

# Leh Wi Lan

Improving Secondary Education in Sierra Leone



## POLICY BRIEF

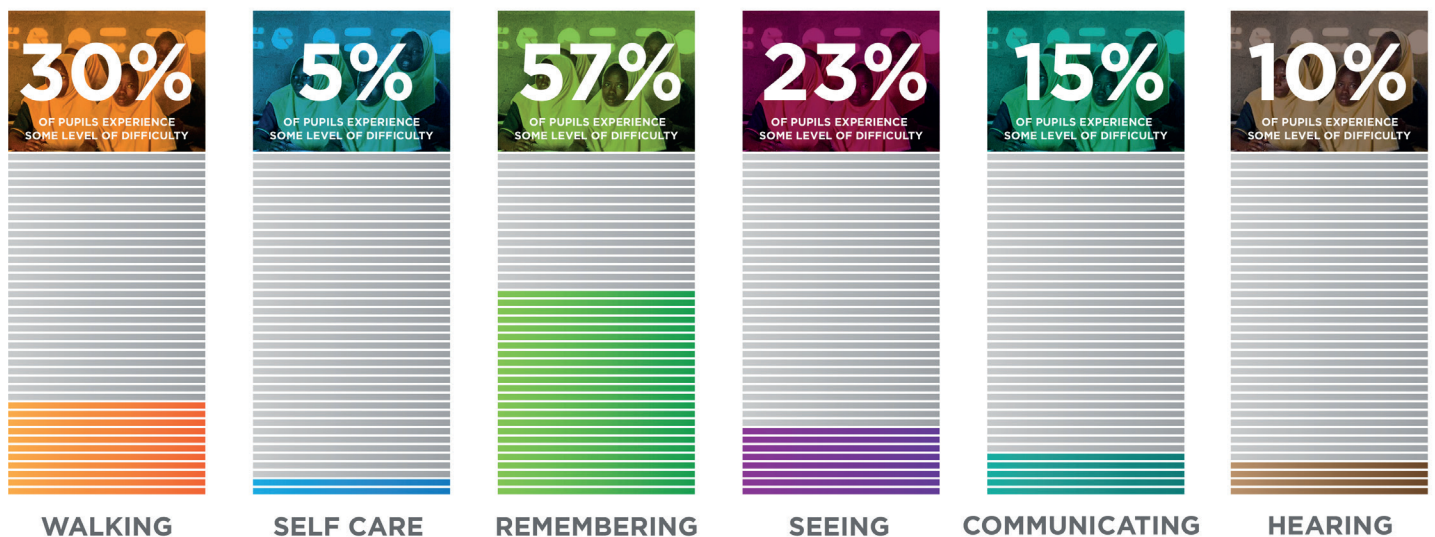
# Tackling Barriers to Learning: Findings from the Secondary Grade Learning Assessment

## Introduction

Quality education for all children is critical to Sierra Leone's growth and development. The Free Quality School Education Programme (FQSEP), launched in 2018, goes beyond increased enrolment and aims to equip Sierra Leonean schools to deliver sustained quality learning for all pupils. Clearly, the FQSEP will only 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 Assessment (SGLA II), supported by the UKAid-funded Leh Wi Lan/Sierra Leone Secondary Education Improvement Programme and conducted in 2018, assesses learning levels of pupils in junior secondary and senior secondary schools in English and Mathematics and shows major impediments to learning for many young people. The second annual SGLA 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.

Percentage of pupils with disabilities in the SGLA II sample (N=5371)



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.

Results from SGLA II show that urgent action is required to ensure that secondary education caters to the diverse learning needs of all pupils, irrespective of gender, disability, family background or remoteness of school location. Findings in both 2017 and 2018 show girls, pupils with disabilities and those from remote areas and poorer backgrounds face a range of barriers including discrimination, harassment and a lack of specialised support.

### Key Findings on Barriers to Learning

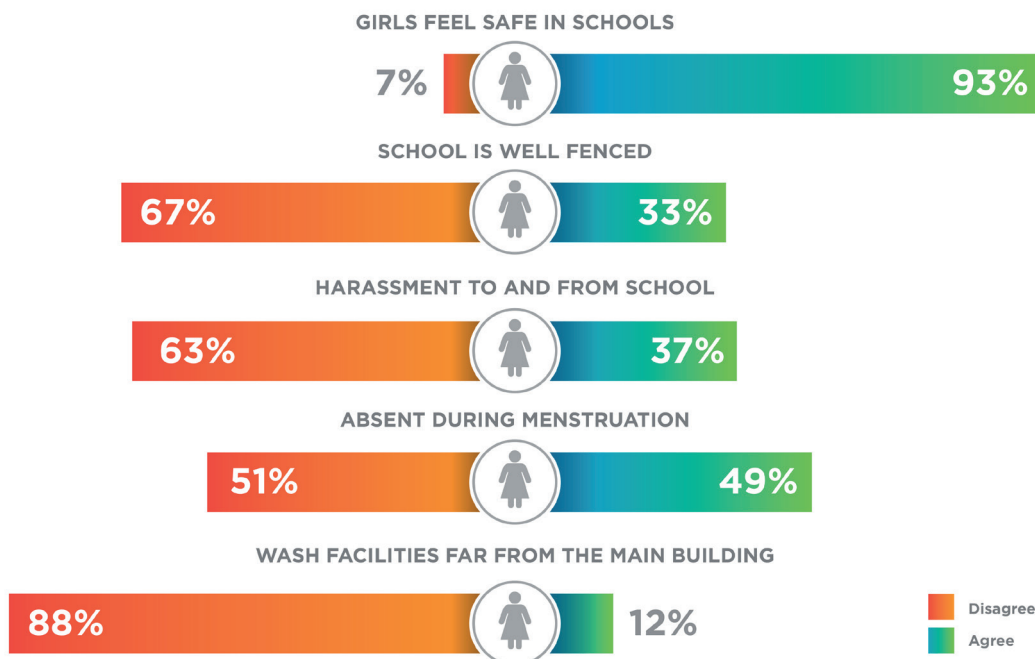
**Most principals report having 'marginalised' pupils in their school.** 73 per cent of principals say their school includes pupils who are marginalised – either because they are from low income families or because they have physical or intellectual disabilities. Disability appears significant in the school system, with around 60 per cent of pupils reporting some form of disability and more than two thirds of teachers saying that pupils with physical or learning difficulties are not given additional teaching outside regular classes - though most say they adapt their pedagogies in class). Also, one in five teachers report that teaching or non-teaching staff discriminate in favour or against pupils with disabilities, for example, by grading them graciously or by not allowing them to participate.

### Difficulties in hearing and remembering have a significant impact on pupil performance in English and Maths.

A disproportionate number of pupils reporting hearing difficulties do not reach a level of knowledge beyond primary grade English. There is also a disproportionate number of pupils with hearing difficulties in lower bands for Maths. Pupil memory problems are also impacting on performance. For both English and Maths, more pupils with difficulties in remembering fall in the performance band corresponding to primary grade level, and fewer pupils reach JSS1 and JSS2 knowledge.

### Schools lack ramps, railings or any other adaptations for students with disabilities.

73 per cent of teachers say their schools lack any physical adaptations to support pupils with physical disabilities. Even if a school is single-storied, this can pose a mobility challenge in accessing certain parts of the school which are raised above the ground.



**Gender-based differences in performance vary significantly across the country.** Gender gaps are small in the Western and Eastern provinces and at JSS2 grade at the district level. In districts such as Kono, Kenema and Konadu girls perform better than boys. However, districts including Bonthe, Falaba and Bombai show large gender gaps in favour of boys. In Falaba only 3 per cent girls in JSS2 reach a level of knowledge that is appropriate for their grade in English compared to 12 per cent of boys and a national average of 16 per cent for both genders.

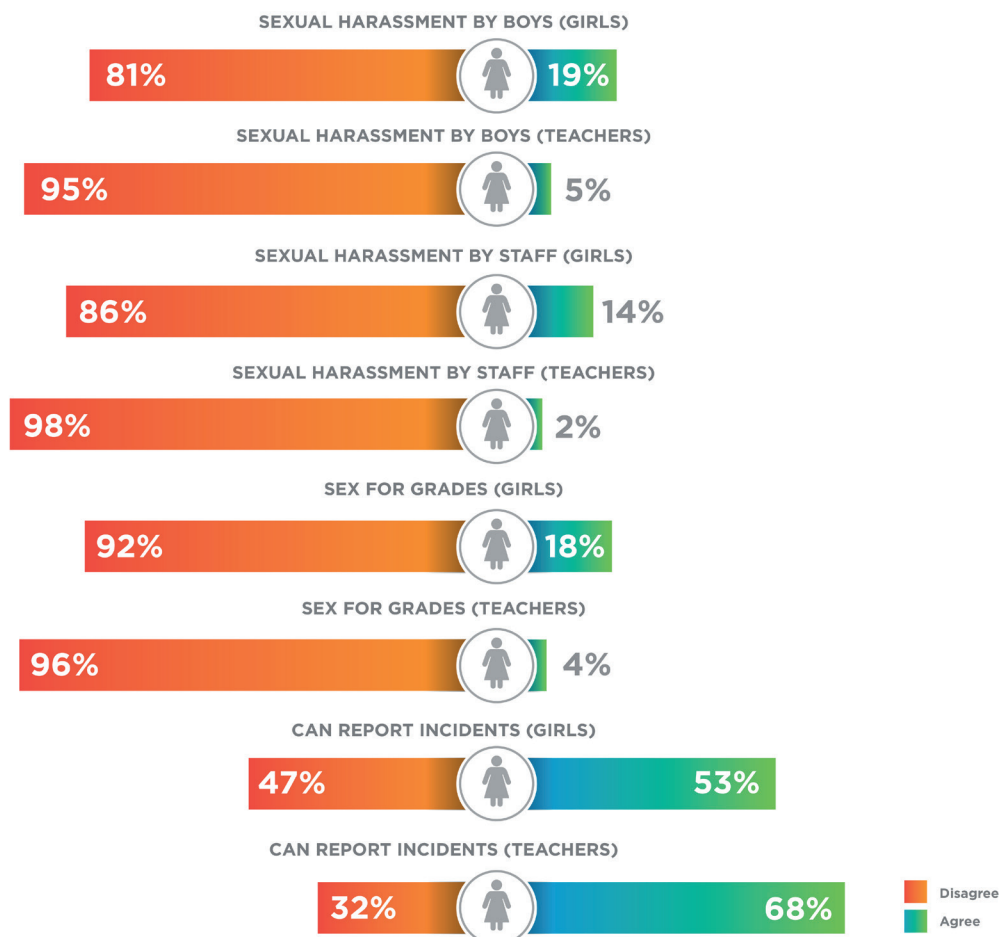
**Gender gaps in performance widen as girls move to SSS2.** Less than half of girls at SSS grade reach JSS1-level knowledge in Maths compared to 59 per cent of boys. At SSS2, 44 per cent of girls have primary grade English skills compared to 34 per cent of boys.

**Safety in the school environment is important in improving girls' performance.** Whilst 93 per cent of teachers report that girls overall felt safe in school, less than 40 per cent of the teachers say their school was well-fenced to prevent strangers entering the school. There are issues too about girls absenting themselves during menstruation – whereas only 12 per cent of teachers report that toilets were too far from the main building, so that girls did not feel safe using them. There is a correlation between girls' safety in schools, that is greater physical safety and less sexual harassment, and girls' performance on the SGLA test. Significantly, more than a third of teachers report that female pupils were subject to harassment while travelling to and from school.

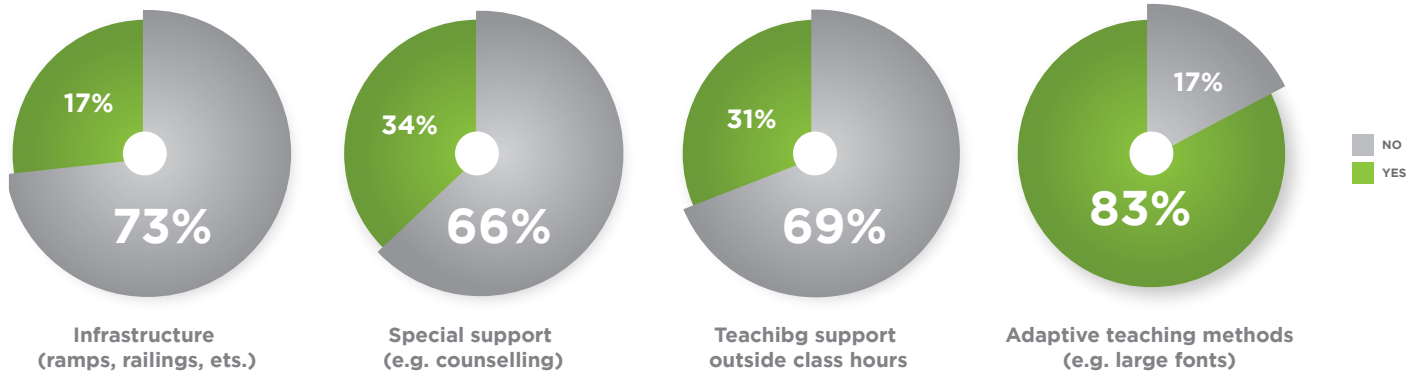
**Sex-for-grade and sexual harassment by male teachers appears under-reported.** Three per cent of teachers say that some male teachers ask female pupils for sexual favours. However, only 2 per cent of teachers - compared to 15 per cent of girls - report sexual harassment by male school staff. Furthermore, 4 per cent of teachers, compared to 20 per cent of girls in SGLA I, report that girls in their school were subject to sexual harassment by male pupils. Province-level results on sexual harassment suggest that this phenomenon is common across the country. SGLA II observed that mechanisms exist where female pupils can report sexual harassment in most schools, but the effectiveness of these mechanisms is not known.

**Family background is one of the biggest determinants of learning levels.** 51 per cent of SSS2 pupils from the poorest households only show primary grade knowledge levels in English, compared to 33 per cent from the richest households. Comparing pupil performance by household wealth shows how a significantly larger percentage of pupils from less advantaged households only reach skills expected at P6 level or below for English, in both JSS and SSS grade, compared to those from more advantaged backgrounds; with a similar picture in Maths.

Percentage of teachers (SGLA 2018) and girls (SGLA 2017) answering



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



**Disparities in learning between richest and poorest pupils are larger at SSS grade.**

Only 14 per cent of JSS2 students from the poorest households are "at grade" or above for English but more than 20 per cent of JSS2 students from the richest households achieve JSS2 knowledge levels. Moving up the grade-appropriate band scale for Maths, wealth-based differences between rich and poor pupils are stark for bands equivalent to JSS2-level knowledge of above.

**Learning levels drop the further pupils are from schools near the district headquarter town.** In English and Maths, there is a negative relationship between remoteness of school and pupils' performance. The SGLA II shows that pupils from remote schools, across both JSS2 and SSS2 grades, are more likely to have knowledge at P6 level or below, and struggle with skills required at higher grades. School management plays an important role in addressing barriers to learning. Results show that schools located farther from the district headquarter town are on average less well-managed as those near the district centre.

**Recommendations**

MBSSE has identified the need to focus on learning – measured by tracking progress annually through the SGLA and WASSCE – as one of its three overarching targets in the new Education Sector Plan (2018–2020). Tackling barriers to learning is important for the success of the FQSEP and there is an opportunity to use the positive momentum from the launch of the programme to make progress.

**Improve the schooling experience for pupils with disabilities.**

A qualitative study of the learning barriers and challenges faced by pupils with disabilities is recommended in future rounds of the SGLA.

**Sexual harassment and girls' safety in schools must be urgently addressed.** Sensitise teachers - especially male teachers - and male pupils to become part of the solution by first emphasising their role in the problem, and what they could individually do to prevent incidents of harassment.

**Ensure robust mechanisms exist so that girls can complain without fear of retribution and appropriate action is taken.** The effectiveness of existing mechanisms where girls and others can report instances of sexual harassment is not known and needs to be investigated in future rounds of the SGLA.

**Consider more female participation in the teaching workforce.** There is ample evidence which suggests female teachers make a positive impact on girls' enrolment, attendance and achievement in school (UNESCO, 2006).

**Research impacts on progress of poorer pupils.** Research should consider the direct and indirect costs of schooling; rationale for pupils' education decisions; opportunity costs of attending school and learning versus wage-earning options; and opportunities for teachers and school management to ensure these pupils receive support to succeed.

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.

**Contact details**

The project managers for SGLA 2018 are **Sourovi De** and **Diana Ofori-Owusu**.  
 For more details, please contact:  
 Diana Ofori-Owusu at [oforiowusud@yahoo.com](mailto:oforiowusud@yahoo.com) or **+232 76803741**.  
 MBSSE (2018), Sierra Leone Secondary Grade Learning Assessment (SGLA) Technical Report.  
 New England, Freetown: Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education.