KN1 and KR3, the school principals conduct regular monitoring of every classroom to check that teachers are in class and delegate a school prefect per class to alert teachers when it is their time to teach. In WR2, it was concerning to note, however, that during the three days we spent at this school, there were several occasions where students were in classrooms for lessons, but there were no teachers and they were not being taught even though their teachers were in school. There was no action taken during these occurrences and whilst intentions to monitor were in place, this did not translate into any action during the three days we were there. In WR1, if a teacher is absent, every effort is made to find a teacher who can pick up the lesson notes/lesson plan of the absent teacher and deliver the class. Management withholds pay (SLL20,000 per lesson missed) if a teacher does not show up for class (despite being in school) and also withhold pay if teacher is underperforming.

Very little teaching and learning takes place in the first couple of weeks after schools reopen. In KN1, to ensure efficient use of the teaching and learning time, the school upholds the practice of embarking on teaching and learning activities on the first day of resumption. The culture of losing the first two weeks of resumption because students and teachers assume that no serious teaching and learning activities will happen at the schools does not apply. Before schools go on holidays, teachers and students are reminded that the first week of resumption will entail active class sessions and that, the second week will be for assessment covering topics taught during the first week. Such assessment is used in determining the

outcome of their terminal exams. Also, the school has a system where all teachers whose subjects are for the first period of the day must be in school earlier than the normal daily resumption time of 7:45am to coordinate all pre-classroom activities for the day (class cleaning and assembly), as soon as assembly is over, classes commence. Teachers who for any reason will be absent, are required to give the principal at least two days' notice so that plans can be made to swap their teaching periods with other teachers. The school mentor (teacher), who is considered strict and disciplined, is in charge of a time-book which teachers sign before and after each lesson. The school management has had teachers sent away from the school just for flouting their class time without prior permission from the management.

Box 6: Increasing instructional time: what are better-performing schools doing differently

Increasing classroom instructional time: what are better-performing schools doing differently

Expanded learning time: Across all districts, schools offered afterschool programs - weekend tutoring in WR3, night classes in KR2, KR3 and KN1, after school classes in KN2 with the aim of bringing students up to speed.

Time-book check is a system to monitor the duration teachers spend in the classroom teaching. Teachers are expected to log in when lesson starts and ends for every period. At the end of the week, this is reviewed by the school management. In WR3, this book was in the custody of the students, they report to the principal at the end of the week if they have had less contact hours in a particular subject for action to be taken. These students also report on the assimilation of the content as well as make recommendations for the next lesson. Time book was also being used in KR1, the school mentor (teacher), who is considered strict and disciplined, is in charge of this time-book which teachers sign before and after each lesson. The school management has had teachers sent away from the school just for flouting their class time without prior permission from the management. In WR1, the school is very orderly in terms of movement of pupils around school. For example, after lunch break or morning devotion, everyone goes back to class immediately and lessons start with no more than 5 minutes delay. Late comers beyond 8:05am are not allowed in. If a teacher is absent, every effort is made to find a teacher who can pick up the lesson notes/lesson plan of the absent teacher and deliver the class. Management withholds pay (SLL20,000 per lesson missed) if a teacher does not show up for class (despite being in school) and also withholds pay if teacher is underperforming.

Early school resumption: In KN1, to ensure efficient use of the teaching and learning time, the school upholds the practice of embarking on teaching and learning activities on the first day of resumption. The culture of losing the first two weeks of resumption because students and teachers assume that no serious teaching and learning activities will happen at the schools does not apply.

4.4 Are schools able to cover the syllabus?

“There are about 50 topics in all to be covered but only about 30 topics get completed. Most of the topics are related for each term but when these are not covered step by step; basic concepts are lost. These impact on their overall lesson contact hour as a result of time spent trying to bring students up to speed” – Teacher, WR3.

Most teachers confirmed that they really struggle to complete syllabus due to many holidays, activities, and lack of classrooms during internal exams. Some measures have been put in place to enable the school to extend the time for teaching and learning in order to cover the syllabus. The time table has been adjusted by reducing the two breaks to one and reducing the duration of the remaining break from 25 minutes to 20 minutes to have additional time for teaching and learning ***“when there was a 2nd break, the last period was just 25 minutes now we dropped one break and so we get the full 40 minutes” teacher, KR2.*** Two hours are devoted for extra classes after school when exams are approaching. Also, night classes are organised in order to revise, cover syllabus and deepen understanding of concepts. In WR3, teachers disclosed that workload per term is a lot as the syllabus is too ambitious for a term and far too many school activities which keep pupils away from the class. As a result, the syllabus is hardly covered, and children go half prepared for exams.

Similarly, principal in KR3 believed the curriculum is too broad, too theory oriented. He said that Sierra Leone as a country has not given a place to skills acquisition in its curriculum and that a revisit is needed to incorporate skill acquisition in the curriculum. The lack of job opportunities in the country discourages parents from contributing to the education of their children because they are of the mindset that, after graduation, it will be difficult to get any gainful employment. ***“The role of education is to ensure that it meets the needs and aspiration of the community in context – it should incorporate – arts – drama, agriculture, music and the likes so that pupils can learn skills to become entrepreneurs in the future”*** Principal, KR3.

Poor primary school foundation is also another barrier to completing the curriculum, for instance, students in JSS3 still struggle with being able to read simple text and understand simple concepts such as how to use tenses correctly in English. These findings have serious implications not only for how children are coping with school today but also for what they will be able to acquire when they are in upper grades. Teachers will have to start from teaching the basics first before moving on to the day’s topics. This makes it hard to be able to sufficiently cover the syllabus ahead of exams. ***“The problem in the schools are inherited from the primary school, to identify the problem, it should be at the primary school education system. The N.P.S.E does not provide thorough screening for pupils that transition to secondary schools”*** Teacher, WR3. It is for reasons such as mentioned above that KR3 and KN1 school liaise with the primary school headmasters to ensure that the basic concept is taught at the primary school to pupils who eventually transition to these secondary schools. ***“In the past, a lot of the primary school pupils after completion of primary 6, could not identify the letters of the alphabet effortlessly. But, the presence of the secondary school in the community has further strengthened lesson delivery at the primary school. When we realized that the crop of students that graduate from the primary level had very faulty teaching and learning outcome and 80% of them lacked the basic knowledge, we decided to partner with the head master of the primary school to address the situation and now we have recorded tremendous improvement”*** Principal, KR3.

Box 7: Covering the syllabus: what are better-performing schools doing differently

Covering the syllabus: what are better-performing schools doing differently

Extra hour of class / fewer breaks / shorter recess: In KN1 and KR3, secondary students stay back for an extra hour to learn. During this period, key concepts taught during the previous term are revised so that students fully absorb these concepts. It also provides more time to cover the curriculum.

Synergies between primary and secondary schools: In KN1, some of the secondary school teachers have previously taught in primary schools. Hence, they had the skill and patience to explain complex concepts to secondary school students but who have weak understanding of basic concepts, they provide routine support to the primary headmaster to know how those who newly transitioned to the secondary are faring. The principal of KR2 collaborates with the headmaster of the primary school to discuss concepts to cover before students get to the secondary school. This way, the secondary schools keep track of what was taught in the primary schools and can leverage it for continuity of the curriculum.

4.5 What role do classroom assessments and examinations play?

“Measurement and evaluation need to be valid and accurate to motivate children to put in their best” - Teacher, KN1.

“If students are allowed to cheat during exams, it weakens their chances to do well during external exams because such opportunity for malpractices might not be available” – CTA member, KR3.

“I will give classroom assessment to ascertain level of understanding and decide how much remediation is needed. If required I take extra / special classes both to help students catch up, revise, understand content but also to help coverage of curricular material” -Teacher, KR2.

Better performing schools, overall, seemed to make greater use of continuous formative assessments – both to encourage pupils to revise and for teachers to ascertain pupils’ level of understanding. For instance, at the time of the team’s visit, classroom or internal assessments were going on at KR2. The school undertakes two assessments per term (six per year). These are used by teachers to assess what pupils have understood, and also motivates pupils to study regularly. The case study teacher says he uses pupils’ responses to his questions in the class and their performance in class assignments to determine their level of understanding of the topic (a way of continuous and formative assessment). Checking pupils’ notebooks also plays a role in classroom-based assessment. ***Appreciating the lack of a textbook and knowing that most students rely on their notebooks to study for exams, if notes are not copied during classes, they will be left with nothing to revise for exams – Teacher, WR3***

The pressure on pupils to pass examinations is pervasive and this focus on exams determines much of what is taught and learnt – sometimes to the detriment of conceptual understanding of content. This also leads to teachers singularly focussing on past years’ BECE / WASSCE question papers to teach, rather than the curricular material. In KR2, parents are very conscious of the fact that passing examinations help children progress to higher levels in their academic and career pursuit. Because of this, they are very keen for their children to pass examinations and reward them with food or money when they pass, and pay for their children to attend extra classes for exams revision. The school also has an incentive package for pupils who pass their examinations: during the time when they were fee-paying, a child who came first in class was given a dozen exercise books and 2 sets of uniforms. Currently, children who come first are given money for lunch and are given leadership positions in school.

“We have nurtured children to be lazy, when exams are around the corner, they fall victim to exam scams...they use phones to cheat. No one press them to practice - DDE.



The high prevalence of malpractice in exams was mentioned in almost all schools. After-school extra classes mainly focus on review of exam papers from prior years – with students often camping in their schools for night classes just before their exams (as the adjoining picture shows). Students themselves admitted taking their studies seriously only in JSS3 (the BECE year). Teachers see the outcome of exams as a reflection of their school, so they take it seriously. It determines the status of the school in the community and bears implications on pupil enrolment. Teachers often prepare their scheme of work and

lesson notes based on past years’ exam papers rather than the syllabus (this practice, however, is now significantly reduced for English and maths since the launch of lesson plans but continues in other subjects). When they run out of time, teachers admitted focussing on often-repeated topics asked in BECE or WASSCE as a priority instead of covering the syllabus. One SSO interviewed in Kono, said that from his observation, teachers find it hard to teach some topics on the LPM because such topics are not listed on the exam curriculum and so they have never taught it. For instance, there is a topic called ‘Sets in Everyday Life’ under mathematics, it is in the national syllabus, but it is not on the WAEC syllabus. He stated that some teachers are not able to teach the topic because they are not used to it.

“For a child to pass exams he or she must have started studying before time. So, the reasons why children pass their exams are because those children take their schoolwork seriously and do not wait for the dead hours to start studies” – CTA member, KR2

Most schools have regular internal examinations although parental support to pupils during exams (especially for girls) appeared stronger in better-performing schools. In KR2, for instance, there is strict internal examination system. Due to lack of adequate classrooms, exams are conducted in shifts to allow for adequate spacing between each student to prevent cheating. The marked exam scripts from each teacher is submitted to the school management for vetting along with the grades and these are then assigned to another teacher to review before results are released. Also, as a way of encouragement, as exams approach, parents reduce household chores that their children are mandated to do. Girls interviewed also disclosed that older siblings also help them to study. The school organizes evening classes for students from 2-4pm, night classes are organised from 8pm to about 1am (this is a kind of boarding school arrangement, parents make financial contribution for food and electricity expenditures) routinely for the JSS3 students. Parents also pay visits to the school at night to supervise these activities and teachers are also present in school to support and monitor, especially ensure there are no distractions from social media or other vices. In WR1, the principal and CTA members proudly proclaimed their school toppers in exams had consistently been girls.

Some principals and teachers also opined that recent poor performance in BECE and WASSCE was because every form of examination malpractice was eliminated this year. *“Before 90% of our children depended on exam malpractice for passing external exams like BECE. Presently government has wiped off that habit of exam malpractice and that is the reason why these students are not doing well in the external exams” – principal, WR3.*

“Some of the teachers are not honest and some are biased. They may pass a student due to favouritism. Therefore, these students underperform in external exams” – Principal, WR3.

Despite the high frequency of tests, assessments and examinations in most schools, it is not clear to what extent these influence improved teaching and learning. Better performing schools appeared to have slightly better systems, i.e. tests are conducted and marked with integrity and without much malpractice; and scores are then used to give pupils feedback. Class assignments are regularly evaluated as reported across schools; a revision is done with the students to point out required corrections. Continuous assessment forms part of the possible overall score a student can get at the end of the term (40% class assignment and 60% for exams), from these scores, the performance of the student is evaluated to know where they are struggling so that efforts can be made to support them before the terminal examination. On exam malpractice, the DDE disclosed that it depends on the integrity of the school head. If principals are able to manage teachers well to deliver quality teaching, there will be no need for children to depend on malpractice to do well in exams. In WR3, on the other hand, due to the large student population and the number of scripts that teachers must mark, exams scores were not considered fair or accurate by students. Students were said to be promoted based on teacher’s preference, and result/scores were attributed based on how active a student was in class rather than on actual performance in the test/exams. To address this, the principal has now made it compulsory for teachers to submit their script after grading for validation to be sure that no student is favoured or victimised. However, teachers blame the current situation on the pressure (by parents and school administration) on teachers to ensure that all students taking their courses do well in exams. Teachers are also assessed by the pass level of students in their classes. - ***“I am consistent in my work. I give grades to deserving students, but the school complain that my class has the highest failure rate. But my students get the best grades in the BECE. I teach so hard” - Teacher, WR3.***

Box 8: Classroom assessments and examinations: what are better-performing schools doing differently

Classroom assessments and examinations: what are better-performing schools doing differently

Strongly discouraging examination malpractice and strict monitoring: Across all schools, students are being discouraged from exam malpractice. However, in better performing schools, there appears to be strict monitoring by all parties (school principals, teachers, parents, community members) to ensure this is actually implemented and goes beyond lip service. In KR2, the schools ensure senior students sitting for exams are well spaced out during examinations to avoid malpractice. As a result, a shift-system occurs during exams. This involves the junior secondary school students writing their exams at an earlier period to allow enough space for the senior school students during their examinations

Continuous assessments are integral to pupil's overall performance: Also, providing graded continuous assessment (especially in KN1, WR1) to form a percentage of their final terminal score provide teachers opportunities to assess on a regular bases to ascertain students comprehension level and come up with modalities to rectify them.

Holistic approach to classroom assessment: Teachers use every means available to them to continuously assess pupils' level of understanding, give feedback, and adapt their style of teaching. Principals themselves were also reported to conduct routine monitoring and observation of classroom to assess teachers.

All forms of favouritism by teachers in grading is discouraged: Teachers in whose subject student perform best at the end of a term as well as on the BECE exams are offered incentives by the school management to motivate them. This was reported across all schools. Schools have also put in measures to see that teachers grade exams fairly. In KR3, all exams scripts are reassessed after the teachers would have done so to verify that the scores issued are appropriate before the results are released. This was also the case in KN1 and WR2.

5 Managing the teaching workforce

This chapter explores the general system for managing the teaching workforce, observed across the 9 case study schools in this study. We discuss recruitment of teachers, the status of these teachers (approved/voluntary), and what this means for their motivation and the quality of teaching. The SGLA quantitative data and Annual School Census has already indicated that approximately one-third (33 per cent) of the teaching workforce in secondary grades is voluntary, giving rise to questions on accountability, performance management and ultimately quality of education. We also discuss salary and remuneration. Finally, we discuss the extent to which pre-service training prepares teachers for challenges of the classrooms and gather whether teachers are receiving any in-service CPD geared towards learning. Throughout the chapter, it will become apparent that some schools are still managing to harness better performance from their teachers despite facing similar challenges to schools throughout the education system.

5.1 How do we recruit more trained and qualified teachers?

“The TSC needs to know where there are gaps in schools in terms of subject specialists, and coordinate better with us DDEs. One school got 36 SSS teachers and 14 JSS teachers when other schools were not allocated anything” – DDE

Sierra Leone’s teacher recruitment system has undergone change since the establishment of the Teaching Service Commission (TSC) through an act of Parliament in 2011. Whilst previously teacher recruitment and promotion were managed by the MBSSE with significant involvement from the DDEs through their District Education Offices (DEOs), this is now spearheaded centrally by the TSC. In turn, the TSC have a mandate to oversee the recruitment and performance management of teachers across the country. Since this shift, criteria for teacher recruitment and approval – which is directly linked to whether, as a teacher, you are on the government payroll and therefore receive a government salary or not – has changed. Teachers now need a Higher Teaching Certificate (HTC) or Diploma as minimum standard.

That is not to say principals, school management and other key stakeholders do not play any part in teacher recruitment. Principals and DDEs make recommendations to the TSC via an “ED Form”, who then process these recommendations and decide whether to officially hire a teacher and put them on the payroll. In theory, this “*autonomous or semi-autonomous*” approach, according to a DDE, is a “good thing” as it helps to “recruit trained and qualified teachers”. This approach contrasts past recruitment practice: “*in the past we used to recruit even the untrained and unqualified teachers and we encouraged them to do in-service training or later they will go to colleges to capacitate themselves. We even used to invite them to in-service training so that we can give them some capacity to be able to teach*”. (DDE)

In practice, however, another DDE told us that “sometimes this is not the case, and this is concerning”. An SSO confirmed that whilst the “school principal is responsible for making recommendations from the pool of volunteer teachers at the school” ultimately the “final decision is made by the Teaching Service Commission”. The TSC can only work with the recommendations they have been given, however, and if these are problematic then flaws crop up which affect the entire recruitment system. Another SSO bemoans; “recommendations are sometimes done as a means of rewarding a volunteer teacher who might have been at the school for many years and not necessarily based on teachers’ qualifications, teaching skills or other competencies”. As a result, the recruitment system becomes “liable to recruit teachers

on the basis of goodwill rather than on merit and the system gets flooded with unqualified teachers". In general, there appears to be a dual-track recruitment system: a formal route (as managed by the TSC, described above) and an informal route whereby volunteer teachers are, enticed by principals, to join the school and remain motivated in hope of one day getting them a government pincode / approval status. As one teacher at KR3 who recently left another school tells us: *just imagine a teacher who has taught for six years without government approval and another school promises to bring you in to help you get approval...my being here is like a miracle.*

Better-performing schools go beyond MBSSE recruitment guidelines (WR1, KR1) where one principal described their teacher recruitment as a "*formidable process*" which involved referring to MBSSE teacher recruitment guidelines in addition to an in-depth interview and lesson observation testing a candidate's "*handle over content, classroom and time management and pedagogy*". They went on to affirm that "*trained and qualified has to mean something in practice in the classroom*".

Another challenge is the recruitment and retention of female teachers. Whilst the SGLA survey tells us that female teachers constitute a very small percentage of the teaching workforce in secondary grade – only 5 per cent of JSS and SSS teachers are female – we now have insights as to why this may be. A DDE explains that "*it is just too difficult because you and I know in the remote areas that before this time women were supposed to just be housewives things are changing, especially in urban centres but in villages women are just regarded as wives so when a young girl is about the age of fifteen or so she is sent into marriage although this act is gradually fading now*".

It is not just the recruitment of female teachers that is challenging, but also being able to retain female teachers in schools when they are hired. This is especially the case in rural schools where female teachers working in schools away from their own homes faced family and societal pressure about being away from their husbands and homes. A DDE notes of the complaints they have received from female teachers, stating that "even those female teachers that are recruited, you will always have them coming to complain that their husbands are threatening that if they do not go back to stay in their marital home they are going to leave them...when I was in [X], that was the most rampant complaints that we were getting from our female teachers".

Stakeholders from all schools across the three districts we visited lamented on the lack of female teachers and the negative impact that this had for girls' safety, wellbeing and aspirations. Indeed, it was argued that "when you do not have female teachers in schools "*men most times maltreat these girls to the point of molesting them and having female teacher around not only serves as a deterrent but also as a role model.*" There are no ongoing initiatives towards recruiting more female teachers in the workforce or placements closer to their marital homes.

This issue of rural placement is not unique to female teachers. Challenges such as distance and finding accommodation were disincentivising teachers from working in rural areas. When asked how the TSC could make teaching in rural areas more attractive, a teacher in KR3 urged for a "rural settlement programme" which includes a "rural allowance, accommodation support and access to amenities". Another option which might be more cost effective would be to focus on building capacity in rural localities so that those already vested in their local communities are brought in, trained and qualified and become teachers in their

own communities. This might require some initial investment but could offer medium to long-term gains that go beyond the initial investment.

Box 9: Teacher recruitment: What are better-performing schools doing differently

Teacher recruitment: What are better-performing schools doing differently

- **Go beyond MBSSE recruitment guidelines.** They conduct in-depth interviews as part of their recruitment process, which includes testing a candidate's "handle over content, classroom/time management and pedagogy" (WR1).
- **Other recommendations for consideration:**
 - **Design and implement a female recruitment drive** with commensurate incentives to make the teaching profession a viable and sought after option for females.
 - **Consider a 'rural settlement programme' to attract teachers** consisting of an allowance, accommodation, and access to recreational facilities in order to incentivise teaching in rural localities
 - **Consider a 'rural apprenticeship programme':** Build capacity in rural localities so that those already vested in their local communities are recruited as "apprentice teachers", trained and qualified and become teachers in their own communities.

5.2 Are extra classes a financial lifeline for teachers and schools?

"Honestly, this free education will not be a quality because teachers are not well paid. Imagine nurses are paid over Le 1,000,000 (\$100) and teachers are paid lesser and it's a chicken change. We are being pushed to the wall. Let's say a student offers Le50,000 (\$5) and our services are very poor, we do not have medical allowances and others, will I not take it? No matter what they do, it will not be a quality education" (Teacher, WR2)

Salary concerns were a source of contention among teachers, having ramifications on teacher motivation, attendance, retention, management and ultimately teaching and learning. Whilst complaints of not getting paid and waiting to be brought onto the official government payroll system were ubiquitous across all schools we spoke to, we tried to learn more about the specific ways in which this was impacting teaching and learning. For example, all three DDEs referred to potential challenges of teacher management when such a significant number of teachers are either on payroll but not getting paid (i.e. late salary payments) or not on the payroll at all (i.e. volunteer teachers). A DDE proclaims, **"if teachers are on payroll and paid, as principal you will have that authority to ensure teachers do their work"**. This becomes more problematic, the DDE explains, when a principal in a school is the only person being paid as **"if you don't coax the teachers from your own pockets, some of them will only go to school when they choose to and also you will not have a hold on them"**. In many cases, teachers are being subsidised by their principal's salary or community contributions (food, money, labour) or in some cases from government school subsidies (i.e. resources primarily for upgrading the school's learning environment and facilities). Teacher pay naturally also plays a big role in teacher retention. A teacher (KR3) explains, "in this school the principal is generous enough in giving financial assistance or loans to teachers as a form of motivation, but I have heard in other schools where the head of school doesn't offer anything irrespective of the reasons. That is why I decided to stay even when I was not approved by the government...this principal listens to the cry of his teachers".

Community contributions towards teacher remuneration plays an important role towards motivating and retaining teachers. According to a CTA chairperson, *“we often meet and come up with a reasonable amount of money to give to the principal who would then give to the teachers as a stipend as a way of motivating them to deliver their services”* (KN1). Whilst a principal at KR1 “doesn’t have money to give teachers” from his personal resources, they “appraise teachers and get to raise funds from parents which is shared for the school administration and welfare of teachers”. It is interesting to note that both these schools (KR1, KN1) are better performing schools in their respective districts, both schools finding alternative financing means (community stakeholders and parents) to provide financial incentives for teachers to be motivated and refrain from seeking alternative employment.

The fact that schools seeking alternative means of financial support from parents goes against the principles of FQSE, is well known. For some schools we visited, the introduction of FQSE had cut off a vital lifeline of financial support from parents and had had negative ramifications for motivation and retention of volunteer teachers who are not on the government payroll. Indeed, *“because of the introduction of FQSE and the government telling us we should not collect any money from the kids...as a result of not having any money to pay teachers a whole lot of them decided to leave and this is why we are short of teachers...it is only a few of us who decided to stay and ask other colleagues to help us fight the cause, to help boost free quality education”* (Principal, KN3). As a result of FQSE, however, *“parents were told not to pay anything for their children in school and because of that parents stopped paying”*. Coupled with delayed payments from the government, the sudden reduction in financial support for the school was described as one of, if not the biggest, challenge for the school currently. One could argue that this is a short-term challenge for a relatively newly-introduced FQSE. As more teachers and schools get approved, however these severe financial constraints are having serious effects on school upkeep and teacher retention, especially since teachers are looking for alternative forms of employment. As one teacher puts it, *“you cannot expect a teacher who is not receiving salary at the end of the month to be a happy man in the classroom at all”* (KR3).

The most common method for teachers to address their salary woes was through paid extra classes (after school or on the weekends) which is used to pay teacher salaries. Some schools (KN2, KN3) even made it compulsory for students to enrol for extra classes, and with 200+ JSS/SSS students at KN2 being charged 20,000 SLL per month for extra classes, this provides a significant lifeline for the school’s finances. However, whilst this model which goes against FQSE seems to be operating smoothly and successfully in KN2, in KN3 a teacher tells us how students avoid school because of these after-school extra classes. Indeed, *“I think one of the main reasons why these children sometimes refuse to come to school is because I sometimes ask them to stay after school for extra classes which we ask them to pay so because of that most of them will decide not to come to school...some don’t have the money and they stay at home”*. This concern around extra lessons and potential impacts on teaching and learning in terms of student attendance was echoed by a DDE who had received complaints that teachers spent lesson time complaining about their salary predicament to students whilst inviting them to attend additional paid classes and in some cases even leading to a “grades-for-payment” phenomenon.

Studies (Jayachandran, 2014)⁴ suggest that paid extra classes can limit teacher effort during their regular school day as effort is saved for paid classes. Then there is the issue of those who cannot afford extra classes – if ‘good’ teaching only takes place in these extra classes, those who do not attend are put at a further disadvantage. Whilst KN2 offers flexible and reduced payment options for their compulsory 20,000SLL/month of classes, this still puts the onus on teaching time outside of normal contact hours for more thorough learning to take place. A teacher at the same school cited that it was because of these extra classes that they

⁴ S. Jayachandran: Incentives to teach badly: After-school tutoring in developing countries. Journal of Development Economics, 108 (2014), pp. 190-205

were able to cover all topics in the syllabus, further disadvantaging those who are unable or unwilling to attend.

Salary concerns are not limited to the non- or late-payment of salaries but also how they are paid. Even when teachers are receiving salaries, the system that governs the payment of salaries has left some principals feeling disempowered. Currently salaries are handled by the TSC and are paid directly into personal bank accounts of teachers. Whilst a centralised remuneration system might be more efficient than schools having to handle payments, there are indications that this is making it more difficult to hold teachers to account. A DDE cites that they are receiving “a lot of complaints from principals” who tell them that teachers often go missing for “two to three days” in a month after they’ve received their salaries.

Box 10: Teacher salary concerns: What are better-performing schools doing differently

Teacher salary concerns: What are better-performing schools doing differently

- Principals are proactively encouraging their teachers and have a shared sense of working towards the betterment of education, even amidst salary woes.
- Proactively engaging the community as a source of praise, encouragement and financial support through small contributions of money, food or labour.
- Recommendations for consideration:
 - A more de-centralized remuneration system so that principals are empowered to query payment of salaries to teachers, allowing principals to better hold teachers to account.

5.3 How do we manage volunteer teachers?

“Most teachers leave the teaching job when they get opportunities because of the lack of finance. No student would like to become a teacher.” (Teacher, WR2)

“Also, some of these volunteers you cannot force them to do their work because if you do they will just down their tools so most times we have to coax them and make sure that they help us” (DDE)

The SGLA quantitative survey and Annual School Census have indicated that around a third of Sierra Leone’s teaching workforce is voluntary. They are volunteer teachers who are not on the government’s payroll. Many of them have been volunteer teachers for several years, awaiting their turn to get a government pincode, and in the meantime subsisting on financial and in-kind contributions from the principal and community. In many schools, such as the ones we visited, the number of voluntary teachers can constitute half, if not all, of the schools’ teaching workforce. They are eagerly awaiting approval and corresponding remuneration that comes with becoming formally employed by the TSC.

In some cases, teachers spoke of the teaching profession as a “survival strategy”, a “waiting game”, and not a preferred profession of choice. For instance, a teacher in KN2 spoke of his ambition to become a lawyer but because of financial circumstances could not pursue his dream and is currently a volunteer teacher surviving on stipends paid from compulsory extra classes. Others talked about how they wanted to be doctors, nurses or engineers and when asked about perceptions around the teaching profession stated it was not lucrative, prestigious or respected especially given the current predicament with so many

volunteer and unpaid teachers. Some of these teachers were waiting on better opportunities, or as one teacher put it “any paid opportunity”. It was as if teaching was seen as ‘limbo time’ waiting on for “something better”. This sentiment supports recent academic literature studying the links between teacher motivation, short-term attitudes and behaviour among teachers to education quality that found “teaching was the most frequently cited survival strategy” (Harris, 2020: 4).⁵ One of course cannot ignore the wider context that contributes towards such a predicament: it is estimated that over 1000 Sierra Leonean university graduates enter the labour market each year and The World Bank Enterprise Survey reports that only 143 new formal sector jobs were created in 2017 (Awoko, 2017).⁶

Box 11: A Teacher Reflects on why they joined the teaching profession.

“I decided to become a teacher because the school drop out of children due to sex was becoming alarming and their parents don’t teach them about teenage pregnancy and sex. I then decided to become a teacher to motivate the girl child to focus on their studies, and I do explain to them about how difficult it was during my early age as a girl child and here I am now. I teach them about early marriage and teenage pregnancy for them to avoid such while they go to school. Promoting girls’ education in Sierra Leone is very important.” Teacher, WR1

That is not to say all teachers we spoke to were not vested in the teaching profession, even if it might not have been their first-choice career initially. A teacher in KR3 reflected on her career choice; “personally my dream was to become a nurse but after college I changed my mindset and chose teaching as a profession.” This was due to being persuaded against nursing because it was deemed an “expensive course”. Completing an HTC and after six years of teaching, she concludes that “my love for children is probably one of the reasons I took the profession and so far it has been good for me and I never regretted the decision”. Elsewhere, a strong sense of community and sense of responsibility to ‘pay it forward’ to the nation helped overcome the precarious nature of being a ‘volunteer teacher’. After initially wanting to become a doctor, engineer or president, one particular teacher changed their minds in order to give back to the community – “as a patriotic Sierra Leonean, I believe I can make my contribution in developing the country through teaching” (Teacher, KR1).

We found a suggestive link between a strong sense of community and teachers’ obligation to give back to the future generations as “daughters and sons of the soil” among better performing schools. CTA members at KR1 are proud of their teachers and their commitment to quality teaching and learning despite all staff currently working on a voluntary basis. They praise their teachers as “not wanting the children to be uneducated” and “willing to sacrifice to make sure that our children get the education they deserve”. One member points out that the secret behind their teachers delivering so well despite the challenges they face is “all to do with their motivation and personal sacrifice”. Indeed, the CTA are so grateful and impressed by the teachers at the school, they mobilise their resources from small scale farming and offer food items such as “millet and groundnut as a form of encouragement for their services”. As a result, this seemed to mitigate the challenges that less-performing schools have been facing among volunteer teachers, i.e. absenteeism, lack of motivation, cash-for-grades and extra classes. Perhaps the recruitment system can think innovatively about how to best benefit from these sentiments and work towards specific policies to recruit, train and empower community stakeholders who are vested in the communities they teach in.

⁵ Harris, J. (2020). If you can’t do teach: Exploring short-termism in the teaching profession. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 99, 101519. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2019.101519>

⁶ Sierra Leone news: Harvest season of graduation ends at USL. 2017, May 17 (2017) Retrieved 20 April 2018, from Awoko Newspaper website: <https://awoko.org/2017/05/17/sierra-leone-news-harvest-season-of-graduation-ends-at-usl/>

While voluntary teachers do not feel motivated due to the lack of salaries, they can be a destabilising factor in an education system marked by massive teacher shortages that compromises the quality of teaching and learning. An SSO from WR explains:

“The lack of salaries to majority of the teachers who are volunteers can lead to corruption because they have to take care of their families and some of them are being paid Le 200,000 (\$20) a month as volunteers. Most of the female volunteer teachers ended up selling cakes, ginger beer in the school as a way of generating income. Teachers demand for money in exchange for grades at the SSS level. They normally ask students to buy gifts when they have their birthdays, and this may lead students to steal from parents.” (SSO, WR)

The proliferation of volunteer teachers, therefore, has a number of significant unintended consequences on the quality of teaching and learning. It is difficult to hold these teachers to account, particularly to ensure their attendance. The negative impact on attendance for teaching and learning is well known – for example, Das, Dercon, Habyarimana and Krishnan (2007)⁷ show that a five percent increase in teacher absenteeism reduces average learning by 4-8 percent over a year. Better-performing schools have, through a range of measures such as community contributions and strong school leadership, managed to make the system of volunteer teachers work for their schools.

Box 12: Managing volunteer teachers: What are better-performing schools doing differently

Managing volunteer teachers: What are better-performing schools doing differently?

- ✓ Fostered a strong sense of community and responsibility to ‘pay it forward’ to “sons and daughters of the soil” in order to motivate teachers in overcoming the precarious nature of being a volunteer teacher. This has also had positive implications vis-à-vis absenteeism, cash-for-grades and extra classes.
- ✓ Fostered positive relations with the CTA to the extent that they are encouraging teachers through offering in-kind incentives such as millet, rice and groundnuts.
- ✓ Banned extra classes (WR1) to prevent selective effort that teachers put in during extra classes vs regular contact hours.

5.4 How do we provide pre- and in-service training?

“The teaching profession is open to all manner of people, half-baked teachers are destroying the future of our children, foundation is everything” – Principal, WR3

“Philosophers did very well in letting us know what we should expect in the classroom...they propounded many theories but there are things that they left out which are unforeseen. Things like child psychology which talks a lot about the child and how children learn. This simply means that when one is from the training college it is not all what you learnt that will be in reality...” (Teacher, KR3)

The challenges of recruiting untrained and unqualified teachers has been highlighted in earlier sections. Just over a third (37 per cent) of JSS and SSS teachers have a Higher Teacher Certificate (HTC) qualification (SGLA Quantitative Survey, 2019). The HTC does not only entail subject specific knowledge but training on guidance counselling, continuous

⁷ J. Das, S. Dercon, J. Habyarimana, P. Krishnan: Teacher shocks and student learning: Evidence from Zambia. The Journal of Human Resources, 42 (4) (2007), pp. 820-862

assessment, pedagogy and supporting students with special needs. As stated earlier, the TSC is moving towards holding the HTC as minimum standard for being officially recruited into the teaching system and it provides the foundational basis for good teaching and learning in the classroom. For those teachers we spoke to that taught prior to obtaining an HTC, experiences were generally positive. In comparing his time and experience as a teacher before and upon obtaining his HTC, a teacher from KN3 explains:

“My experience as a teacher when I was not in college to now when I got my HTC is quite different. I now know what it entails to teach and be a good teacher.... you have to make the children take part in the learning process through class participation instead of you talking alone.” Teacher (KN3)

Other positive aspects of HTC training pertain to practical arrangements around classroom seating to “ensure each student has the opportunity to write freely as well as allow the teacher to move freely whilst teaching” and focussing on “adaptive teaching”, i.e. a teacher’s ability to “change the method of teaching depending on their understanding of a particular topic” (Teacher, KR3).

However, there was an overall impression that pre-service training covered generic concepts that were good for understanding how to teach in an ‘ideal’ educational environment but less sensitive to the realities of a typical, Sierra Leonean classroom. For example, a teacher complained about the lack of preparation to teach in classrooms which were overcrowded, diverse in mother tongue and lacked parental buy in to supporting their child’s education (WR2). Whilst each school we visited had its own challenges and constraints, there were emerging themes which could be found at all schools.

The introduction of FQSE has introduced new challenges for classroom teachers, mainly pertaining to rapid increases in enrolment, overcrowding in classrooms, and pupils from a diverse mix of backgrounds (including dropouts, overage learners, and first-generation learners). Pre-service training could be enhanced to incorporate some of these context-specific challenges of classroom teaching.

Box 13: A Teacher Reflects on LWL LPM In-Service Training

*“For me the training was a very good one because we were taught on how to use the LPM in the classroom. Of course the LPM has been a revelation in the teaching field for me. Because with it I don’t have to worry about teaching the syllabus to the children because the topics have been selected accordingly. **It is very simple to use and teach.** I strongly believe if teachers use it well, then they will have no problem in the classroom whatsoever. The LPM gives the teacher the opportunity to interact with the children in class and (using pupil handbooks) gives the children the opportunity to study ahead of the teachers so that when they come to class, the teacher will find it easy to teach. With this LPM you as a teacher will be able to group these children in such a way that they can learn from themselves. When once you divided them into groups, those in the group who understand what the teacher explained will have the opportunity to teach their companions, which will give freedom to the teacher to be moving around and making sure that the class goes on well. So through the training I have been able to see the lapses that were there in the classroom before the introduction of the LPM. Because before this time, you see a teacher when he goes to the classroom to teach, he does the talking alone while the children will be there listening. But the LPM has taken away the burden from the teachers and making a provision for the teachers and the pupils to interact in the class while teaching.”*

Teacher, KN3

A recurring aspect of pre/in service training that was brought up across all schools we visited was that of Leh Wi Lan and in particular the introduction and training on lesson plans. For those who were new to teaching and with limited, if any, teacher training, LPM

training is providing a “lifeline” to schools and teachers with limited resources. Indeed, the introduction of LPMs and training has resulted in less preparation time and contributed towards a shift from “chalk and talk” teaching to more interactive methods of teaching. There was consensus among teachers that the LPM training was “very positive” and contributed to “better teaching and learning”. Whereas “in the past the teacher would write on the board and expect students to copy”, teachers who have been through LWL training feel better equipped to teach (Teacher, WR2).

Furthermore, a teacher from a top performing school discussed how LPM training has helped shed light on the actual learning level that the students are currently at – rooted in the evidence base of the SGLA – and the LPMs have helped “communicate to children at a level they can understand” (KR1). Complementing HTC training, LWL in-service training was seen as a positive contribution towards “teaching, caring and managing slow and fast learners” (KR1). That is not to say in-service training buy-in has been universally embraced, especially in its initial roll out. An SSO berated teachers in one school they supervise for considering the “introduction of LPM training as an added burden to their work” due to the need to “read the LPM every day before coming to school” (WR3). After having to “cajole and coax them to see the training as a good guide in helping to deliver quality education”, the SSO has contributed to a renewed feeling that has led to “teachers commending the introduction of the LPM” to such an extent that “some teachers who used to resist the training now say they find it difficult to teach without using the LPM and skills they learnt during training” (SSO, WR3). Thus, it can be said that for some schools, **LWL training provides a fundamental and, in some cases, the only form of meaningful in-service training teachers will ever receive.**

In better performing schools a strong culture and community of practice existed around in-service training, such as:

- **“Learning circles” for cascading training to other teachers in the school:** *After we receive external training we come back and organise a seminar for those teachers who were not part of the training so we can share with our colleagues what we learn and what we should be doing.* (Teacher KR1). It was a similar arrangement in another top performing school (KN1) whereby weekly training has been institutionalised, covering training covered in LWL, gender-based violence, child centred learning, teaching pedagogy and classroom management.
- **In-service training camps organised by the school during holidays** (WR1)
- **Teachers being encouraged to apply general pedagogical techniques from LPM training to other subjects** (KR2)

Crucially, principals in better-performing schools tended to invest significant effort in monitoring their teachers’ use of LPMs in classrooms, giving feedback to teachers on a regular basis. For one hard-to-reach school which could only be accessed by an unpredictable perishable ‘road’ or by river (KR1), only 1-2 teachers are able to attend in-service training but the commitment to train their peers was strong. The principal organised his teachers into “learning circles” to disperse LPM training across all teachers. In WR2, there was a recent introduction of what it called ‘team teaching’ initiated by the new principal. This is where two teachers plan out a subject together and then each teach an aspect of the lesson to the class while the other watches and provide inputs where necessary. In some cases, other teachers or the principal demonstrate live class for teachers to watch, activities are reviewed, and feedback provided. Resource persons from other schools, colleges of education and some universities are also invited to train teachers on components of a subject where they are found to be struggling.

Box 14: Pre- and in-service training: What are better-performing schools doing differently

Pre- and in-service training: What are better-performing schools doing differently

- ✓ Organise learning circles and “team teaching” – including LWL-trained English/maths teachers and other subject teachers can benefit from LPM training.
- ✓ Teachers being encouraged to apply general pedagogical techniques from LPM training to other subjects
- ✓ Had a strong culture of in-school teacher training – they organised internal in-service training for a period of time (1-2 weeks) before the start of each term, covering both subject knowledge, pedagogical skills and time and classroom management.

6 School leadership and management

This chapter shifts the focus to school leadership, and the intersection of how external supervisors – such as SSOs and Community/Teacher Associations – interact with the school system. Having discussed teacher motivation in the previous chapter, we explore the incentives and decision-making structures principals face and how this varies across schools. We discuss - to what extent are principals empowered over decisions such as teacher recruitment, school development planning and resourcing, and how do principals' response to these challenges vary between schools. We also discuss how SSOs and other external supervisors (e.g. MBSSE inspectors) provide a support and accountability function to the education system.

6.1 What constraints do principals face in managing their schools?

“I can transform lives through education, that is my passion. I like my job as principal because it is my responsibility to the nation. I like being surrounded by pupils. Discipline is one of the main things I appreciate. Our country is full of people who have power but don't deliver their responsibility” (Principal, WR1)

“If you don't have principals who are paid well or looked after, how are they to complete their mission?” (Principal, KN2)

“The government should pay principals and heads of schools properly. Imagine you serve as a teacher and you were paid 900,000 SLL and you were promoted to principal and serve for five years still receiving the salary of a teacher” (DDE)

Principals faced many of the same drivers and challenges around remuneration and motivation discussed in the previous chapter on teachers. It was common to hear of principals talk about their “love for teaching” before becoming a principal, a desire to “serve the nation” and the potential to see pupils from their schools go on to “excel in many areas”. One school we visited was founded on the passion of a principal who, as an “impoverished orphan” benefitted from the “kindness of non-relatives” to get an education and wants to ensure that the school “sees students do well in exams and get into higher institutions” (Principal, KR3). The importance of a principal was acknowledged, cited as “responsible to ensure that education develops” and “if education develops the country will develop because it is from there we will get our engineers that will bring innovation and development, our doctors, our lawyers”. Motivation was seen to be challenging, however, due to principals not being sufficiently remunerated – if at all. Indeed, we were told that it is not all that uncommon for a teacher who has become principal to have a similar salary from when they started in the profession to their retirement.

Coupled with one's own woes on remuneration, **principals are faced with limited alternatives but to compromise their school's limited financial resources in order to motivate and retain teachers.** We heard of principals who used part of their school subsidies intended for the running and upkeep of school infrastructure to offer stipends for volunteer teachers, providing a “very big motivational factor that spurs teachers to do more in school” (WR3). These stipends are a significant pull factor for teacher retention, especially volunteer teachers who are not on the government payroll: *“in this school the principal is generous enough in giving financial assistance as a form of motivation but I have heard other schools where this isn't so... that is why I decided to stay in this school”* (Teacher, KR3). It became clear that one of the only limited options principals had to motivate their teachers was to use funds – in the form of school subsidies, allocated from the government to provide stipends to their teachers. **The impact this had – being unable to adequately procure teaching materials, furniture and pay for the maintenance /upkeep of schools**

was concerning – especially when (as discussed above) school infrastructure is under immense pressures due to increasing pupil enrolment since FQSE.

Paid extra classes is another source of funds for schools, as is the malpractice of overreporting student headcount. It was also evident from one top performing school, KN2, that a culture of over-enrolment was in place. Whilst a high number of students was a source of pride and success for the principal, the fact that school subsidies are directly linked to the number of students enrolled in a school should not be overlooked, especially considering that the school had classrooms with over 100 students for one teacher – well beyond the government target of 50:1. The lure of school subsidies (US\$5 for a JSS pupil and US\$6 for an SSS pupil per term) often means principals may overreport enrolment in the annual school census. We saw a clear example of this in one school where the official enrolment figures were 133 pupils vs. 18 pupils in reality. This is currently being looked into by the MBSSE through a FQSE headcount verification process. However, at the end of the day, raising additional funds through extra classes and inflating enrolment are some of the only options available to principals and proprietors, especially given the limited autonomy principals can yield over recruitment and allocating teachers hired by the TSC (as discussed above).

Box 15: Limited Autonomy of DDEs and principals over teacher recruitment

Limited Autonomy of DDEs and principals over teacher recruitment

If we were consulted, we will all sit together and see the stony areas, we will take it school by school and look at their capacities, look at their problems. But a list just coming from TSC that these are the schools that will benefit from new teachers, you have some schools that were over staffed; they have more teachers than others while some were not even given any teachers. Like we have a school that was given thirty seven teachers in the SSS fourteen teachers in the JSS while others were not given a single teacher. If we were invited when these allocations were done we would have divided it because even fifteen teachers would have been enough for the school while the other thirty or so teachers will service other ten schools or even more but we were not consulted. So these are the constraints faced by principals in the district. If you talk to the heads of schools they will tell you more (DDE)

6.2 How do parents and communities hold schools to account?

“Non-pincode teachers are like hungry lions...the dangerous ones who nobody can control” (CTA, WR1)

“We engage teachers through meetings and admonish them to take their work seriously and for now we are seeing the impact by the good results the school is getting as a result of our involvement in monitoring the teachers and that impacted on our children education. We now have some of our children in colleges and universities”. (CTA, KN2)

One of most pertinent issues raised in the previous chapter around recruitment was the inability for teachers to get on the payroll which is managed by the TSC. From the perspective of principals, however, **being in control of stipends – whether raised through school subsidies or extra classes, empowered principals to address challenges such as teacher attendance, performance and motivating staff.** Thus, to enhance the mandate of principals in their schools, not only do teachers need to get on the payroll, but principals need to have sufficient accountability levers available to them to manage teacher performance. Only then, a DDE tells us, will principals have the “authority to ensure that teachers are accountable”. Indeed, it is not that there does not currently exist procedures for a principal who is concerned about the performance or attendance of a teacher and would like a dock-in-pay, for example, to be considered. The problem lies, according to a principal (KR3) with the time it might take for any action be taken: ***“Even when a request is made to the TSC for a teacher’s salary to be withheld who have turned ghost workers, it takes about a year***

before this takes effect, so such teachers keep receiving salaries for over a year before their details are removed from the payroll.” Whilst the rationale for a more centralised approach to recruitment is well-noted, this report suggests the need to rethink how better to coordinate the accountability functions between schools, the TSC, MBSSE and other bodies, which should, in turn support better teaching and learning.

Community and Teacher Associations (CTAs) play a significant role in the running and performance of their schools. These are primarily made up of parents and other key community stakeholders. In some schools, they played a fundamental role in holding teachers, including volunteer teachers and principals, to account and **we found better functioning CTAs in better performing schools.** The extent and types of involvement of CTAs in their respective schools was varied, but those in better performing schools ensured frequent, in-person visits and meetings with teachers, principals and students, and truly embodied the proverb “it takes a village to raise a child”.

Box 16: CTA Engagement: “it takes a village to raise a child”

CTA Engagement: “it takes a village to raise a child”

As CTA we pay frequent visit to the school to ensure all protocols are observed in keeping the school running and children safe at all time. Our frequent meeting with teachers and head of the school has brought a lot of changes in the school and one of the ways is teachers have stopped flogging and the use of vulgar language which was demoralising to students. Now we have seen teachers calling parents in the school to explain the progress of their children and to me that is a very big change in the community. (CTA, KR2)

It was not uncommon for the CTA to directly tackle the systemic challenge of teacher remuneration and retention. It was the CTA’s intervention that stopped teachers from leaving: *“Upon the inception of the school the CTA agreed to pay teachers a stipend out of our pockets which was a good move at the time to keep teachers in school. Then with time government started sending subsidies in the school and we agreed with the principal to use some of the subsidy to pay the stipend for the teachers who are not on payroll” (CTA Member, KR2).* In communities where monetary support was not possible, or significantly limited, the community united to offer gifts in kind, sacrificing their yields from subsistence farming, rent-free accommodation in the community, bags of rice, etc. in order to “appreciate and motivate teachers who are not on the payroll” (KR1).

In other words, where all bodies including the TSC and MBSSE find management of volunteer teachers beyond their remit, it is often the principal and the community which holds this informal workforce to account and motivated (which, not to forget, constitutes 33 per cent of the teaching workforce of Sierra Leone).

Beyond monetary support, CTAs have been able to provide a direct monitoring and accountability function by increasing communication among community stakeholders. For example, in one top performing school, WR1, the CTA has played a fundamental role in strengthening the mechanisms in place to hold the principal and teachers to account. In a bid to increase communication, the CTA now organises regular meetings with parents and other stakeholders in the community to discuss all matters related to the effective running of the school. To encourage parents to monitor school activities, teaching and learning, leadership and teachers, the CTA has set up a WhatsApp group to be used as a forum to encourage parents to monitor their school, channel complaints, disseminate information and report any issues to the CTA leadership to action on. Parents feel vested and able to hold the leadership of their child’s school to account. One member proudly confirms the importance of “shared monitoring and responsibility” – *“My children are my biggest investment. They will look after me in my sunset days. I am 100% committed to ensuring they get a good*

education, so I am committed to monitoring their school and following up on any action” (CTA member, WR1).

Box 17: CTA’s Plea for Female Teachers & Agents of Change

CTA’s Plea for Female Teachers & Agents of Change

“In such meetings we made a plea to the principal to bring in a female teacher who can be able to mentor and address girls better when they are in their menstrual circle. Most of these girls are shy when in their menstrual period but if there is a female teacher, they can approach her easily and explain and the female teacher can offer advice. The school has started receiving pads for female students since last year and to me that is a very good venture to keep our girls in school when in their menstrual period. (CTA, WR3)

“If a teacher is seen going out of the way we have the right as CTA members to caution that teacher or report to the principal for action to be taken in the interest of the children”. (CTA Member, KR2)

“Before this time we had complaints of teachers using invectives or flogging our children and the situation was alarming. We as CTA met with the teachers and admonished them to refrain from such acts and today we are not getting reports from our children. I believe the training we had has helped us to know how teachers could be engaged and persuade them to change certain attitudes that may affect our children’s education. Parents serve as a watchdog....” (CTA Member, WR3)

Whilst the success of this particular CTA in a top performing school, WR1, should be celebrated, it is worth noting that the committee was able to do so through monetary incentives. In another better performing school, the CTA’s contribution towards two new buildings led to a “profound feeling of sense of ownership and pride” (CTA, KN2). **It should not be assumed that these incentive structures are replicable in other schools, especially since some schools we visited were severely cash strapped due to the dominance of subsistence farming in the community.**

Box 18: CTAs holding schools to account: what are better performing schools doing differently?

CTAs holding schools to account: what are better performing schools doing differently?

- ✓ Community and Teacher Associations played a fundamental part in holding teachers, including volunteer teachers, and principals accountable. They made regular visits to their schools and frequently met with the principal, teachers and students.
- ✓ CTAs often incentivised and showed appreciation to teachers by in-kind offerings from subsistence farming or rent-free accommodation.
- ✓ CTAs have been able to provide a direct monitoring and accountability function by increasing communication among the community.
- ✓ Set up forums through the CTA to encourage parents to monitor their schools, channel complaints, disseminate information and report any issues to the CTA leadership to action on.

6.3 How do districts and MBSSE hold schools to account?

“It is inadequate; because our traditional role is to monitor, that is to go to these schools and provide supportive supervision. But if you don’t have enough personnel and you want to go to one school a day, it will take you two to three years to cover the entire schools in the district looking at the number of staff that we have here” (DDE)

It became clear across the districts we visited that **key stakeholders at the district level, particularly DDEs, were finding it hard to monitor schools, principals and teachers.** Whilst there was consensus that effective monitoring is a key component in a well-functioning education system – “if you monitor schools and provide the right supportive supervision, the people will do the right thing” – **there was simply not enough personnel, financial resources and capacity to do so.**

One of the reasons for this situation, as explained by a high-level stakeholder at MBSSE, was that **the flow of funds from MoFED, to MBSSE (central) to DEOs was not functioning, hindering the district offices to deliver its operational mandate.** Indeed, it was not that no system or process exists for requisition and flow of funds. District Education Offices are required to submit an annual budget to MBSSE, which when approved goes to MoFED for approval, and then the central government releases funds to districts on a quarterly basis. All three DDEs we spoke to had not received their funding as scheduled: *“as I am speaking...for the entire year we have only got one quarter. It is only recently that we were told another quarter had been posted to the council...maybe the third and fourth quarter payments for this year we will receive next year”.* Another DDE lamented, “at times moneys from the government do not come at the time that we need it, as I am speaking we are now in the fourth quarter but we have only received money for the second quarter for which I have just submitted my proposals”. When funds do finally flow through to districts, they are slowed down by having to go through multiple levels of approval from the MBSSE and MoFED, and the quantum of funds are inadequate – SLL10 million or \$1000 per quarter per DEO according to one official. This report acknowledges, however, that underlying fiscal constraints at the National Treasury level may be contributing to this phenomenon but leads one DDE to feel that “decentralisation is not fully implemented; it is only partial” and confused about where 21 per cent of the national budget (i.e. education’s share in the national budget) is going.

In addition, **a source of tension between the MBSSE inspectorate unit and the TSC became apparent** – when an inspector inspects a school, they have a limited mandate to inspect the teachers because teacher management now falls under the remit of the TSC.

Linked to a lack of stable finances, **the district offices for education – in line with the entire education system, suffers from a scarcity of staff on payroll and must rely on volunteers.** As a result, the DDE office had to do a lot of ‘firefighting’. That is, pay visits to schools where there are known problems of significant nature. There was a feeling that the lack of transport means for inspectorate staff was a source of indignity; disrespectful to the office that they hold and devoid of appreciation that some schools in the riverine areas are difficult to reach, requiring motorised boats to ensure safe access.

The workload on DDEs and inspectors has been exacerbated by the onset of FQSE with already constrained inspectors needing to cover an increasing number of schools within a district as more schools get approved. Disparity of oversight between schools easily reachable in the cities and those more remote has widened. Indeed, the SGLA results show that in both English and maths, there is a significant negative relationship between remoteness of school and pupils’ performance. In other words, pupils’ learning levels drop as we travel away from schools that are located near the district headquarter town, towards more remote schools. Pupils from remote schools, across both JSS2 and SSS2 grades, are more likely to feature in the lower performance bands (P6 or below).

Box 19: DDE's Share Transport and Logistics Woes

DDE's Share Transport and Logistics Woes

"Logistics support, because like even the ones that are volunteering, some of them do not have bikes. And for those that are with bikes at times, we are constrained with the provision of fuel to move around. Although we have our sector funding from council, so to speak, but the late disbursement of these funds normally affect our job. Now we are in the fourth quarter and we have only received first and second quarter monies. So, the late disbursement of funds from council or from central government is really constraining our work"

"Like I said now we are doing monitoring and we have schools everywhere in the district but the road network is one that is very challenging for us because you have some terrains that are very difficult to reach, so to go there it will take you some time while in some places at this time of the year you cannot venture going there. So difficult terrains, poor road network in the district are very much challenging for us".

"And also even the volunteers that I have; the supervisors or the focal persons that I have do not have mobility, some of them are using their old bikes some of which are not road worthy any more. And sometimes even in terms of network because we have some communities like [XXX] that do not have network coverage and because of this when you want to talk to some of these heads of schools it will take days to be able to reach them"

6.4 What role do SSOs play? What lies ahead for them after LWL?

"Only God Almighty knows what will happen to SSOs after LWL" (High Level Stakeholder at MBSSE)

SSOs are frequent external visitors to schools. Nearly all principals reported at least one external supervision per term visit, in the SGLA quantitative survey. Of these visits, SSOs were the most frequently reported visitors – reported by 80 per cent of principals. For teachers, over 80 per cent reported an external visitor had observed their class, with 89 per cent reporting the visitor had been an SSO. Indeed, all but one of the nine schools we visited had first-hand interactions with SSOs, one school being privately-owned and thus rendering it ineligible to SSO support.

Box 20: SSO mandate

The SSO Mandate

A School Support Officer, or SSO:

- Serves as a critical friend to the teacher they support, with the:
- Mindset to bring about positive change
- Skills to support adult development;
- Knowledge of lesson plans and pedagogy
- Credibility to establish mutually respectful relationships with teachers
- Commitment to overall goal of improving student learning outcomes

They are to carry out:

- In person school visits 4 days/week
- Work directly to support teachers and principals, including lesson observations and one-to-one meetings
- Undertake own programme of professional development as a coach 1 day/week and in school holidays
- Data collection
- Teacher training

The feedback on SSOs was overwhelmingly positive. They are often seen as highly trained, qualified and experienced individuals who operate directly in the classroom and alongside the teaching workforce. They are seen as making tangible contributions in promoting teaching and learning in the schools they visit. They have played a fundamental role in ensuring that LPMs are delivered effectively in classrooms and teachers start getting into the habit of reflecting on their pedagogical practice. SSOs have provided the operational impetus towards transitioning away from “copy from the board, talk and chalk teaching methodology” (Principal, KR1). An SSO reflects on initial classroom observations whereby “teachers used to do all the talking and writing without involving the students but the introduction of the LPM has brought the students and teachers close to each other” (SSO, WR3).

Box 21: SSO feedback

SSO Feedback

The teachers appreciate the LPM and most are giving me congratulatory messages when we meet even outside of the school. They said they learnt a lot from what I teach them and for now the teaching methods they use is comfortable compared to what they have been using the previous years. Their teaching methods have drastically improved as a result of the intervention of LWL in their school. Secondly I used to look at the students notes and ask them if they actually understood what the teacher was teaching. I also check if the teachers go according to the LPM and most times I find the books of the students to be consistent to what the teachers are supposed to teach. These have created impact on the way the students learn in school and teachers have also become accustomed with the LPM. (SSO, WR3)

However, SSOs have not always had a smooth ride. Initial ‘buy-in’ to SSO intervention did present some challenges, especially given the feeling that teachers were being given “**an added burden to their already stretched workloads**” and only exacerbated by the lack of adequate remuneration. In addition, there may be considerations around **gender** in terms of initial buy-in and this was certainly the case in one of the schools we visited. The SSO for WR3 found it extremely challenging to gain the trust of the all-male teaching staff and one even hid from her during a visit so as to avoid a lesson observation.

In a significantly resource-constrained school inspectorate system, **we found that the SSOs added a much-needed layer of independent supervision and pedagogical support.** They often went above and beyond their remunerated mandate, solving problems not directly linked to their remit. Examples include reporting teacher absenteeism to principals and following up to ensure action is taken. One SSO we spoke to goes further if the principal does not take any action – “if the principal fails to take actions on teachers doing the wrong thing in school I will hold him/her accountable by forwarding a complaint to the DSO who will inform the authorities and the LWL team” (SSO, WR3). More worryingly, another SSO learnt of sexual harassment taking place in an SSS school and their intervention ultimately led to the dismissal of the perpetrator.

There was also an indication that schools benefitting more from SSO support were those who had a good relationship with their respective SSO and saw them as a trusted link to improve teaching and learning. These schools already had a strong foundation of school leadership and management through their principals and community stakeholders. Where relationships were not so positive, some SSOs lamented the struggle to engage with demotivated teachers, even those who were on government payroll. In more rural/peri-urban parts of Kono and Karene, SSOs faced challenges with the “**difficult terrain, far distances and weather constraints**”, made more challenging by the mode of transport (okada / motorbike). Although these challenges were not widespread in our study, or to such an extent

that severely impacted service delivery, during the time of our research an SSO died on their way to a meeting and therefore issues around safety should not be overlooked.

A more looming concern was around the future of the SSO intervention once the Leh Wi Lan draws to an end in March 2021. For one, SSOs employment status is precarious – they do not hold employment contracts but rather consultancy contracts which are renewed on an annual basis. In addition, it became clear in central level interviews that sustainability is of concern with one option currently being considered is for the MBSSE to absorb them into the system.

Box 22: How do schools engage SSOs: What are better-performing schools doing differently?

How do schools engage SSOs: What are better-performing schools doing differently?

- ✓ They embraced SSO engagement and fostered a positive relationship with him/her. SSOs were perceived as a trusted partner in better teaching and learning, and took implemented feedback, leading to SSOs going above and beyond to support their school. These schools already had a strong foundation of school leadership and management through their principals and community stakeholders.

7 What can positively-deviant schools teach us?

In this final section of the report, we first provide some concluding remarks to highlight key messages from the chapters above, and then offer a set of recommendations from better-performing schools based on how these schools are tackling these issues. This study was designed as a deep-dive into how some schools are managing to achieve better learning than others, there are some overarching challenges that all schools have to encounter on a daily basis:

Schools are not safe spaces for girls: All three SGLAs have repeatedly shown that girls face significant gender-based harassment in school. This study goes a step further and provides richer detail on what it is like being a female pupil in a secondary school in Sierra Leone, and the picture is truly disturbing. Not only do girls score less than boys do in the learning assessment, but when in school, they are subject to lack of physical safety and sexual harassment. A sizeable proportion of female students are facing harassment while travelling between school and home, and while in school being sexually harassed by male pupils and teachers, including being asked for sexual favours by teachers in return for grades. One might ask – what have toilets got to do with girls’ education? We find that lack of adequate toilet facilities near the main building of the school means that girls feel unsafe using them and absent themselves from school during menstruation. What is worse is that teachers – who are mostly male and supposed to be guardians of pupils while they are in school – systematically underestimate the prevalence of the problem. Only 5 per cent of secondary grade teachers in the country are female. This possibly prevents them from recognising the extent of the problem as experienced by female pupils first hand, but also prevents them from contributing to solutions at the school and community level. While mechanisms exist for lodging complaints (girls/boys clubs, suggestion boxes, etc.), girls often don’t trust these mechanisms and their effectiveness is minimal.

Very little classroom time is devoted to meaningful teaching and learning: the SGLAs had already established this consistently for three years – at best, only about 2.5 hours (out of 5 hours) of teaching actually takes place in a day on average. We learn through this study that the reasons for this are various: poor teacher motivation, teacher absenteeism, pupil absenteeism due to income-generating activities or cultural practices (secret society initiations), whole host of school activities (sports, thanksgiving, etc.), among many others. Extra classes (a financial lifeline for teachers and schools) is therefore mainly used to complete the syllabus and revise before exams.

Volunteer teachers present a significant workforce management challenge: volunteer teachers are, on the one hand, summarily demonised by actors at all levels of the system as “hungry lions...the ones that are so hard to manage”. Yet, it must not be forgotten that these volunteer teachers play a very important role in propping up the teaching workforce and continuing to teach many cohorts of pupils year-after-year as they themselves wait to get enlisted on the government payroll, highly demotivating for them. They rely on community contributions and funds from school subsidies. The launch of FQSE (therefore drying up of parental contributions) has left volunteer teachers in a difficult financial position. Our study showed that if anyone, it was the principals and community members, who could hold these so-called “hungry lions” to account by encouraging them, paying them small amounts from school subsidies, offering them rent-free accommodation in the community, and small in-kind gestures (bags of rice, cans of palm oil, offer of labour, etc.).

Fee-free education due to FQSE is very good but also presents a formidable set of challenges for schools. Even if FQSE doesn’t cover all ancillary costs of educating a child, parents and CTAs in all our interviews were very thankful for the fee-free education, thanks to FQSE. However, a large and ambitious universal free basic education programme is bound to present teething challenges in its implementation – we saw many examples of this. Prime

among these was the sudden and huge spike in enrolment in government and government assisted schools – many class sizes have gone up by 2-3x compared to pre-FQSE days but without commensurate increase in numbers of classrooms, teachers, infrastructure, etc. Schools are still awaiting their termly school subsidies, some schools are inflating enrolment numbers to avail them of more per capita subsidies, volunteer teachers walking away to approved schools in hope of getting on the government payroll thus leaving children in unapproved schools without anyone to teach, and some unscrupulous principals are “selling off” approval status to teachers who don’t even belong to their schools. Over time this implementation challenges will probably ease off, but many thousands of pupils will have lost precious years of education in the meantime.

The role of principals and community in ensuring school quality is paramount and often underappreciated: In every single better-performing school we visited, the main driving factor contributing to quality learning was inevitably a strong leader (i.e. principal) who manages and leads the organisation that is the school, despite all its multifaceted challenges. Having a strong principal is certainly not sufficient to make a school perform well, but is certainly a necessary condition. Second, we observed that all better-performing schools had very engaged and supportive community members who took their role of supporting and challenging the school leadership very seriously. They might be uneducated themselves, often with very meagre resources, but this did not hold them back from playing their role as responsible community members. We also saw examples of schools that are doing their best to succeed but are situated in unsupportive communities and therefore not fairing as well. This truly represents the proverb, “it takes a village to raise a child.”

LWL resources and training (especially LPMs and CPD) was uniformly praised by teachers and principals. We know very well there is a lack of trained and qualified teachers in Sierra Leone’s teaching workforce. It is not uncommon to come across well-meaning teachers in rural parts of the country who are teaching WASSCE students but have barely passed WASSCE themselves, and have certainly not received any form of meaningful pre- or in-service training in pedagogy or classroom management. In this context, LWL’s lesson plans have been a lifeline for many teachers; we observed many lessons across these 9 schools being delivered to satisfactory quality due to the support of LPMs and SSOs. Before LPMs arrived, teachers admitted they used to base their lessons mainly on past years’ question papers and use traditional “chalk and talk” methods. While contextual constraints still pose challenges (e.g. large class sizes, lack of foundational skills among pupils) LPMs assist teachers to offer well-rounded lessons. Teachers also admitted they are now starting to use some of the same pedagogical techniques to other subjects they teach.

We can learn valuable lessons from a range of schools, not just better-performing ones. All schools face some common challenges such as large class sizes, poor infrastructure and shortage of teaching and learning materials. When we set out to conduct this research, we naively assumed that best practices of classroom teaching and school management would all come from better-performing schools only. Indeed, this is not the case – poor performing schools (WR3, KR3, KN3) also showed us many ideas to emulate. Secondly, we also foolishly assumed that better-performing schools would all be of a certain type – Freetown-based, urban, with trained and approved teachers, and set in a relatively well-to-do community. Alas, this also proved to be a wrong assumption. We found the most compelling cases of positive deviance schools in the most hard-to-reach rural parts of Sierra Leone, run by a strong leader in the form of their principal, in a supportive even if poor community, and operating entirely on the shoulders of four motivated but volunteer teachers and one trained teacher, and yet this school performs better than some of the elite Freetown schools.

Below we present a set of “ideas for change” that our 9 case study schools can teach us, categorised by short, medium, and long term ideas, and indicating the relevant actor within the education system for whom the recommendation is most relevant.

Table 6: Some ideas for change: what can positively-deviant schools teach us?

School leadership & mgmt.	Some ideas for change: what can positively-deviant schools teach us?	
Principals have to use school subsidies to pay volunteer teachers, therefore less investment in school infrastructure and materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (Short-term) Set up forums through the CTA to encourage parents to monitor their schools, channel complaints, disseminate information and report any issues to the CTA leadership to action on. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (Short-medium term) Formalise the employment of teachers to minimise numbers not on payroll as a measure to enforce formal accountability and sanction for absences (action: TSC)
DDEs and principals have limited autonomy in teacher recruitment and management (teacher management is under TSC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (Short-medium term) Clarify roles of TSC vs MBSSE inspectorate unit / DDEs in school monitoring and inspection (action: MBSSE, TSC) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (Medium-long term) Strengthen CTAs to play a fundamental part in holding teachers, including volunteer teachers, and principals accountable. CTAs empowered to provide a direct monitoring and accountability function. (action: CTA, MBSSE)
DDEs have very limited financial and human resources to inspect and supervise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (Short-medium term) Extend role of SSOs beyond lifetime of LWL and recruit more SSOs to address stretched workload (action: MBSSE) 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (Short-medium term) Work with principals, teachers and CTAs to help schools embrace SSO engagement and fostered a positive relationship with SSOs as trusted partners in better teaching and learning, and took implemented feedback, leading to SSOs going above and beyond to support their school (action: LWL, MBSSE, TSC) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (Long term) Stipulate attendance and instructional time as a foundational pillar of career progression for teachers and enforce through a performance management system (action: TSC)
Managing the teaching workforce	Some ideas for change: what can positively-deviant schools teach us?	
Principals' recommendations to TSC are sometimes marred by favouritism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (Short-term) Organise learning circles and "team teaching"– including LWL-trained English/maths teachers and other subject teachers can benefit from LPM training. (action: LWL, schools) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (Short-medium-term) Develop policy around extra classes and regulate them in terms of paid contribution from parents, teaching hours, stipend for teachers (action: TSC, MBSSE)
Some evidence of corruption in teacher approval process, i.e. sale of ED forms		
Many teachers continue to teach for years as volunteers; difficult to hold to account; demotivated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (Short-term) Teachers encouraged to apply general pedagogical techniques from LPM training to other subjects (action: LWL, schools) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (Short-medium term) Wherever feasible, encourage schools to develop a strong culture of in-school teacher training – e.g. organised internal in-service training for a period of time (1-2 weeks) before the start of each term, covering both subject knowledge, pedagogical skills and time and classroom management (action:TSC, schools)
Very small % of female teachers		
Teachers (esp. female) unwilling to work in rural schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (Short-term) Proactively engaging the community as a source of praise, encouragement and financial support through small contributions of money, food or labour. (action: schools) 	
Extra classes – a necessary evil?		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (Medium-term) Design and implement a female recruitment drive with commensurate incentives to make the teaching profession a viable and sought-after option for females. (action: TSC)
Pre-service training is inadequate		

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (Short term) Undertake mapping of qualified teachers by subject specialism and location to enable better teacher deployment and equitable distribution of teacher resources (action: TSC) • • (Short-medium-term) Empower schools go beyond TSC recruitment guidelines by conducting in-depth interviews as part of their recruitment process, which includes testing a candidate's "handle over content, classroom/time management and pedagogy". (action: TSC, schools) • (Short-medium term) A more de-centralized remuneration system so that principals are empowered to query payment of salaries to teachers, allowing principals to better hold teachers to account. (action: TSC, schools) • (Short to medium term) Advance the focus of teacher training programmes from teaching and pedagogy to learning, supporting teachers to do formative pupil assessment, carry out continuous assessment of pupils, report on the progress of individual pupils, and provide remediation measures (action: TSC) • 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • (Medium-term) Consider a 'rural settlement programme' to attract teachers consisting of an allowance, accommodation, and access recreational facilities in order to incentivise teaching in rural localities (action: TSC) • (Medium-term) Consider a 'rural apprenticeship programme': Build capacity in rural localities so that those already vested in their local communities are recruited as "apprentice teachers", trained and qualified and become teachers in their own communities. (action: TSC)
Classroom learning environment	Some ideas for change: what can positively-deviant schools teach us?	
<p>Large class sizes and overcrowding, esp. since FQSE</p> <p>Limited school infrastructure (e.g. furniture, toilets)</p> <p>Limited learning materials in classroom (ex. LPMs); PHs in short supply / not yet distributed by principals / collected by parents</p> <p>Classroom assessments and exams are not geared to improve teaching and learning</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (Short term) Engage all stakeholders in the system to foster culture of no-tolerance towards exam malpractice with strict monitoring (action: all, esp. MBSSE, TSC, schools, CTA) • (Short term) Extra hour of class / fewer breaks / shorter recess to expand learning time. (action: MBSSE, schools) • (Short term) Early school resumption: Remove culture of losing the first two weeks of resumption because students and teachers assume that no serious teaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (Medium term) Holistic approach to classroom assessment: Teachers to use every means available to them to continuously assess pupils' level of understanding, give feedback, and adapt their style of teaching. Strict code of conduct around integrity in marking and no-tolerance towards sex-for-grades (all: TSC, schools) • (Short-medium term) Synergies between primary and secondary schools: Secondary school principals and teachers liaise with nearby primary school head

<p>Significant classroom teaching time is lost during the school year</p>	<p>and learning activities will happen (action: MBSSE, schools, CTA)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (Short term) Provide updated and reliable data specifying enrolment increases due to FQSE to allow further provision of pupil materials (action: MBSSE) • (Short term) Consider introduction of a national book policy specifying the use, lifespan and replacement plan for FQSE books (action: MBSSE) • (Short-medium term) Continuous assessments be made integral to pupil's overall performance appraisal (action: MBSSE, schools) 	<p>teachers and teachers in catchment area to discuss strategies to plug foundational skills gaps in core subjects (action: MBSSE, schools)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time-book / log book check, a system to monitor the duration teachers spend in the classroom teaching. (action: MBSSE, TSC, schools)
<p>Pupils' can attend school & learn</p>	<p>Some ideas for change: what can positively-deviant schools teach us?</p>	
<p>Gender-based differences in pupils' performance exist in all provinces</p> <p>Girls' safety is a significant and underreported problem</p> <p>Certain cultural practices keep pupils out of school for up to 3-4 months in a year</p> <p>Pupils' family background is one of the biggest determinants of learning levels</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (Short term) Conduct self-assessment against international Safe to Learn Benchmarks (to which SL is a signatory) and identify gaps in policies and practices to keep children safe in school and learning (action: MBSSE) • (Short term) Introduce a streamlined grievance and incident reporting system empowering schools to escalate reports, and respond promptly to cases to build faith in the integrity of the system (action: TSC) • (Short term) Provide all pupils with key contact information needed to make reports or to find support in the event they have been abused. This can be done through already established girls-and-boys clubs (action: MBSSE). • (Short term) The National CPD Framework for teachers should reorient teacher education, initial training and CPD towards how to support individual and differentiated learning needs (action: TSC) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (Short term) Review list of extra-curricular activities to create more time for assisted / self-study in school (action: MBSSE) • (Short term) Address pupils' foundational skills to ensure that teaching and learning happens at the right level through targeted remediation, e.g. at JSS1 and JSS2 (action: TSC). • (Short-medium term) Leverage positive role models (especially female role models) to build career, academic and life aspirations among pupils, especially girls (action: MBSSE, schools, CTAs) • (Short-medium term) Leverage community leaders / elders to mandate secret society initiations only take place during school holidays (action: schools, CTAs)

Annex A Qualitative research matrix

Table 7: Research matrix: core areas to probe and sources of information

#	Area of inquiry	Core areas to probe (incl. how these differ across better vs. poor performing schools)	Links to TOC assumptions	Source of information
1	Pupils' ability to attend school and learn: parental and community support, readiness to learn, home language, poverty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How might economic, social, cultural obligations outside of school (economic and labour market conditions, early marriage/pregnancy, bodo-society, caring for family members, household chores) limit pupils' school attendance or time spent on learning outside of school? What support do parents provide to pupils? Why are learning outcomes often lower amongst girls and children from the poorest households? What are schools doing to ensure inclusive learning for these groups? How do teachers monitor pupils' learning outcomes on an ongoing basis, and how does this influence teacher and management practices? How do teachers mitigate the potential negative impact of language differences? 	Input → output assumption: "Children with sufficient cognitive and physical functioning to learn, including health and nutrition"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> CTA/SBMC group interview Girls FGD Boys FGD Principal interview Teachers FGD School observation
2	Teacher performance management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is the general system for determining number of teachers recruited into the workforce? Are there adequate numbers of teachers, are they approved/voluntary? What is the implication of 33% workforce being voluntary, on accountability and performance management? What is the geographical spread of teacher postings, especially in rural areas? Are teachers paid adequately and on time? To what extent does current pre-service training prepare teachers for challenges of classrooms? Are teachers receiving in-service CPD geared towards learning? 	Resources → inputs link: "TSC drives a rapid professionalisation of teaching workforce"; Output → outcome link: "Teachers receive CPD geared towards learning"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Principal interview Teachers FGD Lesson observation Teacher case study interview SSO interview DDE interview Central level interviews (MBSSE, LWL, TSC)
3	Class time devoted to learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What motivates teachers (intrinsic and extrinsic)? What incentive structure do teachers face, and how does this influence their school/classroom attendance and instructional hours? What is the extent of the attendance and low instructional time problem across various schools? What is causing this problem / what are key constraints to attendance and class time? How do school principals, supervisors/inspectors and community hold teachers to account? 	Output → outcome link: "Teachers attend school and provide sufficient quantity of instructional hours"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> CTA/SBMC group interview Principal interview Teachers FGD Teacher case study interview SSO interview DDE interview School observation

#	Area of inquiry	Core areas to probe (incl. how these differ across better vs. poor performing schools)	Links to TOC assumptions	Source of information
4	Teaching techniques and support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What do teachers see as key barriers to their classroom effectiveness? To what extent are teachers' own subject knowledge and pedagogical skills seen as constraints? If yes, what are the key causes of these constraints (external factors - e.g. limited support/materials, vs. individual factors - e.g. poor pre-service training)? How do school principals, supervisors/inspectors and community support / hold teachers to account? 	Output → outcome link: "Teachers' have adequate subject knowledge and pedagogical skills"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Principal interview Teachers FGD Lesson observation Teacher case study interview SSO interview School observation Central level interviews (TSC)
5	School leadership and management (SLM)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What motivates principals? What incentive structure do head teachers face, and how does this influence their decision-making? What is the level of autonomy principals can yield over teacher recruitment, school development planning, resourcing? How do the district/local council/community hold principals to account? What options are available to principals in addressing challenges such as teacher/pupil attendance, discipline, setting staff pay, motivating staff? 	Inputs: "SLM is professional and works to increase contact time and discipline"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> CTA/SBMC group interview Principal interview Teachers FGD Lesson observation DDE interview School observation
6	School environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent do schools have manageable PTR and class size? How does this vary across schools? How does language of instruction impact the classroom learning environment? To what extent do schools have adequate infrastructural facilities (e.g. safe WASH facilities)? How does this vary across schools? 	Input → output link: Adequate number of schools at low/no cost to parents with conducive classroom learning environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> CTA/SBMC group interview Principal interview Teachers FGD Lesson observation Teacher case study interview Girls FGD Boys FGD School observation
7	Teaching and learning materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have teachers/pupils received lesson plans/pupil handbooks? If not, why not? Are these resources being used by teachers/pupils and have they been trained/told how to use them? Are they able to understand the content and genuinely engage? Does teachers'/pupils' existing level of knowledge skills inhibit usage? To what extent are the materials appropriate for the average teacher / pupil? What support do teachers and pupils receive from school leadership, teachers, SSO, peers to make best use of these materials? 	Resources → inputs link: Teachers and pupils grasp new T&L materials and approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> CTA/SBMC group interview Principal interview Teachers FGD Lesson observation Teacher case study interview SSO interview DDE interview Girls FGD Boys FGD School observation

#	Area of inquiry	Core areas to probe (incl. how these differ across better vs. poor performing schools)	Links to TOC assumptions	Source of information
				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Central level interviews (MBSSE, LWL, TSC)
8	Curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What do teachers feel about the appropriateness of the curriculum? How do teachers and pupils engage with the curriculum, given the wide gap between actual skills and curriculum expectations? What challenges and pressures do teachers and pupils face in engaging with and covering the curriculum? 	Outcome → Impact link: Curriculum is aligned with student learning levels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers FGD Lesson observation Teacher case study interview SSO interview Girls FGD Boys FGD Central level interviews (MBSSE, LWL, TSC)
9	Examinations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do teachers and pupils consider the current examination system as a fair and accurate test of learning? What value do pupils, parents and community place on doing well and passing these exams? To what extent does passing exams dictate teaching practice in classrooms? 	Outcome → Impact link: Examinations (WASSCE and BECE) are a fair and accurate test of learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> CTA/SBMC group interview Teachers FGD Girls FGD Boys FGD School observation
10	Classroom assessments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is the existing practice of using classroom-based assessments? Do these have a formative and/or summative role? To what extent are classroom assessments used by teachers? Do teachers have relevant skills and knowledge to use assessment for, e.g., identifying pupil learning needs and remediation? 	Not in TOC: Teachers use classroom-based assessments to understand diverse learning needs and provide a consistent learning experience for all	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers FGD Lesson observation Teacher case study interview SSO interview School observation
11	External quality assurance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are the roles and responsibilities of SSOs and other external supervisors? What challenges do they face, if any, in delivering their role? What is teachers' and principals' feedback on SSOs impact on teaching practice in their school? 	Inputs → outputs link: decentralised school monitoring systems and school supervision are strengthened	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> CTA/SBMC group interview Principal interview SSO interview DDE interview School observation Central level interviews (MBSSE, LWL, TSC)

#	Area of inquiry	Core areas to probe (incl. how these differ across better vs. poor performing schools)	Links to TOC assumptions	Source of information
12	Delivery systems (policy & planning, performance management, use of data, financing)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent is GoSL able to monitor districts? To what extent are districts and local councils able to monitor schools, principals and teachers in a decentralised set up? What is the degree of autonomy districts and local councils have in key decisions, e.g. recruitment, resource allocation, etc.? Is there a common understanding across actors on what good education service delivery looks like? If so, what is it? To what extent does GoSL, districts, schools use of evidence and data to take action? Are schools adequately financed? How does approval status affect funding? 	Resources → inputs link: GoSL and districts commitment to improve service delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> CTA/SBMC group interview Principal interview DDE interview Central level interviews (MBSSE, LWL, TSC)