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Understanding Secondary Education
through Teachers' Perspectives:
The role of gender, language and teacher training
programmes in Sierra Leone

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Executive summary

This report examines the general perception of secondary education in Sierra Leone, focusing on the role of teachers and teacher training programmes as well as language and gender in education. The study is based in Makeni, northern Sierra Leone, and was possible through the support of the University of Makeni, a local tertiary institution that offers teacher training programmes. Through interviews with several informants, this report finds that teachers often work in uncondusive environments and that their role extends beyond that of instructors, often including social support for all students. Teacher training programmes, while effective in theory, present some structural problems, such as graduates not pursuing teaching or not wishing to work in rural areas, which contributes to an urban-rural educational divide. Lastly, gender and language can act as challenges for students in secondary schools since girls' education and the use of English as the medium of instruction are at times problematic. Recommendations based on the findings are also presented in this report.

1. Introduction and background

This report illustrates the results of an eight-week virtual placement at the University of Makeni, in northern Sierra Leone, undertaken during June-July 2021. The main aim of the placement's research was to understand the perceptions of secondary education and how different actors contributed to its provision, focusing on teachers, teacher training programmes, language and gender. Recent studies have highlighted the challenges that both teachers and students face within educational settings, which range from systematic issues to wider cultural barriers. Firstly, the country faces the massive task of reconstructing the education system after the civil war (1991–2002) brought education to a halt. The country's economic context and the governments' limited resources are reflected in the lack of proper infrastructure, learning material and adequate learning environments (World Bank, 2007, p. 68). Secondly, poverty, gender and cultural perceptions also influence school participation, posing important challenges to children's education (Reilly, 2014, p. 21; Mai, 2019, p. 7). Understanding teachers' and students' needs and dynamics, from an insider perspective, could be extremely beneficial in crafting effective educational policies.

2. Areas addressed

The research focused on perceptions of junior secondary education and the role of teachers as primary actors in education provision.¹ Given the structural issues that education faces, the investigation focused on understating how teachers navigate these complex environments and their overall impact. To understand their role, teacher training programmes in Sierra Leone were also analysed as the cornerstone of their professional formation. These programmes are three-year programmes offered at tertiary education institutions, comprising a mix of subject-specific knowledge, pedagogy and school-based training. These are particularly relevant considering that in 2019, roughly half of the secondary teaching force was unqualified and less than 16% of the teachers were female (MBSSE, 2019). Lastly, gender and language are two major areas of analysis given the reality of gender-based violence in school (Reilly, 2014) and the use of English as the national medium of instruction despite a flourishing multi-lingual context (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2017, p. 92).

¹ Junior secondary education (age 12-14) falls between primary education (age 6-11) and senior secondary education (age 15-18) (MEST, 2018, p. 30). Primary and junior secondary education are referred as 'basic education' and they have been free since the 2004 Educational Act (Government of Sierra Leone, 2004).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research questions

1. What is the perception of secondary education by professionals involved in the field?
2. What is the role of teachers and teacher training programmes in secondary education?
3. How do language and gender impact secondary education provision?

3.2. Research methods

The research was based on a social constructionist approach, which emphasises the existence of a shared reality and personal truths in contextualising a topic. Through the support of a research assistant in Makeni, qualitative structured and semi-structured interviews with 6 junior secondary teachers and 7 students at the University of Makeni (enrolled in teacher training and school administration programmes) were carried out. They resulted in a comprehensive profile of secondary education in Sierra Leone, focusing on its strengths and weaknesses. The investigation relied primarily on grounded theory, which provided an open approach to the topic and informed data collection and analysis. Ethnographic research methods and data analysis were also used, particularly participatory observation and thematic analysis. Both methods allowed for a deeper contextualisation of the topic, minimising the presence of research biases.

3.3. Ethics

The investigation followed the University of Sheffield ethical guidelines, taking into careful consideration the wellbeing of all participants involved, from the research assistant to the informants. The aims of the research and the implications of participation were discussed with each informant to achieve informed consent and guarantee comfort and privacy. All data collected was safely stored throughout the investigation and only accessible to the researcher and his assistant.

3.4. Limitations

The major limitation of the research was the virtual nature of the placement, which severely limited data collection. Firstly, the inability to experience Sierra Leone first-hand affected an ethnographic contextualisation of the topic, especially because education is intrinsically connected to other aspects of life. Secondly, some interviews were carried out by the research

assistant for practical reasons: although they provided excellent data, the researcher had no control over the discourse and follow-up questions were not possible.

4. Key findings

4.1. Secondary education

The data collected highlighted the importance of secondary education, including the perception of junior secondary education as a transitional phase that is crucial to adolescents' formation. However, despite the government's efforts to improve education provision, there are still several barriers that make education a challenging reality. Lack of proper scholastic infrastructure, learning material and subject-specific laboratories figured as issues that severely impacted the work of teachers. These professionals worked in difficult circumstances and wished for more support from the government and the community, which in most cases was extremely limited. Besides these challenges, the informants also emphasised the struggles that students face, inside and outside the educational environment. It is common for students to experience stress related to family issues, poverty and peer pressure, which can have important repercussions: for instance, students may work after school to support their families, while others may have no money for school lunches. Drug addiction among boys has also been noted, along with gender-based issues (discussed in Section 3.4). While private schools present fewer issues related to the educational environment and learning material due to being self-financed, many informants brought to attention the reality of community schools in rural areas. These schools, which are entirely self-managed by the community, exist outside the governmental reach and receive no support from it, contributing to an important urban-rural divide.

4.2. Role of teachers and teacher training programmes

Within the socio-cultural context of Sierra Leone, the role of teachers extends much more beyond that of simple instructors at schools. Interviews highlighted the multifaceted character of this profession, which includes guiding and supporting students inside and outside the classroom and well as being a role model for the whole community. Besides imparting knowledge and motivating students, most teachers discussed supporting students with personal issues, abusive households, dangerous behaviours, drug addiction and gender-based violence. In this perspective, teachers act as comprehensive mentors for the younger

generation, helping the development of multiple assets related to human, social and identity capitals. Unfortunately, while recognising the impact they have, all informants discussed the hardships of their profession, especially the little remuneration and support they receive.

Teacher training programmes are important aspects of the profession as all informants emphasised their crucial roles in forming effective teachers. However, the informants noted two main issues with teacher training programmes effectiveness. Firstly, due to lower entry requirements compared to bachelor's degrees, they often attract students who wish to pursue higher education but have no intentions of teaching. In this perspective, many resources aimed at forming a new generation of teachers could be lost. Secondly, newly trained teachers may not wish to relocate to rural areas, furthering the urban-rural divide in education quality and the presence of community schools. The informants stressed the lack of government incentives to relocate to these areas, with a few people admitting they would not relocate. The reality of community schools, with no governmental support nor trained teachers, needs to be carefully examined, taking these issues and limitations into consideration.

4.3. Language and gender in education

Language and gender are two interesting dimensions that are often seen as a barrier to education. The national language of education, deeply connected to its colonial history, is English. The data collected show contrasting views on the language of instruction: while all the informants noted the crucial role that English plays in accessing education and other aspects of public life, they also reported that most students struggle with it. In fact, many informants admitted that they often use local languages alongside English to make sure that complex concepts are understood. Nonetheless, regarding whether multiple languages should be officially allowed as media of instruction, the informants remained divided. Despite the importance of English to access to higher learning and better opportunities, further investigation on the topic is required, especially in a multi-lingual society such as Sierra Leone.

Gender is another important aspect as female students have been clearly characterised as a vulnerable group in education. Data show that female students face many challenges, including cultural views that deem girls' education unnecessary and gender-based abuse at home. Issues with school facilities have also been pointed out, particularly the lack of sanitary facilities dedicated to female hygiene, which has been linked to frequent

absenteeism. These issues are deeply connected to the cultural and economic reality of Sierra Leone and are difficult to tackle comprehensively. Nonetheless, the informants noted that more female teachers should be part of the educational system since they can have a positive impact in guiding and supporting young women, both as role models and advisers for women's issues. As the informants stated, this is particularly important given the low percentage of female teachers in secondary education.

5. Conclusion

This investigation aimed at understanding the complex reality of secondary education in Sierra Leone, focusing on the role of teachers in education provision. The findings uncovered the harsh reality of challenges that plague the educational system, which include systematic limitations to school environments and barriers that both teachers and students face, often connected to the socio-cultural and economic reality of the country. The study demonstrated the multifaceted role that teachers have in educating and forming new generations, acting as mentors and role models for the wider community. While teacher training programmes are effective ways to prepare teachers, some issues can make them virtually ineffective. This study also emphasised the need for more female teachers in schools to minimise gender-based issues and supporting girls' education. Lastly, English as the language of instruction remains a topic that presents discrepancies from theory to practice, which requires further analysis. Overall, while education is clearly beneficial to the human, social and identity capital development in Sierra Leone, there is a margin for further improvement.

6. Recommendations

Based on the data collected, the following recommendations are presented:

1. *Impact on the wider community.* Given the lack of governmental and community support perceived by the informants, more could be done to improve the quality of teaching and educational resources available to secondary schools. This could include access to subject-specific learning material and continuing professional development for teachers.
2. *Improvement to female teachers' participation.* Based on the impact that female teaching staff can have on students' development, there is a need for more

opportunities for women in the field. The role of scholarships should be carefully considered as a primary incentive for their involvement.

3. *Consideration for rural schools.* Rural areas often rely on self-managed community schools and there are often no real incentives for teachers to relocate there from urban areas. Voluntary teachers from these schools could benefit from scholarships or short-term programmes to improve their knowledge of pedagogy and subject-based areas.
4. *Understanding English as the medium of instruction.* Considering that many students struggle with English and that teachers often resort to indigenous languages, more studies on the matter are needed. Investigation on how English could be promoted among secondary students through extracurricular activities, for instance, could benefit local schools.

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