



# Leh Wi Lan Sierra Leone Secondary Grade Learning Assessment 2019



Briefing note 3: October 2019

## Learning outcomes of the most disadvantaged students and status of inclusive practices in school






**On the 20th of August 2019, Sierra Leone marked the first anniversary of the Free Quality School Education Programme (FQSE).** The past year has seen significant strides in ensuring all Sierra Leonean children have equal access to free quality school education. FQSE has led to more schools and teachers getting approved; improved learning environment through distribution of teaching and learning materials; better school and classroom infrastructure; review of service conditions for teachers; and measures against examination malpractice. Furthermore, by focussing on ‘quality’ in the FQSE, this ambitious programme is aiming to go beyond simply filling classrooms through increased enrolment. Ultimately, the FQSEP will succeed if children in all parts of Sierra Leone are learning useful skills, whether they are girls, boys, poor or rich.

**The Secondary Grade Learning Assessments (SGLAs) play a pivotal role in informing MBSSE, districts and schools on the quality of teaching and learning in Sierra Leone.** In 2017 and 2018, SGLAs measured English and mathematics skills of JSS2 and SSS2 students in Sierra Leonean schools. The results showed that most pupils only show basic primary-level English and maths skills despite completing eight (JSS2) to 11 (SSS2) years of formal education and passing various exams like the NPSE and BECE. Girls, poorer pupils and those in remote schools tended to do worse. One explanation for why schools are not improving is that enrolment is increasing rapidly: on average, JSS were enrolling 10 per cent more students in 2017 compared to 2015, and SSS 30 per cent more students. Some schools may struggle to cope with the additional students while maintaining or improving quality. School census data for 2019 – which will provide a first glimpse of how much FQSE has increased enrolment – was not available at the time of writing this note. However, it can be hypothesised that the launch of a free universal basic education programme will push enrolment numbers up, with many newly enrolled pupils being first-generation learners, from disadvantaged families, who need closer attention from teachers in order to learn and thrive. This is in addition to historical shocks borne by these pupils back in 2014-15 (when they were at a formative stage of primary education) due to Ebola. These contextual factors should be borne in mind when reading the results discussed below.

This briefing note presents key results from the SGLA for pupils and teachers. It addressed the following questions:

- How are JSS and SSS students doing in English and maths?
- Are there learning gaps between boys and girls, rich and more poor students, and in different locations?
- What are the inclusive practices most commonly used by teachers and principals?
- What is the level of girls’ safety in schools?
- What is the experience of students with disabilities?

## About the Secondary Grade Learning Assessment

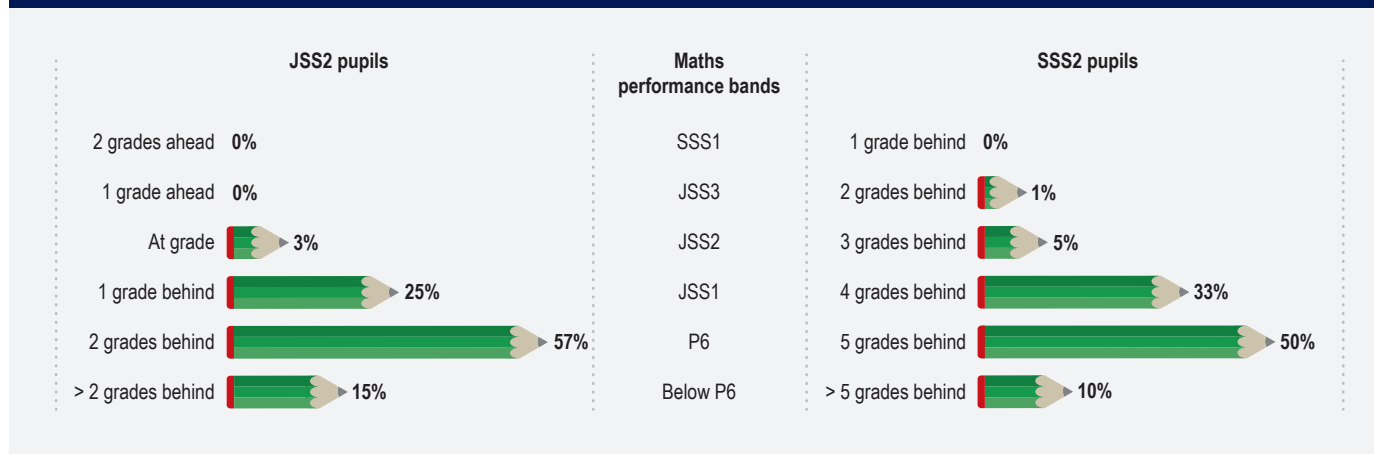
 <p><b>5,400</b> JSS2 and SSS2 pupils tested on English and maths</p>	 <p><b>One-on-one</b> test administration: each pupil is tested individually by a data collector using a handheld computer device</p>	 <p><b>Approximately</b> 45 minutes per pupil</p>	 <p><b>40</b> questions per test covering both English and maths</p>	 <p><b>Background</b> questions on pupils’ age, language spoken at home, assets at home, and use of pupil handbooks.</p>
--	--	--	--	---

## What is the level of English and maths skills typically demonstrated by JSS2 and SSS2 pupils?

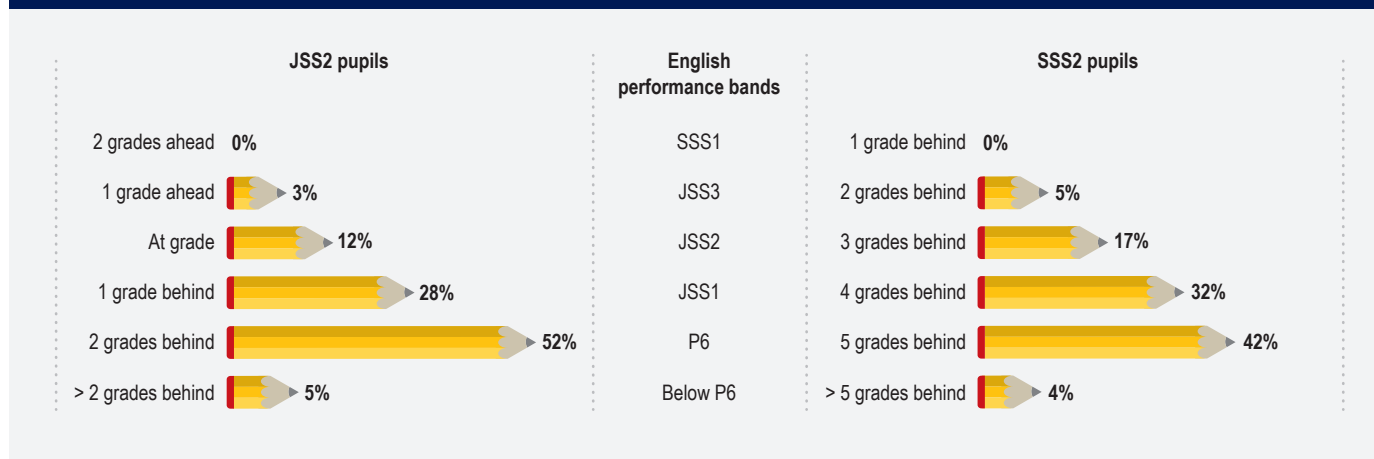
The SGLA III reiterates finding from previous years: pupil learning levels in secondary grades are generally low. There is a wide gap between pupils' actual skills and competencies compared to national curriculum expectations.<sup>1,2</sup> Moreover, results from this year suggest a larger drop in maths scores than English scores from SGLA II.

For English, as demonstrated in Figure 1, 57 per cent of JSS2 pupils and 46 per cent of SSS2 pupils are performing at a level that is expected from pupils in P6 or below. These pupils are unable to show skills expected at their level and have fallen behind curriculum expectations by 2 and 5 years respectively. Around 12 per cent of JSS2 pupils were able to exhibit skills that are appropriate for their grade and 3 per cent of pupils demonstrated skills that exceeded expectations. As compared to JSS2 pupils, a much larger proportion of SSS2 pupils were performing better. However, they are still falling behind by up to 4 years with no SSS2 pupil exhibiting skills that are expected for pupils in their grade.

**Figure 1: Distribution of JSS2 and SSS2 pupils across maths grade-level performance bands**



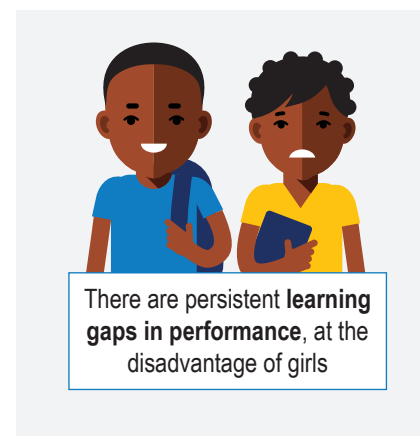
**Figure 2: Distribution of JSS2 and SSS2 pupils across English grade-level performance bands**



- 1 The process of aligning the learning assessment questions with curriculum expectations was carried out by a panel of experienced Sierra Leonean English and maths teachers, principals, examiners, curriculum specialists, and lesson plans developers. It was facilitated through technical assistance from the Leh Wi Lan programme, under the auspices of the Executive Secretary (Basic Education).
- 2 The attending experts took each SGLA test question and discussed and debated the most important skills being tested by each question and its placement in the national curriculum, ranging from below P6, P6, JSS1, JSS2, JSS3 and SSS1. The experts provided a grade level allocation for each item in the SGLA II test. Their discussions were supported with data about the occurrence of key terms in the outcomes stated in teachers' lesson plans.

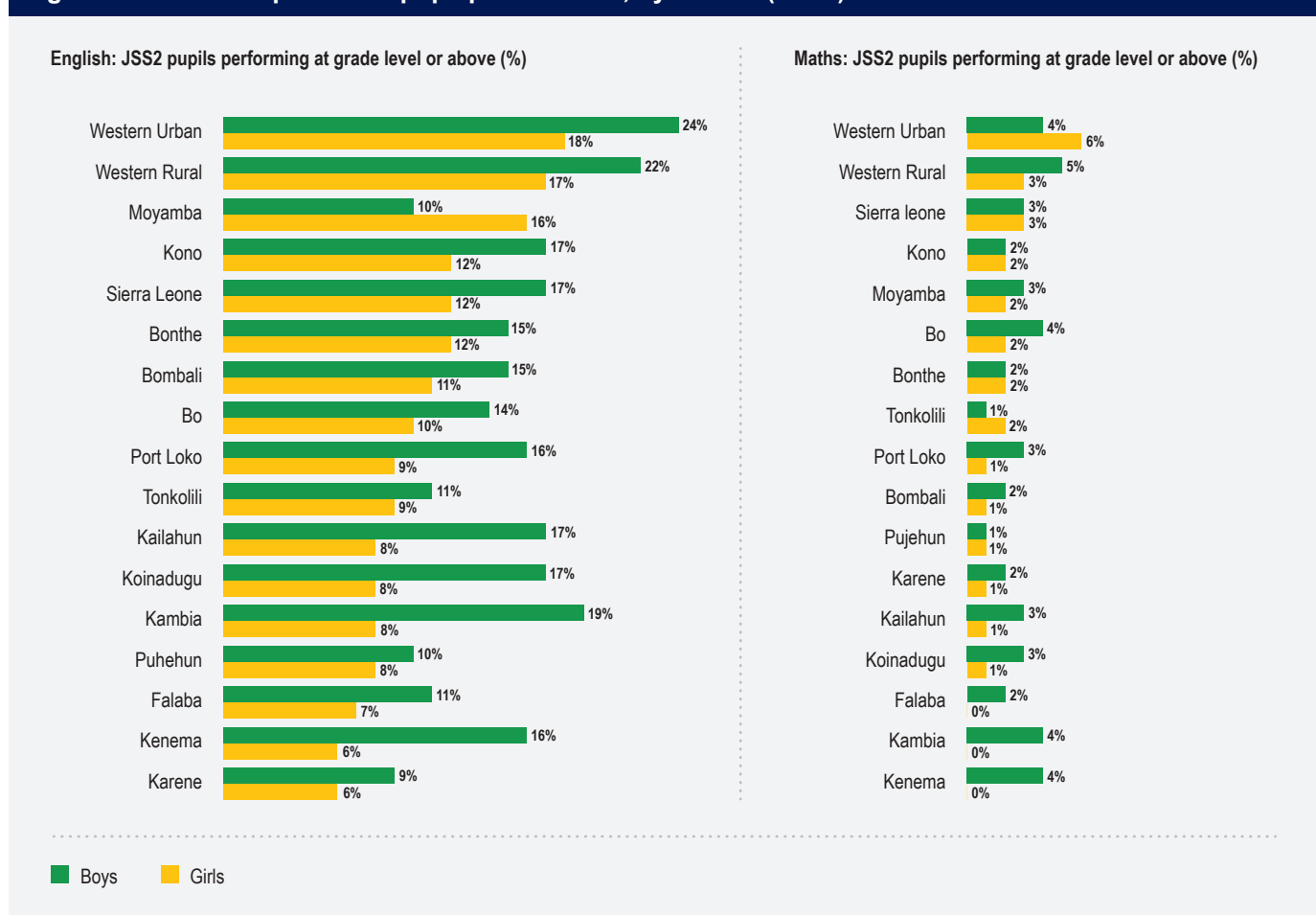
## How does pupil learning vary by gender?

Across both grades and subjects, girls perform worse than boys in the SGLA tests. The gender gap also widens as pupils move from JSS to SSS. At the SSS grade, only 34 per cent of girls show skills at the JSS1 level or higher compared to 46 per cent of boys for Maths. For English, 60 per cent of boys show skills at the JSS1 or higher compared to 49 per cent of girls. A significantly larger proportion of girls exhibit skills expected at the primary level but struggle at higher bands where the proportion of boys is higher. The gender gap was also present during the previous rounds of SGLA which provides evidence of the persistency of the gap. It is interesting to highlight, however, that from SGLA 2018, this gap has slightly widened in SGLA 2019, where girls performed worse relative to boys than last year.



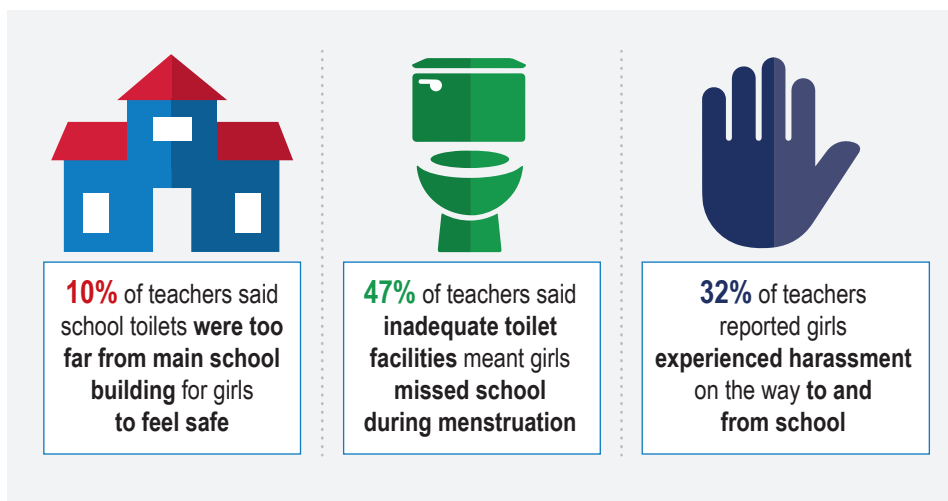
It is important to note that the prevalence of the gender gap and its magnitude shows significant variation across the country. At the provincial level, the gender gaps in the Western and Southern provinces are fairly small. At the district level, there is a persistent gender gap in JSS2 for English with girls only performing better than boys in Moyamba. There are large gender gaps in certain districts. As shown in Figure X, in Kambia, only 8 per cent of JSS2 girls show skills at the JSS2 level or higher compared to 19 per cent of boys. The gender gap is less prevalent and small for Maths with girls performing better in some districts (Western Urban, Bonthe, Pujehun, Kono).

**Figure 3: Gender disparities in pupil performance, by district (JSS2)**



## Girls' safety in school

Increased girls' safety in the school environment can play an important role in improving the performance of female pupils. As part of the SGLA survey, teachers were asked a range of questions on girls' safety in school to assess whether female students feel a greater sense of physical safety in school, what the incidence of sexual harassment is and whether there are mechanisms present for female pupils to report incidences of harassment.

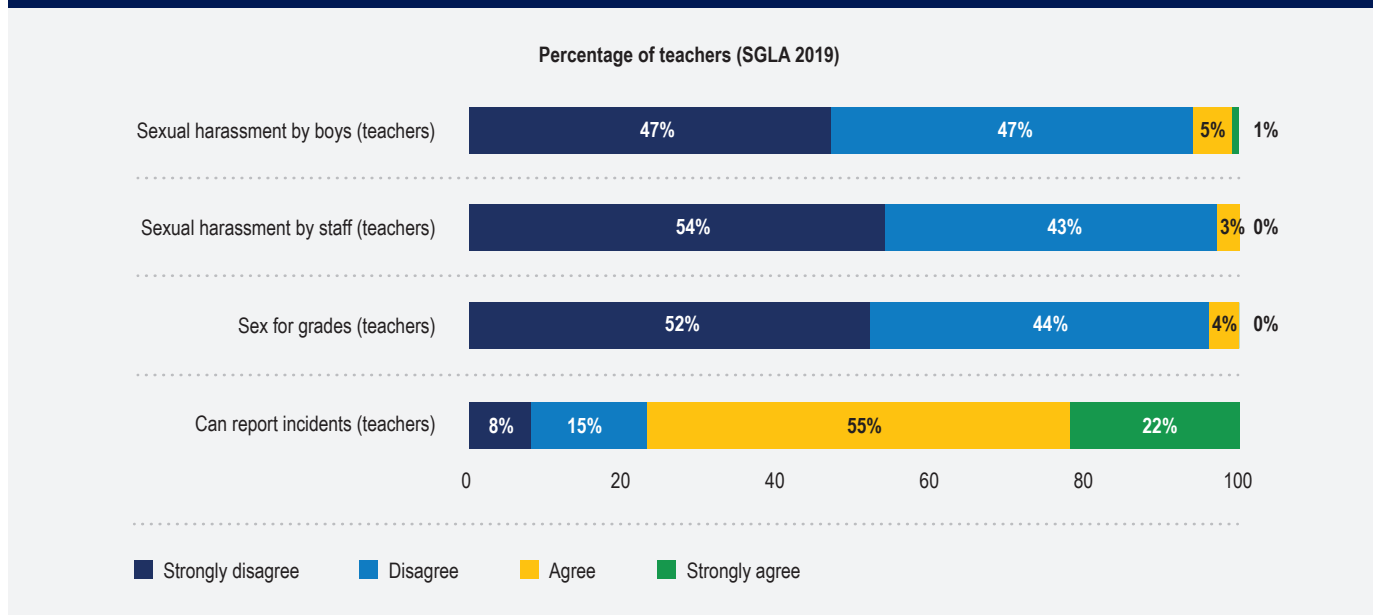


As with SGLA II, more than 90 per cent of teachers reported that girls generally feel safe in school. However, only 38 per cent of teachers reported that the school is well-fenced such that no stranger can enter the school compound. In addition to this, 32 per cent of teachers reported that girls face harassment when traveling to and from school. When asked if the toilets were located within a safe distance of the school buildings, 10 per cent of teachers reported that they are located too far from the main school building such that girls do not feel safe using them. Furthermore, approximately half of all teachers interviewed reported that female students absent themselves from school during menstruation.

The results from all rounds of SGLA suggest that teachers, the vast majority of whom are male, systematically underestimate the incidence of sexual harassment faced by female pupils in schools. In this round of SGLA, 6 per cent and 3 per cent of teachers reported that girls in school are subject to sexual harassment in school by male pupils and male school staff, respectively. The incidence of sex-for-grades also seems to be under-reported, with only 4 per cent of teachers reporting that male teachers ask female pupils for sexual favours. At the provincial level, results suggest that sexual harassment is common across provinces. However, the results from the provinces suggest that this is more widely prevalent in the Southern province compared to the others.

Teachers interviewed during SGLA also suggested that there exist mechanisms within the school and community whereby female pupils can report instances of sexual harassment in most schools as almost eight out of ten teachers agreed that this was the case. However, the effectiveness of these mechanisms is not known and needs to be looked at.

**Figure 4: Sexual harassment by school staff**



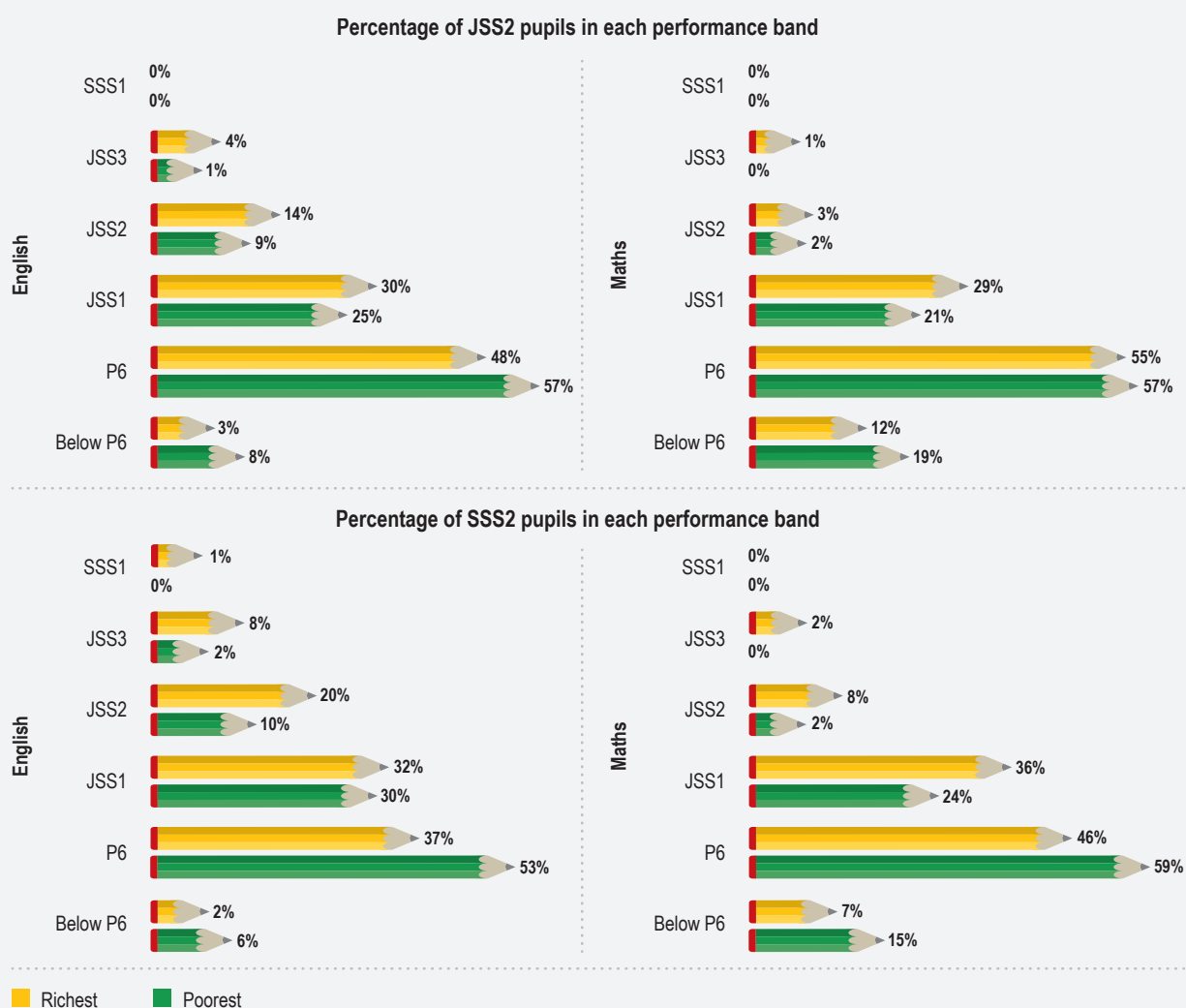
Given the concerns that teachers have raised on the safety of female pupils in school, almost all principals interviewed have reported that they have taken action to improve safety for pupils in school. It is interesting to note that 6 out of 10 principals reported to taking action to make routes to and from school safer for pupils when 3 out of 10 teachers reported that girls face harassment on their way to and from school. Half of all principals also reported to making school facilities (e.g. toilets) safer.

### What is the relationship between pupils' test scores and family background?

Pupils' own background is one of the biggest determinants of their learning levels. From the information collected during the SGLA, an index of household wealth was constructed based on a series of assets that the household owns and compare the richest households (i.e. top 20 per cent pupils based on the household asset index) to the poorest (i.e. bottom 20 per cent).

Comparing pupil performance by household wealth shows that a significantly larger percentage of pupils from less advantaged households only reach skills that are expected at the P6 level or below for English for both JSS and SSS grades compared to pupils from more advantaged backgrounds. As shown in Figure X, 65 per cent of JSS2 pupils from less advantaged backgrounds only show skills at the primary level in English, against 51 per cent from wealthier households. Similarly, 76 per cent of SSS2 pupils from the poorest households show skills at the primary level in maths compared to 67 per cent of pupils from wealthier households. The difference in learning levels by household wealth increases as pupils from JSS to SSS. For example, in English, 59 per cent of SSS2 pupils from poorer backgrounds show skills at the primary level in English compared to 39 per cent of pupils from wealthier households. A similar trend is also observed for maths. Similar was the trend observed for gender-based differences where differences across gender were larger at the SSS level.

**Figure 5: Disparities in pupil performance by household wealth**



Source: Secondary Grade Learning Assessment survey (May-June 2019), pupil learning assessment.

Across all provinces, the magnitude of the difference in pupil performance by household wealth varies across provinces as was the case with differences across genders. Overall, for both English and maths, there do not exist any significant differences in performance between the richest and poorest pupils in the North-Western and Eastern province. The Western province shows slight differences in English but not in maths. In the Northern and Southern provinces, there exist stark differences in performance whereby pupils from more advantaged backgrounds whereby pupils from wealthier households are performing significantly better than their counterparts from less advantaged backgrounds.

### Can school location predict pupil learning?

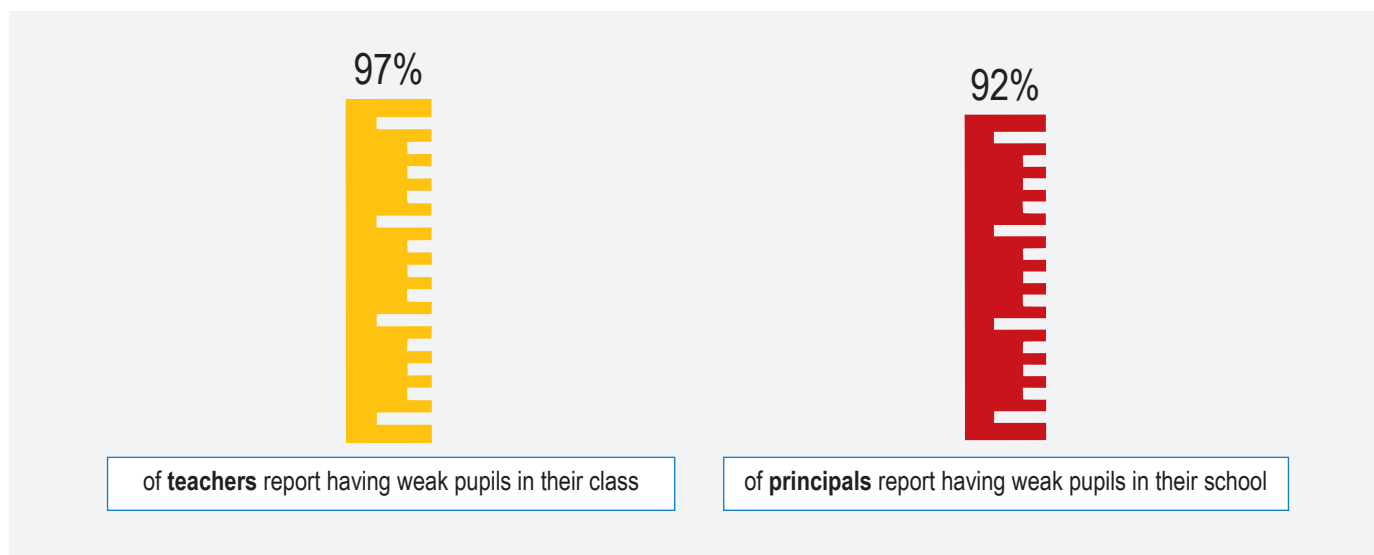
In the SGLA tests, there is a significant negative relationship between the remoteness of school and pupils' performance for SSS2 pupils but not for JSS2 pupils. Consistent with results from previous rounds of SGLA, learning level drops as we move away from schools located near the district headquarter town, towards more remote schools. More pupils in SSS2 from remote schools exhibit skills at the P6 level or below, and struggle with the knowledge required at higher grades than pupils in schools closer to the district headquarter town.

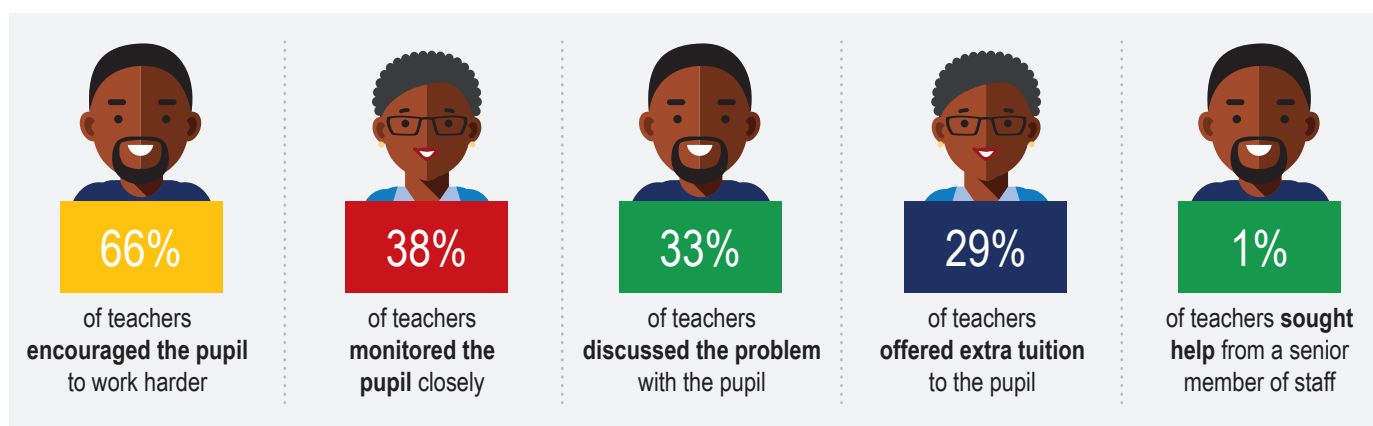
Among factors that could contribute to this relationship, results from the survey provide indicative evidence that schools that are more remote were visited less frequently by an MBSSE Inspector than schools located close to the district headquarter town.

### Are classrooms and schools inclusive to pupils from diverse learning needs?

In SGLA III, teachers and principals were asked about school inclusiveness, and whether they had any pupils in their class who were struggling with their studies relative to other pupils for any reason. As with previous rounds of SGLA, almost all teachers (97 per cent) reported having at least one pupil in their class who struggled with lessons during the previous term. This result was supported by principals, 92 per cent of whom reported having weak pupils in their school.

Almost all teachers reported taking action to support pupils who were struggling with their lessons. The most commonly mentioned actions that teachers reported taking were encouraging the pupil to work harder, monitoring the pupil closely, discussing the problem s/he is facing with the pupil, and offering extra tuition to help the pupil. To help struggling pupils, seeking help from a senior member of staff can prove beneficial to address the needs of the student. However, only 1 per cent of teachers reported seeking help from a senior staff member.





Principals also reported taking similar actions to support weak pupils in school. 7 out of 10 principals reported offering extra classes to weak pupils, 4 out of 10 reported encouraging the pupils to work harder, and 4 out of 10 principals also reported to talking to the pupil's parents. In addition to having pupils who struggle academically in school, principals were also asked about the presence of pupils from low income families (relative to their peers) or with physical or intellectual disabilities in their school. 77 per cent of pupils reported having marginalised pupils in their school. The most common form of support offered to these students was monetary and the provision of school materials free of cost.

### Students with special needs

Pupils with special needs face multiple forms of discrimination, which leads to their exclusion from society and school. Attitudes toward children with special needs, as well as a lack of resources to accommodate them, compound the challenges they face in accessing education and performing well in school. This section presents results on the learning assessment and school inclusiveness from a subsample of 1967 pupils in SGLA II reporting some form of special need.<sup>3</sup>

The type of difficulty most commonly reported was remembering and walking with 18 per cent and 11 per cent of pupils reporting difficulty remembering and walking, respectively with almost no pupils reporting that they cannot do it at all.

When comparing learning outcomes of students reporting some form of difficulty to those pupils without any difficulty, the evidence from the SGLA suggests that difficulties in hearing and walking bear a significant negative correlation with pupils' performance, more so for English than for maths. Evidence from the SGLA suggests that pupils with hearing difficulties are performing mostly at the primary level and a lesser percentage of pupils with these difficulties are performing at higher levels.

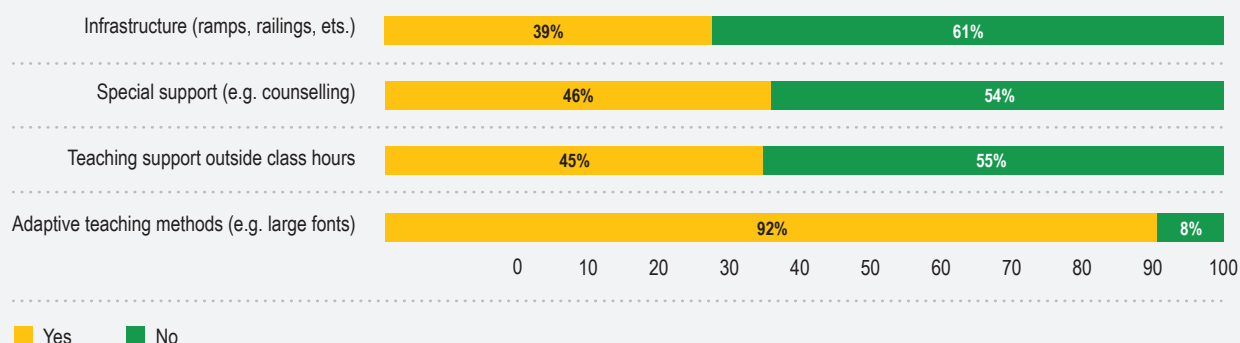
In addition to pupils facing a difficulty in hearing, pupils that reported difficulty in walking or remembering were also found to be performing at lower levels (i.e. primary levels) for both English and maths than pupils who did not report any difficulty. A larger proportion of these pupils fall in the performance bands that correspond to the P6-level or below, and significantly less pupils reach higher levels of knowledge.

The SGLA survey asked teachers about the schooling experience of pupils with special needs. 61 per cent of teachers reported that the school does not provide any special physical infrastructure (e.g. ramps, railings) to support students with special needs. Half of the teachers also reported that the school does not provide any other form of support to pupils (e.g. counselling, help with lessons outside of class hours). 92 per cent of teachers self-reported that they did adapt their teaching methodologies to make the lesson delivery more accessible to pupils with special needs. However, the extent and effectiveness of these techniques is not captured in the SGLA.

<sup>3</sup> In the SGLA, special needs are broadly defined as referring to any physical, mental or learning impairments that affected the full and effective participation of a pupil in learning. These included six core functional domains: seeing, hearing, walking, cognition, self-care, and communication. For a more detailed description of the definition of special needs, we refer the reader to the main report.

**Figure 6: Physical infrastructure and pedagogical support for pupils with disabilities**

Percentage of teachers who reported infrastructure/pedagogy support for pupils with disabilities



Results from SGLA III suggest that, as with previous years, harassment of pupils with special needs is discouraged in schools. Furthermore, about 10 per cent of teachers reported that the teaching and non-teaching staff discriminated in favour or against pupils with special needs, and 65 per cent of teachers also reported that students without special needs interact freely with pupils with special needs.

### Concluding remarks

The main overarching observation from all rounds of SGLA is that there are persistently large gaps in learning, and these are driven by pupils' background and characteristics. A larger proportion of female pupils compared to male pupils do not demonstrate more than basic English and maths skills despite completing eight (JSS2) to 11 (SSS2) years of formal education. Remoteness of the school, measured by the distance of the school from the district headquarter town, also significantly affects performance. Results from all rounds of SGLA also suggest that pupils from poorer backgrounds performed significantly worse than those from more well-off backgrounds across both subjects and grades.

There appears to be a systematic under-reporting of the incidence of sexual harassment experienced by female pupils in schools. Even though school principals are taking action to improve safety in school, results also suggest that lack of safe toilet facilities near the main school building means that girls feel unsafe using them and are more likely to absent themselves from school during menstruation. These challenges have deep-set economic and social roots, but it is important to work towards sensitising teachers and male pupils to become part of the solution, and ensuring that appropriate accountability mechanisms exist to support girls lodging complaints. Finally, considering more female participation in the workforce could be a step towards ensuring that teachers appreciate the extent and seriousness of sexual harassment and girls' lack of safety in the school environment.

The SGLAs also provide evidence of what it is like to be a pupil with special needs in a secondary school in Sierra Leone. Results from the learning assessment show that difficulties in hearing, remembering, and walking significantly and negatively affect students' performance in the SGLA tests. Furthermore, while evidence suggests that support to pupils with special needs, both in terms of physical infrastructure and emotional support, is lacking, teachers are reportedly doing what they can in classrooms to adapt their teaching methodologies to cater to the special needs of these pupils.

### About the project and contact details

*Leh Wi Lan*/Sierra Leone Secondary Education Improvement Programme (SSEIP) is a five-year (2016-2021) UKaid-funded programme aimed at improving English and maths learning achievement in all secondary schools, especially for girls. This briefing note was produced under *Leh Wi Lan's* monitoring, evidence and research workstream as part of the annual secondary grade learning assessment. Any views and opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of UK Department for International Development, Sierra Leone Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education, Mott MacDonald or Oxford Policy Management.

For more details please contact: **Diana Ofori-Owusu at +232 76803741**

**M**  
**M**  
**MOTT**  
**MACDONALD**

**Oxford Policy**  
**Management**