



Instructional Time: Findings from the Secondary Grade Learning Assessment

POLICY BRIEF

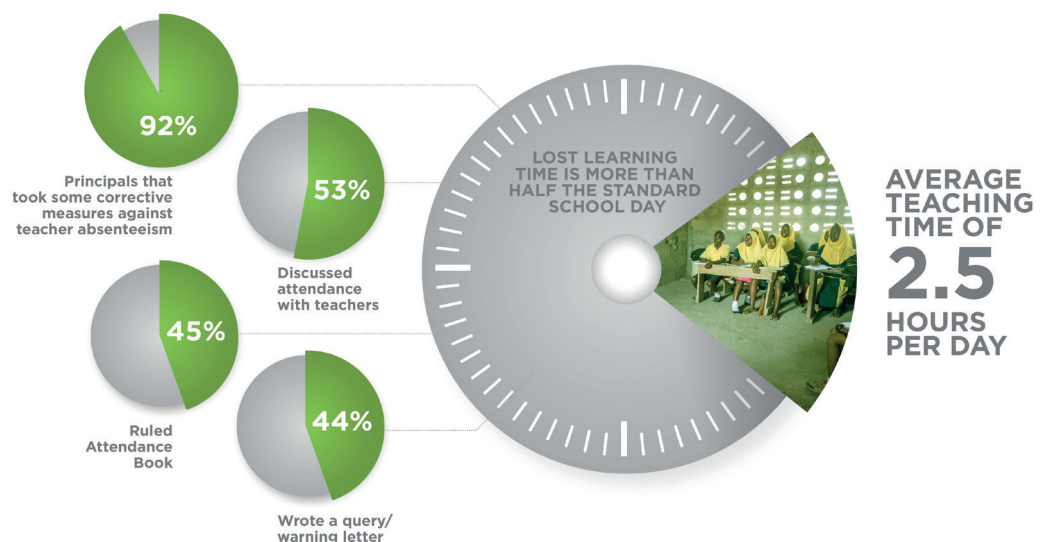
Summary

The 2018 launch of the Free Quality School Education Programme (FQSEP) was a milestone in Sierra Leone's drive to equip its citizens with the skills and competencies needed for the future growth of the nation. By focusing on quality, the FQSEP proposes to go beyond simply filling classrooms and increased enrolment to demonstrate how our schools can ultimately deliver sustained learning for all pupils.

Teachers are absolutely critical to our ability to achieve these objectives and the Sierra Leone Secondary Grade Learning Assessment 2018 (SGLA II) provides invaluable information which can shape our progress by showing learning levels of pupils in junior secondary and senior secondary schools in English and Mathematics.

It reveals the amount of time teachers spend on classroom instruction, reasons for absenteeism, use of teaching aids in class, management of teacher absenteeism, and delivery of supervision and pedagogical support for teachers. The report makes significant findings about the lack of instructional time in school, shows how other factors impact on the effectiveness of the teaching time that is delivered and makes recommendations to address the highlighted issues.

Leh wi Lan/Sierra Leone Secondary Education Improvement Programme (SSEIP) is a five-year (2016-2021) UKaid-funded programme aimed at improving English and Mathematics learning achievement in all secondary schools of Sierra Leone, especially for girls. The programme expects to impact learning conditions for 1.4 million boys and girls, leading to improved secondary exam passes, by making the learning environment safer and more productive.



About the Secondary Grade Learning Assessment.

SGLA II was conducted with the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) covered all five regions of Sierra Leone, assessed 5,600 pupils and interviewed 2,800 teachers and 700 principals. It reveals that secondary school students are losing more than half the standard school day due to teacher absence from school or the class room.

Key Findings on Instructional Time

Teachers spend less than half the school week actually teaching.

Teachers spend an average of just 12 of the 25-30 hours of the school week teaching. This amounts to approximately two and a half hours of teaching per day or less than half of the standard school day. These results are consistent with SGLA I findings. School observations also show that one in four classes had pupils but no teacher.

They blame illness for their absenteeism – but principals say pay is a factor too.

Teachers say personal illness or illness amongst their families is a key reason for their absence from school but add that social or religious obligations are also a cause. Principals say their own absence from school is often caused by the need to attend meetings or events outside of school (60 per cent) or to deal with personal or family health issue (31 per cent). Principals linked teachers' absence from school to low levels of teacher salary and remuneration (51 per cent of principals mentioned this in SGLA II). This finding suggests that low remuneration impacts on teacher morale which in turn leads to absenteeism though further research is needed in this area.

SSS teachers spend roughly 30 minutes more time teaching per day than JSS teachers.

The average SSS teacher reported that they taught for about 14 hours in a week (2 hours 50 minutes per day) whereas this figure was a couple of hours lower at 12 hours a week (2 hours 19 minutes per day) for JSS teachers. These results are very similar to those from SGLA I.

One in three teachers report significant disruptions to their instructional time, although this varied substantially across provinces. The average disruption was as high as four days in the previous two weeks. This was a day higher at SSS level, with teachers reporting an average of five days of classes disrupted in the previous two weeks, compared to four days in JSS. According to teachers, disruption was most often linked to pupil absenteeism, which in turn led to suspension of classes. Ongoing exams or teacher's absence due to training or workshops were also cited.

Most principals take corrective measures against teacher absenteeism. Nearly all principals (92 per cent) report taking some corrective measures against teacher absenteeism - 53% discussed attendance with teachers, 44% wrote a query/warning letter, 45% ruled attendance book. The province-level results are very similar to national results, with little variation across provinces. For the first time in SGLA II, nearly 41 per cent of principals reported addressing pay or salary related grievances of teachers. This has not been mentioned to any significant extent in previous surveys and it will be interesting to explore further why and how principals feel newly empowered in this regard, and whether it results in reduced change in later years.

Pupil Teacher Ratio (PTR) is relatively small, and similar across JS and SS schools.

Pupil-teacher ratios (PTR) can serve as a broad indicator of teacher workloads and the amount of individual attention a pupil is likely to receive from teachers. On average, there are 19 pupils to each teacher in JSS schools and 22 pupils to each teacher in SSS schools. PTRs are higher in SS schools relative to JS schools in the northern, western and north-western provinces. JSS schools in eastern and southern provinces have relatively higher PTRs compared to the national average of 19:1. However, there are significant variations, particularly in the North and North Western regions. Although pupil teacher ratios in Sierra Leone are quite manageable, pupils end up getting fairly reduced instructional time from their teachers who only teach for half of the official length of a school day. The following finding also impacts on instructional time.

Classroom Observations show that one in four classrooms is unattended.

Evidence on the extent of teacher absenteeism is provided during school observations, when data collectors were asked to go around the school and count the number of classes with pupils but no teachers. In SGLA II, 26 per cent of classrooms were unattended, i.e. they had pupils in them but no teachers. Further research is needed to understand the high prevalence of unattended classrooms.

Teachers are regularly unable to complete the syllabus.

Teachers often fall behind and are unable to complete the syllabus for the term but must skip to the lessons for that term regardless of where they were previously up to. This implies that some lessons never get taught. SSS teachers were found to be lagging farther behind than JSS teachers. Teachers could be falling behind lagging for many reasons: lack of instructional time in class, limitations of own pedagogical skills and content knowledge, extra-curricular activities in school, among other reasons.

There has been rapid uptake of MBSSE lesson plans since their initial distribution.

Feedback on the plans is mostly positive, with early evidence that teachers' understanding of content and application is improving. The focus for SSOs and principals going forward should be on improving the way in which teachers engage with, and use, these lesson plans in their classrooms. There are also suggestions that lesson plan developers need to better reflect the learning levels and context of the pupils they ultimately aim to support. Also, evidence from Leh Wi Lan's Tangerine monitoring data suggests that, even though most teachers report the use of MBSSE lesson plans, teachers are not on track when following the lesson plans through the school year. Of concern is the fact that only 40 per cent of teachers can correctly match learning objectives to the appropriate JSS grades and only 35 per cent can name the five standard parts of a lesson.

Staff and formal one-on-one meetings are now well established.

Staff meetings appear to be well-established in the secondary school system in Sierra Leone, with almost all teachers and principals reporting they have had staff meetings in the previous term. Responses suggest staff meetings largely deal with day-to-day school issues and administration. According to principals, the most common topics of discussion during these staff meetings were teacher absenteeism, school administration and – increasingly – teaching practices/pedagogy. Staff meetings are complemented by formal one-on-one meetings with their principal or head of department.

Lesson observations are carried out regularly. Similarly, schools continued to have regular systems of internal lesson observations, which may have a role in the development of teaching in schools. Teachers reported an average of five lessons observed during the previous term (January to April 2018). The observers were usually the principal or head of department. Over 90 per cent of principals and 80 per cent of teachers confirmed that some form of feedback was also provided after the lesson observation, mostly in terms of one-on-one discussion with the concerned teacher.

External supervision now focuses more on teacher development.

SEOs have an essential role to play in supporting teacher improvement and monitoring whether teachers attend class and teach a full working day. The role of external supervisors, particularly SSOs, in visiting schools, observing lessons and discussing advice on lesson plans and teaching methods is apparent in SGLA II. Nearly all principals reported at least one external supervision visit during the previous term, with an average of six visits between January and April 2018. Further, SSOs are now the most frequently reported visitors (reported by 79 per cent of principals), which is a significant increase from 3 per cent principals reporting SSO visits in SGLA I. MBSSE inspectors, school supervisors, and representatives from NGOs/missions were other common visitors in schools. Principals' also suggested that supervision visits had taken more of a teacher development focus (in SGLA I, visits were primarily to check teacher and pupil attendance and other school records). Over two-thirds of teachers confirmed that external visitors had observed their lessons the previous term, with 82 per cent reporting the visitor had been an SSO. In addition, nearly all JSS and SSS schools have parent-teacher or community-teacher associations (PTA/CTA). Most of these bodies are active, having met at least once in the previous term.

1 in 4 classrooms unattended

Recommendations

SGLA II highlights major issues around instructional time and teachers' failure to cover curriculum content.

These will undoubtedly impact on our ability to deliver FQSEP objectives and the following urgent actions should be taken to address this:

Investigate the reasons for lack of curriculum coverage, exploring issues around teacher absence, lack of instructional time in schools or too-much curriculum content in existing lesson plans. Further quantitative and qualitative research is required to see whether, and how, these activities translate into better learning and inclusive education outcomes in the classroom.

Develop an action plan for teacher management. Based on what emerges from this enquiry, MBSSE – together with the Teaching Service Commission (TSC) and other partners – should consider an action plan for getting teacher management right as this is critical to overcoming the hurdle of slow learning.

Increase understanding of teacher management issues.

Results suggest that urgent structural changes to teacher management are needed but the following questions require research:

- Are teachers' subject knowledge and pedagogical skills adequate for the demands of a typical JSS or SSS classroom? Is the current pre-service training meeting these needs? What constraints do they face in the classroom for effective delivery of quality instruction? Can any of this be remediated through in-service training?
- How can principals and school support officers (SSOs) provide necessary support to a struggling teacher?
- What drives teachers' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in Sierra Leone? To what extent is it determined by reward and remuneration, location of posting and allowances, career progression, satisfaction from pupils' good performance, and other factors?

- Are teachers willing to be deployed to remote schools? Pupils in remote schools are performing less well than those in less remote schools. Does this have anything to do with the management and motivation of teachers in these schools? What concrete actions can encourage talented teachers to work in disadvantaged schools?
- How can school leadership and management be enhanced for better teacher management? How can community actors (parents, elders and local influential figures) also be brought into the arena and encouraged to contribute towards possible solutions?

The second annual secondary grade learning assessment (SGLA) was designed and implemented by Leh wi Lan's monitoring, evidence and research workstream in close collaboration with the Sierra Leone Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE). Any views and opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of UK Department for International Development (DFID) or MBSSE. SGLA II is based on data collected in May-June 2018.

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MBSSE (2018). Sierra Leone Secondary Grade Learning Assessment (SGLA) Technical Report.

New England, Freetown: Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education.