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Challenges in Secondary Education Provision in Sierra Leone and the Crucial Role of Teachers

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SID 200236157

Dissertation presented for the degree of MA Intercultural
Communication and International Development

University of Sheffield

2020-21

Approximate number of words: 9,996

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Date 16/09/2021

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all the people that supported me during this hectic year, with special regard to the University of Sheffield and the University of Makeni for their invaluable guidance. Unfortunately, a list of tutors and coursemates that made this year unforgettable would take up the whole page; here, I will thank Dr Jane Woodin, my tutor and supervisor, for her continuous help and encouragement throughout the year.

I would also like to thank the people that made my placement at the University of Makeni possible, including Dr Jess Jones and Ibrahim Joseph Conteh, my brilliant research assistant. This research would not be possible without them. All my previous tutors and professors that shared their immense knowledge – from the University of L’Aquila to the University of Leeds – are also in my thoughts.

And, of course, I would like to extend my gratitude to my family and my friends scattered around the world, who always believed in me.

Abstract

In this dissertation, I will explore secondary education in Sierra Leone in relation to the benefits of learning across different capitals – human, social and identity. Considering the complex socio-cultural context of Sierra Leone, from both a historical and contemporary perspective, education will be analysed as a means to improve oneself as well as the wider community. Particular focus is given to the role of teachers in education provision, perceptions on gender and the role of English as the medium of education. Through grounded theory and ethnographic approaches, the data collected from interviews highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the Sierra Leonean educational system, including the crucial role of teachers in shaping and developing children and the wider community, the role of English in accessing education and the implication of gender in school. While further research is needed, this investigation sheds some light on the complex reality of social issues around education in Sierra Leone.

Abbreviations

BECE	Basic Education Certificate Examination
HTC	Higher Teachers' Certificate
HTC-P	Higher Teachers' Certificate – Primary
HTC-S	Higher Teachers' Certificate – Secondary
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
TC	Teachers' Certificate
TTP	Teacher training programmes
WAEC	West African Examinations Council
WASSCE	West African Senior School Certificate Examination

1. Introduction

Education in Sierra Leone remains a challenging topic, deeply connected to the country's history. While its educational system is characterised as 'recovering from the debilitating destruction of war' (World Bank, 2007, p. 4) – due to the aftermath of the civil war that deeply affected the country between 1991 and 2002 – many issues that afflict education are linked to poverty and its post-colonial reality. Recent improvements to education policies are built on the 2004 Education Act, a crucial milestone that made basic education – primary and lower secondary – free to every child (Government of Sierra Leone, 2004, p. 5).

While school enrolment underwent a massive surge after the conflict, especially in primary education – from 659,503 reported primary students in 2001/02 to 1,280,853 in 2004/05 (World Bank, 2007, p. 176) – many issues still characterise this system as precarious. Lack of learning material, proper infrastructure and qualified teachers are common issues that deeply impact the quality of education (Williamson and Cripe, 2002, p. 35; World Bank, 2007, p. 68; MBSSE, 2019). Despite these challenges, other crucial issues act as barriers that prevent education participation: above all of them is poverty, with many families struggling to afford the hidden costs of education or being unable to spare children from domestic work or labour (Williamson and Cripe, 2002, p. 35; Mai, 2019, p. 7).

This investigation focuses on secondary education in Sierra Leone – with particular regard to junior secondary education and the role of teachers – and its contextualisation in the wider socio-cultural environment. The research was carried out as part of a virtual placement at the University of Makeni, in northern Sierra Leone, and it is entirely possible due to the support of this partner organisation. Firstly, a review of the pertinent literature is presented, with regard to the importance of education for human development and poverty alleviation, and an introduction to the Sierra Leonean context. Secondly, the research methodology is discussed in relation to underlying approaches, data collection and analysis, ethics and reflexivity. A review and discussion of the findings follow, highlighting the benefits of learning in relation to three capital theories – human, social and identity – while analysing the major themes that emerged during data collection: perceptions on education in Sierra Leone, the role of teachers, gender and language in education provision.

2. Literature review

2.1. The impact of education

The role that education plays in our lives is undeniable – and it often remains unseen. In the modern world, education is often synonymous with schooling, standardised tests and academic achievements. While academic achievements remain an important goal of education, it is also beneficial to reflect on education as a force for social change. As McCulloch (2011) argues, education ‘has been a rallying call for social progress, change and equality, and has been fundamental to social class struggles, struggles for democracy, and the fight for social justice’ (p. 1). In this perspective, education allows people not only to be valuable and productive members of society but also provides the tools to change said society.

The importance of education has been acknowledged over time, to the point where it has been listed as a basic human right. The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* advocates for accessible education aimed at the ‘full development of the human personality’, also stressing the promotion of ‘understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups’ (UN General Assembly, 1948, art. 16). According to the *Declaration*, elementary education of young children is also envisioned as both free and compulsory (art. 16). The *Declaration’s* focus is undoubtedly on education as a means to form an individual, providing equal opportunities to learning and intrinsically benefitting intercultural understanding among social groups.

For these reasons, education is a core goal of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), drafted by the United Nations in 2015. The fourth point, solely dedicated to learning, stresses the need for ‘inclusive and equitable’ primary and secondary education for both boys and girls (United Nations, 2015, sec. 17), addressing the disparity often present across genders. Moreover, this goal focuses on access to vocational, technical and higher education as well as education that can provide adequate employment skills (sec. 17). Given the aims of the SDGs, it is evident that education is conceptualised in relation to social, economic and environmental development: compared to the advocacy of the *Declaration*, the SDGs see education as a central force for human development.¹

¹ Vladimirova and Le Blanc (2016) carried out an interesting study on the links between education and other SDGs, noticing ‘causal links’ in UN publications between education and all the other topics, with the sole exception of links to SDG 14 – Life below water (p. 258). This reinforced the idea that education is a crucial and deeply interconnected means to develop other areas and vice versa.

While the benefits of education at an individual and societal level are widely discussed in academic research, analysing their impact remains an elusive task. Poverty alleviation is one of these benefits – often conceptualised as a way to break the ‘vicious cycle of poverty’ (Mihai, Țițan and Manea, 2015, p. 856). However, poverty is a multidimensional reality that involves more than financial challenges. As Godwyll and Kang (2008) note, it is important to remember that ‘poverty is not merely a statistic’ but impacts real lives (p. ix). The dehumanising practice of quantifying poverty into statistics and poverty lines, while serving its purpose, can also ignore the multidimensional nature of the concept.

Scholars have attempted to move past an economic definition of poverty in favour of a broader one: for instance, besides lack of education and income, Majumder and Chowdhury Biswas (2017) include elements such as ‘poor health, insecurity, low self-esteem, sense of powerlessness or the absence of rights’ (p. 151). Other scholars included the inability to satisfy basic human needs: Wolff (2019) argues that mundane acts such as ‘[n]ot throwing a proper wedding ... or not being able to afford the right clothes for your children’ can have deep repercussions on individuals as they fail to fulfil social needs (p. 3). In both examples, a person can be poor due to health conditions, lack of basic employment or even in comparison to other members of society. As Sen (1992) reminds, the definition of poverty rests ‘in the contexts in which questions of this kind are posed’ (p. 107), meaning that poverty is not only intrinsically linked to other aspects of life but must be placed within specific contexts.

Education follows a similar discussion. Even if we consider education as a panacea applicable to diverse aspects of economic, social and environmental development – similar to the SDGs discourse – the ambivalence of such links must be taken into consideration. Studies show that education can lead to better chances of employment, poverty alleviation and economic growth (Seetanah, 2009, p. 139; Tilak, 2010, p. 199; Colclough, 2012, p. 136; Mihai, Țițan and Manea, 2015, p. 856; Majumder and Chowdhury Biswas, 2017, p. 151) but the chances of receiving formal education are also severely hindered by poverty, leading to what Tilak (2010) calls ‘education poverty’ (p. 199). Even in countries where free basic education is available, case studies have shown that families might not be able to afford the hidden costs of education – textbooks, school supplies, uniforms, transportation fees, etc. (Akaguri, 2014, p. 158; Williams, Abbott and Mupenzi, 2014, p. 947; Mihai, Țițan and Manea, 2015, p. 856).

Therefore, education opportunities should be carefully contextualised to understand their barriers and challenges, especially in relation to poverty.

2.2 An educational framework

While it is convenient to argue that education has a meaningful impact on individual and societal development, such discourses should reflect on learning as an entangled web of connections, factors and consequences that lead to multidimensionality – similar to poverty. Therefore, when analysing the possible outcomes of education, one should be wary of oversimplification: as Schuller (2004) notes, conclusions that ‘suggest that a single dose of education, or an additional qualification, will resolve personal or social problems’ should be carefully pondered (p. 14).

Recognising the vast effects that education can have on society, as well as acknowledging the topic of this research, it would be out of scope to move past its benefits at the personal level. In other words, while an individual’s education might contribute to economic, academic and social growth, this research focuses on the effects of education on the individual. In this sense, this research acknowledges the complexity of education and its links to every aspect of life, but instead of conceptualising it as an entangled web, it could be presented as a ripple in the water that affects an individual before having an impact on wider social groups.

In his analysis of the benefits of learning, Schuller (2004) proposes a comprehensive analytic framework that is used to capture three interconnected individual dimensions: identity, human and social capitals (p. 12). As the scholar notes, learning allows individuals to develop ‘capabilities’ that fall into some of these capitals, which in return benefit other aspects of their lives (Schuller, 2004, p. 12). This framework is envisioned as a triangle, with each point representing one capital, as presented in Figure 1. Like many other multidimensional frameworks, considerable overlap among different areas is expected, recognising that items within the triangle can fall under multiple capitals.

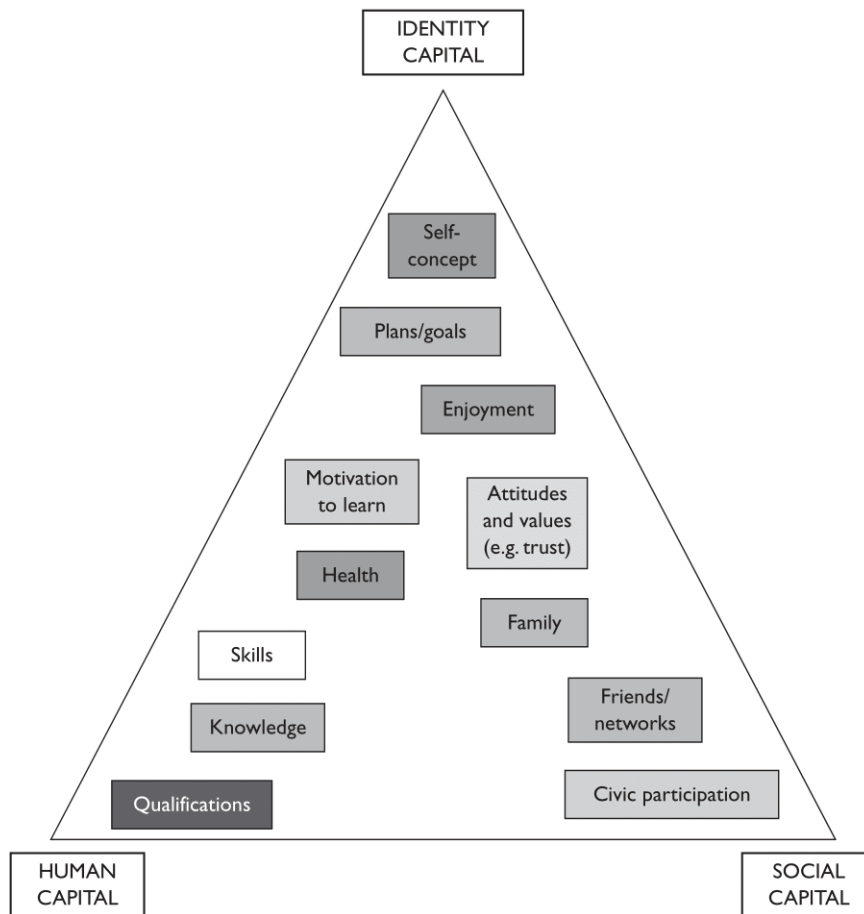


Figure 1: Schuller's three-capital framework (Schuller, 2004, p. 13)

The first capital, and perhaps the most recognisable, is the human capital. The human capital theory finds its roots in the 18th-century economist and philosopher Adam Smith. In his *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith (1843) identifies four capitals that promote economic growth: ‘instruments of trades’, ‘profitable buildings’, ‘improvements of land’ and ‘acquired and useful abilities of all ... members of the society’ (p. 113). Compared to other interpretations of the workforce, in which workers were seen as ‘a mass’ capable only of physical work (Keeley, 2007, p. 28), Smith emphasised the values of their abilities and how these abilities could be learned. Comprehensive theories on human capital arose during the 1950s prominently by the hands of Mincer, Becker and Schultz (see, for instance, Mincer, 1958; Schultz, 1961; Becker, 1993). While these theories argued that ‘[e]ducation and training are the most important investments in human capital’, they also recognised that quantifying the benefits of education through income, especially in unstable global markets, poses serious limitations (Becker, 1993, p. 17).

Today, human capital remains a concept anchored in economic development and company management, stressing the importance of investing in individuals (Mayo, 2012; Pease, Beresford and Walker, 2014) but, paradoxically, also managing workers as a whole (Wright and McMahan, 2011; Ployhart *et al.*, 2014). Regardless, educationalists often criticise human capital theory for decontextualising education from its social and political settings (Tan, 2014, p. 437) while questioning the measurability of such concepts (Schuller, 2004, p. 15). The outlook towards non-economic benefits demonstrates that human capital is much more than an investment tool and it can have real effects on other aspects of life. Nonetheless, analysing these links remains a challenge: while associations between different dimensions might be evident, ‘the process of causation is unlikely to be of a neat, linear, A-leads-to-B kind’ (Schuller, 2004, p. 16).

The second point of the triangle represents social capital. This theory is more recent, rising to prominence in the 1990s: Coleman (1990) asserts that ‘social capital inheres in the structure of relations between persons and among persons’, facilitating and building from these links (p. 310). The immediate benefits are that people within such structures are able to achieve ‘certain ends that would not be attainable in its absence’ (Coleman, 1990, p. 310). Woolcock (1998) defines it as ‘the information, trust, and norms of reciprocity inhering in one's social networks’ (p. 153), stressing the individual and group component of social capital. While Woolcock is more interested in the links between social capital and economic development (p. 168), social capital can also affect other areas of development. Schuller (2004), for instance, notes that since social capital is based on the relations of individuals, one of its primary benefits can be seen in both educational and civic participation (p. 17).²

In summary, individuals within these social groups, by sharing certain information, values and norms, can have a long-lasting positive impact on the lives of their peers. Critics of social capital argue that it could lead to communitarianism and promote ‘a unitary view of society which ignores issues of power and conflict’ (Schuller, 2004, p. 17). Similarly, other critics argued that social capital between different groups, such as the poor and the wealthy, might even help to maintain the status quo (Blaxter and Hughes, 2000, p. 6). Regardless, given the social nature of education, analysing the impact of social capital in this field would be highly beneficial.

² Interestingly, one of the first studies related to social capital was carried out by Coleman (1988) in the educational field: by analysing the drop-out rates of American high schoolers in relation to the presence of social capital within their immediate social structures, he highlighted the positive effects of family, community and religious organisation in mitigating the phenomenon (p. S119).

Identity capital represents the last concept of the framework, dedicated to individual self-perception and self-image. This model was popularised by Côté (1997), who argued that late-modern Western societies saw a degradation of identity, moving from communal identities to ‘increasingly manipulative’ and ‘chaotic’ ones, leaving individuals alone in forming their self-image (p. 577). This evolution implies that while communal identities tended to share similar traits that motivate individuals, the same cannot be said regarding individual identities. Therefore, recognising the importance of context in individual formation, Côté (1997) argues that identity capital characteristics – such as ‘ego strength’, ‘self-monitoring, self-esteem’ and ‘critical thinking abilities’ – can have a profound impact on an individual’s life as well as other capitals (p. 577-578). In his framework, Schuller (2004) broadly defines this capital as an individual’s ‘outlook or self-image’, noting that while many characteristics might seem based on personality, they are often shaped by society (p. 20).

Despite the origin of these theories in Western circles, Schuller’s framework and conceptualisation of the three capitals provide a flexible analytical model for educational research, applicable to traditionally underdeveloped countries such as Sierra Leone. Moreover, given the focus of the research on the individual, a comprehensive framework that takes into account economic and social benefits would highlight the complex impact of education, as seen in Section 2.1.

2.3 Contextualising education in Sierra Leone

The following excerpt from Harris (2014) provides a critical introduction to Sierra Leone:

“Sierra Leone is somewhat typical of post-colonial African states in its multi-ethnic and multi-religious configuration and its faltering efforts to build a cohesive nation and a functioning state from a pre-colonial and colonial legacy” (p. 2).

“Post-colonial”, “multi-ethnic” and “multi-religious” are terms that highlight the diachronic and synchronic cultural diversity that permeates the country, especially in relation to nation- and state-building. Early formal education is deeply linked with the establishment of the city of Freetown, on the west coast of Sierra Leone: purchased from the local Temne people in 1787, this area was used to relocate the ‘Black Poor’, liberated slaves that resided primarily in London; in subsequent years, it homed more emancipated slaves from Nova Scotia and

Jamaica (Oyètádé and Fashole Luke, 2008, p. 123; Harris, 2014, p. 10).³ Even before the establishment of the British Colony of Sierra Leone in 1808, Western-style education was promoted in Freetown through the hands of the Church Missionary Society since 1804 (Mouser, 2009, p. 381). This type of education quickly benefited the Creole or Krio – the descendants of the former slaves – who negotiated a ‘relatively cohesive ... identity’, shaped by both Western and African influences (Harris, 2014, p. 11).⁴

It is not surprising that due to their unique position, the Krio quickly raised to prominence as the elite class of the Colony and their language gained more importance. Nor is it surprising that through strict gender-, class- and religion-based admission policies, most Christian schools were ‘being utilized as an essential instrument of religious conversion’, despite Islam and other indigenous faiths being ‘long-established’ in the region (Cole, 2013, pp. 61, 155). In 1961, when Sierra Leone became an independent country, it became clear that the education system inherited only served the ‘urban middle class’ and disregarded the wider population (World Bank, 2007, p. 34). The inability to access education due to its post-colonial nature, together with the reality of child labour, meant that in 1961, school attendance was extremely low: less than 15% for primary school (age 5-11) and less than 5% for secondary school (age 12-16) (World Bank, 2007, p. 34).

The last decade of the twentieth century saw many reforms to the educational system to move past British ‘grammar school type education’ (World Bank, 2007, p. 34). However, the civil war that tore the country between 1991 and 2002 had immense repercussions on education provision, teacher training, school infrastructure and children. With more than half of the population internally relocated (Mustapha and Bangura, 2010, p. 26) and an estimate of 10,000 children involved in the war as fighters or in other forms (National Committee for Demobilisation Disarmament and Reintegration, 2004, p. 235), education came to a halt. Efforts to rebuild the country’s educational system included the *2004 Education Act* that made public primary and junior secondary education free (Government of Sierra Leone, 2004, p. 5) (see Appendix A for the current configuration of the educational system). While enrolment skyrocketed during the first decade of the twenty-first century – doubling in primary schools between 2001/02 and 2004/05 (World Bank, 2007, p. 3) – the country still faces important challenges that impact learning.

³ Despite an initial modest immigration flux, it has been estimated that between 1808 and 1864, more than 50,000 former slaves from different backgrounds settled in the area (Oyètádé and Fashole Luke, 2008, p. 123).

⁴ The Krio language, for instance developed from the mix of English dialects used by the liberated slaves and many words from Temne, Yoruba, Portuguese, French and other idioms spoken in the continent (Harris, 2014, p. 11), indicating the high degree of syncretism between cultures.

Williamson and Cripe (2002) delineate three areas connected to education that were deeply affected by the civil war: infrastructure, teacher training and poverty (p. 35). Despite improvements and international support, these areas still face many challenges due to their complex nature. Firstly, many schools were destroyed during the war and even when rebuilt, a high percentage of them still lack proper infrastructure, sanitary facilities or a conducive learning environment (Williamson and Cripe, 2002, p. 35; World Bank, 2007, p. 68). Secondly, many teachers remain unqualified or underqualified, with numbers as high as 51% in secondary schools (MBSSE, 2019). This issue was exacerbated by the reluctance of the Sierra Leonean government to integrate ‘returned refugee teachers into its schools’, despite curriculum similarities between neighbouring countries (Williamson and Cripe, 2002, p. 38). Lastly, poverty remains an omnipresent issue, and despite government efforts to provide free basic education, many families cannot afford the “hidden costs” of education or simply cannot spare any help at home (Williamson and Cripe, 2002, p. 35; Mai, 2019, p. 7).

Another area that deserves attention is gender since different authors highlighted challenges that female students often face. First, societal views often act as barriers to girls’ participation in education: Diamanka and Godwyll (2008) assert that in many Sub-Saharan countries where Islam is practised, ‘scriptural misinterpretations’ can severely hinder female education (p. 139), although others reflect that this tendency ‘is likely to be economic than religious’, as the country has a long history of educating women (Steady, 2006, p. 122).⁵ Other serious issues include school-related gender-based violence perpetrated by older students or male teachers (Reilly, 2014, p. 21),⁶ early forced marriages for economic reasons (World Bank, 2007, p. 27), pregnancies and lack of proper sanitation facilities for women’s hygiene (Mai, 2019, p. 7). The lack of female teachers in the country has also been linked to challenges of female education since studies have highlighted the beneficial influence of female teachers on girls’ education (World Bank, 2005, p. 149; Ghafoor Awan and Riasat, 2015, p. 107; Muralidharan and Sheth, 2016, p. 295), including providing guidance and counsel to young girls as well as support in case of school-related violence (Reilly, 2014, p. 25; Wright, 2018, p. 22).

⁵ On the matter, Diamanka and Godwyll (2008) also note that due to low societal expectations on women in Sub-Saharan Africa – particularly their incompatibility with ‘science and technology’ – many women adopt these views themselves, leading to them avoiding educational opportunities (p. 141).

⁶ School-related sexual abuse and violence is a recurrent theme that would require an independent analysis to fully contextualise and comprehend it. As a summary, a ministerial pamphlet published in 2009 aimed at reducing violence in schools lists caning, abusive language and ‘sex for grades’ as the most common types of physical, psychological and sexual violence against students in Sierra Leone (MBSSE, 2009, pp. 10–11).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research aims and questions

Based on the points highlighted by the literature review, specifically the impact of education in poverty alleviation and human development, and the challenges of education in Sierra Leone, this research explores the following questions:

1. What is the perception of secondary education by professionals involved in education?
2. What is the role of teachers and how can they improve secondary education provision?
3. What is the impact and role of teaching qualifications, gender and English language as the medium of instruction in secondary education?

The main aim of these questions is to shed some light on the influence that education can have on the individual, specifically the benefits of learning through capital theories while considering the wider perceptions and role of the community.

3.2. Research approach and design

Given the aims of this research, a qualitative approach was chosen as the foundation of the investigation. The preference for qualitative research is evident when its fundamental pillars are explored, including the importance of subjectivity, context and holism (Grbich, 2012, p. 4). Firstly, recognising that the nature of research is to attain knowledge through truth, it is equally important to recognise the existence of multiple truths: the subjective views, based within a certain context, can be valuable information as much as objective truths; secondly, qualitative research attempts to locate a topic across time and space, recognising the importance of context and connections to other topics (Grbich, 2012, pp. 4–5), which leads to more comprehensive pictures.

If the aims of this research are considered in relation to a qualitative approach, the benefits of characterising education through informants' reflections – and their perceived impacts – are more evident. While facts or statistics are immensely important to understand education, Section 2.1. highlighted the difficulties of finding holistic correlations between education to other sectors of life: therefore, the informants' first-hand experience on the

benefits of learning represent invaluable data to understand the complex reality of education in Sierra Leone. This brings the discussion to another point, which is the research paradigm used: social constructionism. This paradigm follows the notion that reality is ‘socially and societally embedded’, with each individual experiencing their own reality rather than a shared one (Grbich, 2012, p. 5). In this approach, the role of the researcher is to question reality and, as Burr (2003) indicates, ‘to be ever suspicious of our assumptions about how the world appears to be’ (p. 2). This paradigm is particularly suited considering how detrimental assumptions can be, including in contexts that might not be immediately familiar to the researcher.

Regarding methodology, this research follows grounded theory for hypothesis construction and data analysis. As Bryant and Charmaz (2007) note, this model situates data collection and data analysis side by side rather than one after another: the immediate result is that each process ‘informs and streamlines the other’ in a cycle (p. 1). As a result, the research was continuously questioned not only in terms of links and perceptions but also in terms of hypothesis and analysis. This approach, as well as social constructionism, was extremely valuable considering the complexity and foreignness of education in Sierra Leone to the researcher: given the limited experience with the topic and context, it was mandatory to analyse preliminary data gathered through interviews to improve data collection – and vice versa.

While grounded theory remains the core pillar, ethnography was also employed to inform data collection and analysis. Despite the virtual restraints attached to the placement, the researcher attempted to immerse himself in the target culture through participant observation, which in turn was also helpful in processing the results (Fetterman, 2010, p. 38). As for initial hypotheses, the literature review widely indicated the margin of improvement for education in Sierra Leone while noting the positive impact that teachers can have. However, no hypothesis was specifically formulated as the researcher preferred to keep an open approach, especially considering his role as a cultural outsider. Other assumptions that might have impacted the research are discussed in Section 3.5.

3.3. Data collection

The data collection process was carried out with the support of the placement’s partner organisation, the University of Makeni, during June and July 2021. Given the virtual nature of the placement, a research assistant based in Makeni – a graduate of the University of

Makeni who collaborates with the institution – was assigned to the researcher. The research assistant not only acted as a virtual field guide but also provided invaluable support during the research process. Given the placement location, the research focussed on collecting data from teachers and teacher training students within the city of Makeni.

Informants were sourced through the research assistant and can be divided into two groups: teachers active in junior secondary education and students of the teacher training programmes at the University of Makeni. The first group comprised six teachers from three junior secondary schools in Makeni – two teachers per school. The sampling criteria for this group was rather broad since the researcher intended to welcome participants with different backgrounds and experience rather than impose rigid requirements: this was mainly done to give a voice to anyone who wished to participate in the project. Only two preferred criteria were specified: gender and school type. Given that gender in education is a major area of analysis, it was important to interview one male and one female teacher per school, with a total number of 4 male and 2 female teachers.⁷ Secondly, the researcher also advised sampling different school types – governmental, private, charity etc. – to explore how school culture and education might differ.

This group of informants were interviewed by the research assistant at their place of employment, to minimise disruptions in their personal and professional life. Since these interviews were effectively structured – with a list of questions provided beforehand – the researcher had no direct control over the interview.⁸ However, structured interviews ensured that each research area was touched upon. English was used during the interviews by all parties, with no translation required. Carrying out interviews in schools also brought these settings to life and helped the researcher better understand their contexts, since it was possible to hear how convivial most schools were through audio recordings

The second group of informants included students at the University of Makeni who were undergoing teacher training programmes, specifically Higher Teacher Certificate – Secondary (HTC-S). The sampling focused on students in the last year of their three-year course, which included school-based education (University of Makeni, 2018, p. 33). Given the limitation of virtual data collection, a semi-structured group interview between the informants and the researcher took place. The interview group – comprising seven respondents – also included students from the Bachelor of Education in Educational

⁷ Unfortunately, one of the three schools sampled did not employ any female teacher at the time of the interview. Therefore, two male teachers were interviewed at the time.

⁸ However, the research assistant had been encouraged to ask follow-up questions, which was beneficial for the overall research.

Administration and Management course, who volunteered to share their experiences on secondary education. As Beitin (2012) notes, while group interviews are prone to different dynamics and some informants might be more talkative than others, informants can ‘supplement each other’s answers’ (p. 245-247), which was greatly beneficial.

Given the total number of informants that took part in the research, as well as the diversity of interview methods and structures, this investigation attempts to provide a picture of secondary education topics through extensive and in-depth analysis of the rich qualitative data collected, rather than formulate wide generalisations. Triangulation was also crucial to provide a clearer picture of the results, which included analysing the same topic from different perspectives – and through informants with diverse roles in education – as well as using different methodological approaches – grounded theory and ethnography (Beitin, 2012, p. 249).

3.4. Data analysis

Individual interviews with secondary teachers were audio-recorded and later transcribed to highlight recurring themes, words and phrases, to help gain a deeper understanding of the discourse. As Atkins and Wallace (2015) note, although more time consuming, transcriptions allowed for more accurate analysis and provided valuable quotes (p. 89). On the other hand, the group interview with the University of Makeni students was video-recorded, which added more nuanced analysis that took into account body language and turn-taking (Atkins and Wallace, 2015, p. 89).

Primary data investigation was complemented by ethnographic data analysis, specifically thematic analysis as outlined by Grbich (2012, p. 61): this type of analysis – expanding on Spradley’s cultural domain analysis (Spradley, 1980, p. 88) – allowed the exploration of recurrent themes and how they were construed by the informants, which made it easier to place themes in relation to each other and the overall context.

3.5. Ethics, reflexivity and positionality

Given that formal education can be closely intertwined with a myriad of formative and personal experiences – and considering the reality of gender-based violence in Sierra Leonean schools, as discussed in Section 2.3. – ethics was carefully considered. While this research abides by the University of Sheffield ethical guidelines, the researcher stressed the

importance of consent, comfort and confidentiality to all parties involved, from the informants to the research assistant.

The research assistant was briefed in preparation for and during fieldwork to guarantee all parties' wellbeing. The research aims were discussed before each interview to provide context, together with information about participation, use of data and publication of the research as a final project at the University of Sheffield. The notion of 'informed consent' was stressed to guarantee the informants' understanding of their rights to participation, privacy and withdrawal as well as current and future implications in taking part in the research (Atkins and Wallace, 2015, p. 32). To protect their privacy, the informants were pseudonymised using random typical names from Sierra Leone.⁹ To make it easier to discern the gender of the informants – given the importance of gender in this research – the names of male informants start with "M", while those of female informants start with "F". The full list of informants is available in Appendix B.

Together with ethics, the researcher also examined the concept of reflexivity as 'a deconstructive exercise' to understand his role in the research (Macbeth, 2001, p. 35), focusing on his 'personal characteristics, positionality, and the intersubjective elements in the research encounter' (Adu-Ampong and Adams, 2020, p. 583). While the researcher's background was taken into consideration to explore possible preconceptions and biases that could influence the investigation – including reflections on identity, power relations and previous experiences in education – the target culture was also discussed. The researcher had limited knowledge of the cultures of Sierra Leone and had to negotiate his identity between being a cultural outsider and insider, which provided multiple analytical perspectives and was highly beneficial.

3.6. Limitations

Some limitations were discussed with data gathering, specifically the limitations of virtual research and limited control on interview discourses. However, since the research assistant – as a cultural insider – understood the socio-cultural context of Makeni, it is possible that the informants felt more at ease sharing the experience with him rather than the researcher himself. Another drawback of virtual research was the inability to experience Makeni first-

⁹ After some reflections on the implication of choosing typical British names for Sierra Leonean informants, the researcher picked the informants' pseudonyms by using name generator on the Internet.

hand, which would have provided more ethnographic data as well as a deeper understating of its society and culture.

Since all informants seemed comfortable speaking English, language was not an issue for the research. Nonetheless, using their preferred language for the interviews might have produced more natural responses, a reflection that also extends to the researcher as a non-native English speaker. Lastly, time and personal commitments could also be considered a limitation: this is evident with secondary schools entering their summer break during the data collection period and with the inability to interview teaching and administrative staff at the University of Makeni due to their previous commitments.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Perceptions on junior secondary education

According to data collected from six junior secondary teachers in Makeni and students at the University of Makeni, secondary education in the country remains a complex topic. When asked to talk about the strengths and challenges of junior secondary education, all informants disproportionally focussed on its challenges, confirming the educational issues highlighted by the literature review in Section 2.3. Even their personal experiences as teachers are polarising, ranging from having a ‘good experience’ (Marconi) to being ‘frustrating and disheartening’ (Fatu).

The main positive aspects that have been identified can be summarised in two themes: benefits for students and benefits for teachers. Firstly, most teachers recognize secondary education as a key phase in the learning process, in which teachers ‘prepare them [the students] to be adults’ or ‘groom them to send to tertiary level education’ (Momodu); in this sense, secondary education is seen as a ‘transition period’ towards adulthood (Momodu), in which it is the teachers’ responsibility to help students ‘become an acceptable member of society’ (Marconi), ‘good leaders’ (Modupe) and ‘to be self-reliant in the future’ (Momodu).

While academic achievements are important to access further education, perceptions on secondary education are not limited to teaching subject knowledge but include skills to navigate society effectively: as Fatmata notes, despite there being higher-paying jobs, being a teacher allows her ‘to build a better nation’ and ‘serve my country as a whole’. Touching upon human, social and identity capitals, the role of teachers is also characterised by

providing continuous guidance and counselling to all students (Marconi, Fatmata, Modupe), which will be discussed in Section 4.2.

The second theme that emerged from interviews is that secondary education is also extremely beneficial to the teachers themselves. Despite some negative experiences in the classrooms, most teachers highlighted how their profession promotes long-life learning: Marconi, Fatmata, Modupe and Mohamed noted how preparing lessons allows them to study and learn more every day. Marconi also noted how teaching ‘it’s broadened my horizons’ both through continuous learning and through the ‘friendship with the kids’ and colleagues, emphasizing how his role contributes to establishing a sense of togetherness within the community itself. As discussed in Section 4.2., it became evident that teachers in Sierra Leone act as role models for the whole community, even outside of educational settings.

The negative perceptions of junior secondary education can also be divided into several themes, such as school environment, external support, teacher experiences and student experiences. Following previously published data, the lack of qualified teachers has been indicated as an important obstacle to education provision. This issue is exacerbated by individuals who train as teachers but pursue other careers, as seen in Section 4.3. Lack of incentives and low salaries are also clear issues: teachers commented that their remuneration is not ‘commensurable to the service I am rendering’ (Momodu) or to ‘my experience and my degree’ (Fatu). Teachers employed by private schools are paid directly by the school and depend on students’ paying their education fees: as Modupe notes, ‘if they [student] don’t pay them, then you just need to be patient’.

The teachers noted that government schools often face more challenges than private ones: they include very limited to no teaching material available (Marconi, Fatmata, Momodu, Fatu); lack of laboratories and tools for practical subjects such as home economics and agriculture (Fatmata); lack of proper seating accommodation, furniture and infrastructure (Marconi, Fatmata, Momodu, Fatu) and in some cases lack of toilets, which forces students to go home to relieve themselves (Momodu); lastly, the teacher-student ratio is also an issue, with classrooms being ‘so congested’ (Momodu).¹⁰ The student informants also corroborated these issues, noting lack of libraries (Foda), infrastructural issues – including leakage during the rainy season – safety due to road traffic, lack of toilet facilities, potable water and trained teachers in rural areas (Francine, Musa). The two private school teachers did not register any of the issues listed above: on the other hand, they discussed running of debates and outreach

¹⁰ Government schoolteachers reported having between 49 (Marconi) to 62 students (Fatmata) in one classroom. Private school teachers reported 17 (Modupe) to 28 students (Mohamed).

programmes to engage with students (Mohamed), organising ‘graduation ceremony’ and handing out ‘certificate’ and ‘prizes’ to motivate students (Modupe).

In terms of external support, both teachers from government and private schools voiced the lack of support they receive. While private schools received no support from the government due to their status (Modupe, Mohamed), government schools receive limited support, which takes the form of subsidies and English and mathematics textbooks. However, both Fatmata and Momodu agree that the supply should not be limited to these two subjects and that ultimately, the subsidies ‘are not enough to address all the issues that the school has’ (Momodu). Community support also appears to be limited: while Marconi mentions community participation and ‘family meetings’ as part of community support, most informants agreed that no support is received. Student informants also noted this lack of support, adding that more support from the government and the community is needed, although they noted that rural communities tend to be more supportive towards teachers – including cases of providing accommodation – as they want their children to learn (Musa). Francine also noted that rural communities would often come together to build schools where volunteer teachers would educate local children, and that ‘community schools’ are self-managed and outside governmental control.



Figure 2: Classrooms from two sampled government schools.

According to the teachers, students also face complex challenges that can impact their participation and completion rates. First, some students have personal challenges that can contribute to stress and anxiety. Fatmata, as one of the school counsellors, discussed at length the problems that they face: some students who live with their relatives, rather than their parents, are often mistreated, with girls being at risk of sexual abuse at home; other common issues include receiving no food for school lunch, having to work until late at night after school or having drug problems, especially among male students. Absenteeism, social media addiction and peer pressure related to sex and tobacco consumption were mentioned as

negatively affecting school performance (Mohamed, Momodu). Lastly, private school teachers indicated that school withdrawal due to the inability to pay private school fees is also common, and as discussed above, it directly affects the teachers' salaries (Modupe, Mohamed).

4.2. The role of teachers in education provision

As discussed in the previous section, the informants' perception of secondary education underlined the complex system of interconnected strengths and weaknesses that characterises this environment. While teachers remain central figures in education provision, the teachers emphasised how poor classroom conditions, shortage of learning materials and lack of external support can impact their work, regardless of their training and qualifications. Previous studies in Sierra Leone often focused on the impact of teachers in relation to their teaching qualifications, which greatly disregards their overall contribution to society. Regardless of their experiences, all teachers pictured the role of the teacher as multifaceted. Momodu defines it as 'a calling', which sums up the difficulties that these professionals face in exchange for little material rewards. The following section explores three different aspects of being a teacher – role model, counsellor and instructor – and their impact on their students and wider society, considering human, social and identity capital theories.

Teachers as role models were one of the first themes that emerged during the interviews. Marconi noted that '[a]s a teacher, you are a role model'. This statement emphasises that it is not the teacher's choice to be a role model, but it is simply imbued in their position. As Marconi continues, 'if a teacher stands in school and smoke', the students will 'replicate' that behaviour and think it is acceptable. Therefore, informants agree that teachers should be extremely mindful of their role and behave appropriately.¹¹ Moreover, a few informants also noted that a 'teacher should be a parent' (Momodu) and that they often act as one both at school and when they visit the students' houses if needed (Fatmata), which reinforces the idea of teachers as comprehensive mentors, inside and outside the classroom.

Describing role models as 'those from whom we learn particular skills and behaviors' (Morgenroth, Ryan and Peters, 2015, p. 467), it is not surprising, as the teachers mentioned, that teachers are a primary example (Brownhill *et al.*, 2021, p. 654). While their positive behaviours could be linked to different dimensions, assets belonging to identity capital are

¹¹ Positive qualities that teachers should possess and could influence students include: punctuality (Marconi, Fatu), motivation (Modupe, Momodu, Musa), appearance and dress code (Marconi, Modupe, Mohamed), friendliness and patience (Fatmata, Modupe, Mohamed, Fatu), selflessness and empathy (Foda).

perhaps the most evident ones: attitudes, values, motivation, goals and self-esteem are elements that can be learnt or emulated by students. They are also related to the links between gender perception, gender-based violence and the low percentage of female teachers employed in Sierra Leone, which will be discussed in Section 4.4.

The second theme that came to light was the role of teachers as counsellors. While Fatmata discussed her position as an official school counsellor, most of the teachers discussed their commitment to guide and support students on academic and personal matters, following the general definition of a counsellor as providing ‘academic, career, and personal/social’ support to students (Paisley and McMahon, 2001).¹² The teachers’ experiences confirmed both their role in counselling and guiding students as well as its importance for their personal growth. Marconi, for instance, stressed the value of studying psychology during his teacher training and how it helps to approach underperforming students who experience personal issues. Both Modupe and Mohamed discussed strategies to encourage students to change negative behaviours, which includes befriending and one-on-one approaches. Fatmata, as a formal school counsellor, gave an account of students’ problems in Section 4.1., which included girls’ sexual abuse. The informant discussed that in such cases, she should try to ‘find another relative’ that would take them in and do subsequent checks ‘so they are able to continue their education’ and improve their situation. The importance of teachers counselling female students is further discussed in Section 4.4.

While guiding students can have a broad impact on their formation – from motivation to future goals – the teachers’ experiences highlighted how schools can be close-knit communities that provide invaluable support (and social capital) to their students. In this view, teachers act as social networks that students can rely on when needed, which is not limited to academic aspects but can include real support for sexual abuse and drug addiction. These two cases, for instance, demonstrate the impact that education can have outside academic achievement, which is often understudied: as Schuller (2004) reflects, education is often seen as a ‘wholly individualised activity’ that does not take into account the crucial relationships between its actors – students, teachers and institutions (p. 18).

Lastly, and perhaps the most recognisable aspect of the profession, is teachers as instructors. Knowledge, skills and qualifications are primarily associated with the human capital, which in turn are possible through the diligent work of teachers. As Fatmata asserts,

¹² It is also worth noting that due to frequent interactions with the students, teachers are often involved in detecting students’ problems before formal counsellors are involved (Georgiana, 2015, p. 1082; Dobbs-Oates and Morris, 2016, p. 51).

‘the best impact’ is that ‘we disseminate knowledge to the kids’, a reflection that is also echoed by Mohamed and Momodu. Unfortunately, previous statistics highlight issues with pass rates for school-leaving qualifications: ministerial data show that in 2016, the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE), which is sat at the end of junior secondary school, was 65% (MEST, 2018, p. 183); on the other hand, 2017 data for the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE), sat at the end of secondary school, was 20% (MEST, 2018, p. 184).¹³

While this is not surprising considering the challenges of the secondary educational system, two reflections are needed. Firstly, standardised testing is still a highly debated topic, with critics generally arguing that ‘standardized tests oversimplify knowledge and do not test higher order thinking skills’ (Wang, Beckett and Brown, 2010, p. 313). However, given the lack of quantifiable data on students’ knowledge and skills besides standardised testing pass rates, it is impossible to estimate the impact of teachers on human capital formation at this time, although tertiary education enrolment in Sierra Leone – which relies on standardised testing – appears to be low.¹⁴ Secondly, the only asset that was specifically mentioned as beneficial for students was English communication skills, including in relation to the job market (Modupe, Momodu). While Section 4.4. expands on the role of English in multilingual Sierra Leone, it can be summarised that, as the language of education and the government, knowledge of English is understood as a crucial human capital asset to access better jobs and higher education.

4.3 The impact of teacher training programmes

Teachers’ effectiveness in imparting knowledge and skills is also related to their professional formation, specifically the teacher training that they received. As seen in Section 2.3 as many as 51% of secondary teachers are unqualified or underqualified (MBSSE, 2019),¹⁵ which is often cited as one of the main issues with education in Sierra Leone (World Bank, 2007; McDermott and Allen, 2015; Wright, 2018; Mai, 2019; Taylor-Pearce, Carrol and Bindi, 2021). All six teachers interviewed for the research stated they possess an HTC-S

¹³ The West African Examinations Council (WAEC) is an English language external examination board that serves ‘Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and the Gambia’ (Dillard, 2003, p. 415). Both junior and senior secondary school testing relies on this international examination board (MEST, 2018, p. 160).

¹⁴ While there is no clear nor recent data on tertiary enrolment rate, in 2011/12, there were a total 31,103 students enrolled in tertiary institutions in the country, including ‘universities ... polytechnics and teacher colleges’, at any level and year (MEST, 2018, p. 31). For reference, the students enrolled in senior secondary schools in 2011/12 were reported as 124,885 (MEST, 2018, p. 33).

¹⁵ Underqualified teachers have a teaching certificate that is below junior secondary education, such as a TC or at HTC-P, which are only appropriate for primary education.

qualification,¹⁶ and they were satisfied with the training they received. Specifically, they lauded the mix of theoretical and practical aspects related to teaching methodologies, the possibility to gain school-based experience, syllabus planning, strategies related to seating arrangement and classroom management (Marconi, Fatmata, Modupe, Momodu). Furthermore, the importance of a dress code, punctuality and counselling were also stressed, and ‘[m]istakes that we used to do in class were corrected’ (Modupe).

Since some of the teacher informants attended teacher training programmes (TTP) decades before this research, their answers on what these programmes are lacking could be more informative to their experience than the current situation. Marconi noted that TTP cannot cover everything related to education since knowledge is continuously ‘increasing every day’. Fatmata asserted that gender and gender-based violence were missing from her programme, which could have helped combat related issues. Modupe wished for government officials working in education to be more involved in TTP and gain first-hand experience on their impact on education. Similarly, Mohamed lamented that his programme did not prepare him for the administrative side of being a teacher, such as ‘pin codes’ and the role of the Teaching Service Commission.¹⁷ Lastly, Momodu noted that the role of parents in their children’s education, which he deemed crucial, was also overlooked.

HTC are three-year programmes supervised by the Ministry and, in 2020, they were offered by seven tertiary institutions across the country (Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education, 2020, p. 67).¹⁸ Blending ‘subject content and pedagogy’ in their curriculum, they include practical teaching through the years, including a ‘full term’ in the third year (Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education, 2020, p. 67). One issue with these programmes, which is acknowledged by the Ministry, is that they attract ‘students who fail to gain entrance to university degree courses’ since admission requirements are generally lower (Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education, 2020, p. 68).¹⁹ This leads to

¹⁶ Three informants possess both a TC and an HTC-S, meaning they received further teaching training after their initial TC training (Fatmata, Mohamed, Momodu). One, Fatu, possessed both an HTC-S and a bachelor’s degree in education.

¹⁷ The Teaching Service Commission was established in 2011 and is responsible for teacher training in the country (Teaching Service Commission, 2020). Qualified teachers are issued pin codes, which are required to receive a governmental salary (Levey, 2020).

¹⁸ They are: Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone; Njala University; Ernest Bai Koroma University of Science & Technology; University of Makeni; Eastern Polytechnic; Milton Margai College of Education & Technology and Freetown Teachers’ College (Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education, 2020, pp. 67–68).

¹⁹ HTC-S programmes require at least four WASSCE credits – comparable to English GCE Advanced Level or A-levels – for admission, while degree programmes generally require at least five (World Bank, 2007, p. 74). For instance, Njala University currently requires at least four WASSCE credits for HTC-S programmes but five credits for degree programmes (Njala University, 2021).

situations in which students are trained as teachers but do not pursue it after graduating or change their profession within a few years (World Bank, 2007, p. 75; MBSSE, 2020, p. 68). Moreover, some newly qualified teachers may prefer to remain close to their alma mater rather than returning to their home regions, which may negatively impact rural areas that need more trained teachers (World Bank, 2007, p. 75).

During the group interview, the student informants discussed severe issues with the lack of qualified teachers in rural areas and incentives that the government is giving to science teachers for their relocation in these areas (Musa). When asked if they would relocate to rural areas, one student said no (Musa) and another said yes (Francine), while the other two said it would depend on the incentives to move there (Foda, Fatima). Moreover, they also acknowledge that community schools – as self-managed schools outside governmental control – are extremely beneficial in educating children despite virtually consisting of untrained teachers (Foda, Musa, Farah). Musa stated that unqualified teachers in rural areas ‘most of the time can even do the job that some qualified teacher because they are dedicated to the work’, which clashes with teacher informants’ unanimous perception that unqualified teachers are ineffective.

4.4. The language of education

Language was one of the major themes that emerged during the literature review and again during data collection. As discussed in Section 2.3., Sierra Leone presents an interesting linguistic picture, intertwined with its colonial and postcolonial history: while English remains the country’s official language after independence, a multitude of indigenous languages are spoken by the population, with four of them identified as ‘national languages’. The *Education Act, 2004* reform introduced the teaching of indigenous languages and Sierra Leonean studies in the curriculum, with the aim of facilitating cultural understanding in the multilingual and multi-ethnic country (Government of Sierra Leone, 2004, p. 4). As indicated in the 2020 *National Curriculum Framework*, this practice continues to the present, with JSS offering the four national languages – Mende, Temne, Limba and Krio – as elective subjects (MBSSE, 2020, p. 47).

The popularity of these four languages is more obvious when statistics are analysed. The 2015 *Population and Housing Census* reports that the four languages are collectively spoken by 80% of the population of Sierra Leone as their first language: in contrast, English

as a first language only accounts for less than 0.2% (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2017, p. 92).²⁰ While there are no data regarding the total number of speakers of these languages in the 2015 census – that is, spoken as second or other languages – the 2004 census indicated that Krio was spoken by 9.79% of the population as a first language but by an exorbitant 77.26% as a second language (Translator without Borders, 2020).

Since authors often describe Krio as the universal lingua franca of Sierra Leone (Fyle, 2003; Oyètádé and Fashole Luke, 2008; Francis and Kamanda, 2010), the role of Krio, English and other languages in education was incorporated into this research. Based on the data collected, English was indicated as the main language used as the medium of instruction. However, all six teachers indicated that they resort to Krio when students have problems understanding English, which is often attributed to their poor English skills. Interestingly, one informant indicated that she ‘would go down to our local dialect’ or ‘break’ an English word into Krio when the students voiced their lack of understanding (Fatmata). Similarly, two informants also mentioned that ‘we have to go down, to the bottom so the kids understand’ (Mohamed) and that ‘we come down a little bit to Krio’ (Momodu) about using this indigenous language in the classroom.

The imagery of descending from English to Krio provides an interesting point of reflection on the perception of the two languages in Sierra Leone, especially considering the status of English as the language of education, the government and administration. Francis and Kamanda (2010) argued that the adoption of English as the language of instruction in the 1970s was an exclusionary act that prevented Sierra Leoneans who did not speak it ‘from political participation and opportunities for social advancement’ (p. 236). Unfortunately, whether implicitly or explicitly, knowledge of English still appears to be a colossal barrier to access some aspects of public life. All informants agree that English as the medium of education has a positive impact on the students as it provides better communicative skills. Moreover, Fatu also noted that since all educational material in Sierra Leone is written in English, ‘[s]o if you don’t know English, you don’t learn, how can you read them?’ (Fatu). In this perspective, the knowledge of English is crucial to general education as much as academic learning.

Regarding the students’ knowledge of English, teachers agreed that their students struggle with English and react poorly to it as the language of instruction, with Fatu

²⁰ The census reports eighteen language in total, with fifteen being indigenous and three being exogenous. In order, Mende is spoken by 29.7% of the population, Temne by 26.6%, Krio by 18.2% and Limba by 5.5%. English is part of the label ‘foreign language’, which accounts for 0.2% (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2017, p. 92).

indicating that ‘we have to force them’ to speak English despite their adversity. The use of Krio was mentioned by one informant as something that specifically affects the students’ use of English: he indicated that, unsurprisingly, the children are used to use Krio in every aspect of their life, from home to friends to the street; however, he also added that the use of Krio was detrimental for their English learning, stating that due to linguistic similarities between the two language, ‘it [Krio] destroys their English’ (Mohamed). When asked if indigenous languages should complement English when teaching in secondary education or have a more prominent role, two informants were for the notion, while the other four were against the idea. The latter, while recognising that Krio would be easier to understand for the students, indicated that only English is the language of the classroom.

On teaching through a combination of English and indigenous languages, Modupe stated that ‘two can walk together’ and that it is the ‘duty’ of a teacher to make sure that a student understands what is being taught, which includes using a local language if necessary. Mohamed also noted that they should ‘not forget our native language’ and noted that other countries are also implementing similar practices to preserve indigenous languages. Views from the student informants varied, including using exclusively English in the classroom (Musa) to using a ‘blend’ of English and local languages in primary school to help students familiarise themselves with English (Michael).

So far, the use of English as the medium of instruction suggests a positive impact on the development of human and social capital: from one side, being versed in English allows access to tertiary education but also to independent learning and knowledge that is written in English; from the other side, is also grants access to different aspects of social life, expanding civic participation, social networks and international affairs. Further research on the role of English on identity capital would be required, especially to understand how the use of English can affect the students’ self-perceptions and the use of English as an inclusive – or exclusionary – educational policy. Nonetheless, as the Ministry states, ‘[b]eing illiterate and innumerate puts an individual at a significant disadvantage in making headway in life’ (MEST, 2018, p. 69).

4.5. Gender in education

As discussed in Section 2.3, Sierra Leone faces different issues regarding gender in education. To summarise, female student attendance in school is generally low, with important repercussions on their education and development. This issue is exacerbated by

gender-based violence and abuse in school, early marriages and rooted cultural views that see girls' education unnecessary. The presence of female teachers in school is also low, especially considering the positive impact that female teachers can have on both male and female students.

The informants generally confirmed the data from the literature review and noted that these issues persist to the present. Out of the three schools sampled, one did include any women in their teaching staff, while the other two tended to have a low ratio of female to male teachers (one to five and two to three). Nonetheless, and regardless of their gender, all the informants agreed that female teachers can have a positive impact on the education of young girls. As seen in Section, 2.2., teachers have discussed the role of female teachers in guiding and counselling female students, including in gender-specific issues: Fatmata stated that since 'we know their [female students'] problems', female teachers can have a 'big impact' on their education. Fatmata specifically mentioned menstrual cycle, unwanted pregnancy and sexual diseases as topics that are discussed with female students to sensitise them, adding that '[w]e as female, we know the complications about these things'.

The topic of women's health was also brought up by two male teachers employed (Modupe and Mohamed) in the school that did not have any female teachers in their staff. Modupe noted how female students are often reluctant to discuss issues related to 'their own personal hygiene' with male teachers, and that the presence of female teachers could help. Mohamed also voiced similar concerns about female students' comfort in disclosing sensitive information, stressing that the school is actively looking 'to bring some female teachers because we really need them' (Mohamed). Since one school sampled only admitted male students, their teachers reflected on the impact of female teachers more broadly: Momodu not only discussed the importance of female teachers in education but also added that 'in developed countries, more females are found in the classroom'.²¹

Regarding differences between boys' and girls' education, most teachers indicated that there are no implicit differences: as Marconi put it, at the end of the day they both have to study for exams. Fatmata acknowledged that some people in 'different communities' believe that only boys should be educated, confirming existing views from the literature review. In this perspective, having female students in the classroom is not only beneficial to the students themselves but also the wider community: as Fatmata noted, co-education would demonstrate

²¹ While analysing the link between socio-economic development and female to male teacher ratio would require separate research, data from 2009 shows that Europe and North America had a high percentage of female secondary teachers (around 65%) compared to Sub-Saharan Africa (less than 30%) (UNESCO, 2012, p. 100).

that all genders ‘have the same rights to education’ and could urge more families to send their daughters to school. All teachers characterised female students as a vulnerable group and recognised the need to improve girls’ education. When asked about how girls’ education could be improved, the following comments were mentioned: employ more female teachers to act as role models (Marconi), motivate and encourage female students (Modupe, Mohamed), provide more scholarships for girls (Mohamed, Fatu), convince parents to send their daughters to school (Momodu) and put in place more law against harassment and early marriages (Fatu).

The variety of these suggestions catches the multidimensional nature of girls’ education as expressed by the teachers, including its issues and barriers. As individuals, teachers can have a profound impact on their students as both “role models” and “counsellors”; however, schools are only able to create safe and conducive spaces through participatory approaches, including the support by both the community and the government. The balance between these dimensions has yet to be found, at least according to the teachers: Fatu, while strongly in favour of improving girls’ education, also disclosed that her school had recently become a boys’ school and girls were turned away. The reason given was that since students ‘are only interested in social activities’ rather than learning, the presence of female students escalated the situation into ‘a mess’ which resulted in ‘all of us [teachers] recommend that female should go out of school ... let them find other schools’ (Fatu). While Fatu was not the only one advocating for single-sex education – Fatmata also support this view, claiming that girls can be easily distracted and fall ‘in love’ with male students – the removal of girls from the school remains an important decision that could have deep repercussion on their education, even when considering external factors such as school location.

The general benefits of educating girls, as discussed by the informants, could be summarised in a recurrent phrase: ‘when you educate a girl, you educate the nation’ (Momodu).²² This saying highlights the perception of women in Sierra Leone as well as their role in shaping the future, although perhaps not enough is being done. Educating women, as the teacher stated, can have a series of benefits besides scholastic achievements, employment and social participation, including a better understanding of reproductive and women’s health (Fatmata, Modupe, Momodu).²³ Therefore, educating women is not limited to forming a new

²² Mohamed, similarly, said ‘when you educate female, you educate the nation’.

²³ An interesting study carried out in Sierra Leone, based on 2008 demographic data, found a positive correlation between mothers’ level of education and their children’s enrolment in junior secondary school

generation of workers but also a new generation of healthy, enriched and self-reliant members of society: as Diamanka and Godwyll (2008) argue, poverty in Sub-Saharan African is ‘heavily gendered’ and ‘girls’ education is not simply an educational issue; it is, in fact, the cornerstone of poverty reduction’ (pp. 135-6).

5. Conclusion

This research aimed at investigating secondary education in Sierra Leone and its benefits to individuals’ human, social and identity capitals formation. Emphasis was given to the role of teachers, gender and English language in educational provision. Generally speaking, the finding confirmed previously published data on the matter: despite immense effort from the government to render education as accessible as possible, many barriers are still present for students, teachers and the wider community. Specifically, it could be inferred that systematic issues with the poor conditions of school buildings – together with the lack of teaching material, furniture, and classroom overcrowding – massively impact the teacher’s ability to educate children.

However, and despite some disheartening comments on the reality of their position, most teachers displayed a strong commitment to their profession and expressed the importance of educating new generations of self-reliant citizens. Therefore, this research must stress the crucial role that teachers have in educating and supporting their students, which cannot only be equated to academic achievements. While previous studies often focussed on the impact of teachers in relation to school-leaving examination pass rates, this research underlined their role in building a better society – from motivating students to protecting them from serious issues such as drug addiction and sexual abuse.

Comparisons between teachers’ and teacher training students’ perception on the importance of teaching qualifications provided some initial reflections, but further research is required to understand this debate: for now, it can be inferred that teaching without proper training is a reality in many rural areas which needs to be addressed at the root rather than blatantly admonished. The use of English as the medium of instruction is also a topic that requires more exploration: while it is beneficial to access some aspects of public life besides education, careful consideration should be given to its impact on the many indigenous languages that are spoken in Sierra Leone, perhaps from post-colonial lenses. Lastly, despite

(Kamanda, Madise and Schnepf, 2016, p. 123), which highlights the importance of education for educating new generations.

serious issues related to gender in school, the informants stressed the importance of providing more scholarships and educational opportunities for women. Further research on the role of educational institutions in providing such opportunities would provide valuable insights to understand why gender-based barriers still exist.

Despite the limitations of this research, and the modest number of informants, the researcher hopes that a more comprehensive and humanised picture of education in Sierra Leone was provided, highlighting both its strengths and weaknesses.

Appendixes

Appendix A: Educational system of Sierra Leone

Tertiary education		Teacher Certificate (TC) and Higher Teacher Certificate (HTC)	Undergraduate degree programme	Polytechnic	Technical/Vocational institutions
Senior secondary education	SSS-3		Senior secondary school (SSS)	Technical/Vocational centre (TVC)	Vocational trade centre (VTC)
	SSS-2				
	SSS-1				
Basic education	JSS-3		Junior secondary school (JSS)	Community centre A (CEC-A)	
	JSS-2		Primary school	Community centre B (CEC-B)	
	JSS-1				
	Primary-6				
	Primary-5				
	Primary-4				
	Primary-3				
	Primary-2				
Primary-1					

Appendix B: Informants table

Pseudonym	Informant group	Type of school employer
Marconi	Junior secondary teacher	Government
Fatmata		Government
Modupe		Private
Mohamed		Private
Momodu		Government
Fatu		Government
Musa		Teacher training student (HTC-S) / Bachelor of Education in Educational Administration and Management
Foda		
Farah		
Francine		
Fatima		
Michael		
Fauza		

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