



Leh Wi Learn Sierra Leone Secondary Grade Learning Assessment 2017



Baseline briefing note 2

Current teaching and supervision practices in junior and senior secondary schools of Sierra Leone

December 2017

Introduction

The UKaid-funded *Leh wi Learn* programme is supporting the Sierra Leone Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEST) to achieve sustained improvements in girls' education and secondary grade learning outcomes. To bring about meaningful improvements, it is important to understand the current state of learning achievement, teaching practices and school environment. One of the channels through which *Leh wi Learn* proposes to do this is through improved monitoring, research, and evidence. Towards this end, the first annual secondary grade learning assessment survey was conducted in all four regions of Sierra Leone in the months of May and June 2017. Its objective is to provide MEST and other education sector stakeholders with robust nationally- and regionally-representative data on the status of learning and teaching in secondary grades, and track these annually for progress.

Effective teachers and supportive supervision and management from principals is necessary for meaningful improvements in learning achievement and inclusive education outcomes. This note presents evidence on the current state of teaching practices and school leadership and management in junior and senior secondary schools from the first secondary grade learning assessment survey conducted in all four provinces in May and June 2017.^{1,2} Before discussing the results in detail, some background information on teachers and principals is presented in Box 1 below to help contextualise the findings.

Box 1: Background characteristics of JSS and SSS teachers and principals

Teachers³

- Less than 5 per cent of all JSS and SSS teachers are **female**.
- Average **age** is 35 years.
- Just over a third (34 per cent) of teachers have the Higher Teacher Certificate, HTC (secondary) **qualification**.
- Average **teaching experience** is 11 years.

Principals⁴

- Only 7 per cent of principals are **female**.
- Average **age** is 46 years.
- 41 per cent principals have an HTC (secondary); 41 per cent hold a bachelors' and 11 per cent a masters' **qualification** in education or equivalent.
- Average **teaching experience** is 20 years, and school leadership experience is 6 years.
- Nearly 85 per cent of principals are heading a school for the **first time**.



1

Please refer to briefing note #1 which discusses the current status of learning achievement among JSS2 and SSS2 pupils in English and maths.

2

In total 400 JSS and SSS schools were sampled across the four provinces. Within each province, 100 schools were sampled (50 JSS and 50 SSS). The teacher and principal background questionnaires were administered to 1,173 teachers and 392 principals respectively. To provide estimates of key indicators that are representative at various levels, the observed values were analysed using survey weights.

3

For the purposes of this survey, only English and maths teachers at JSS/SSS levels were included in the sample.

4

The term 'principals' is used to refer to the various heads of schools interviewed as part of the principal sample which comprised of 36 per cent principals, 42 per cent acting principals, and 20 per cent assistant or vice principals.

Quantity of instructional time: teaching hours, teacher absenteeism, and pupil-teacher ratios

Teachers, on average, taught for 13 of the 25-30 prescribed school hours in a standard week, which amounts to approximately two and a half hours of teaching per day (or less than half of the standard school day).⁴ SSS teachers taught for a couple of hours more per week than their JSS counterparts did.

One in three teachers also reported significant disruptions to their instructional time in the past two weeks.⁵ The average disruption was as high as four days in the last two weeks, and most often linked to student absenteeism which led to suspension of classes.

According to teachers, the main reason for being absent from school was own or family illness, however, principals seemed to link teachers' absence from school to low levels of teacher salary and remuneration. The other common reason for teachers' absenteeism was social or religious obligations requiring them to be away from school. Explaining their own absence from schools, principals particularly spoke of attending meetings or events outside of school, as well as own or family health issues.

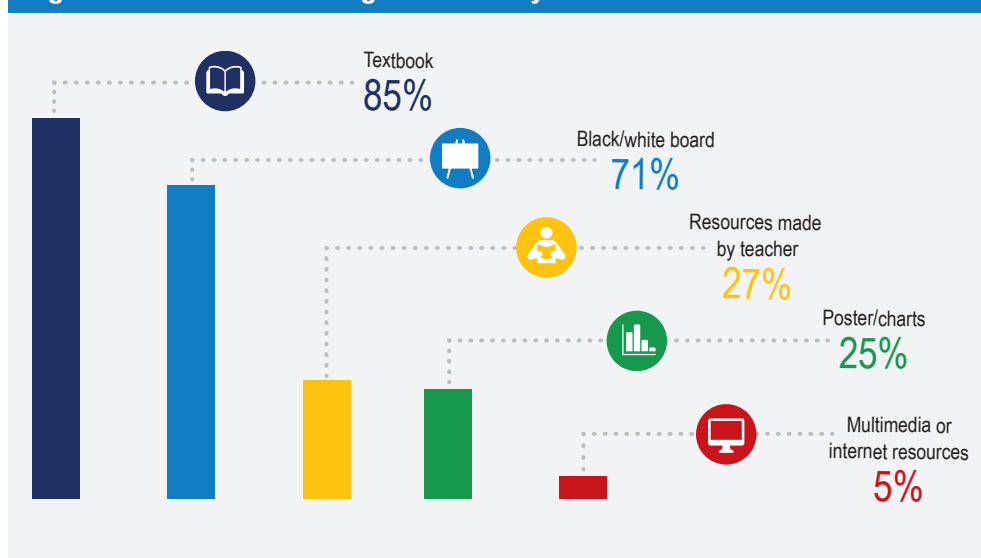
Nearly all principals (95 per cent) reported taking some corrective measures against teacher absenteeism. The most commonly cited action was to discuss the issue with teachers (44 per cent), followed by writing a query or letter of reprimand to the teacher (27 per cent) and ruling the attendance book at school opening time (26 per cent).

The pupil-teacher ratio in JSS and SSS (which can serve as a broad indicator of teacher workloads and the amount of individual attention given to pupils) was also found to be relatively small and similar across grades. On average, nationally, there are just over 23 pupils to each teacher.

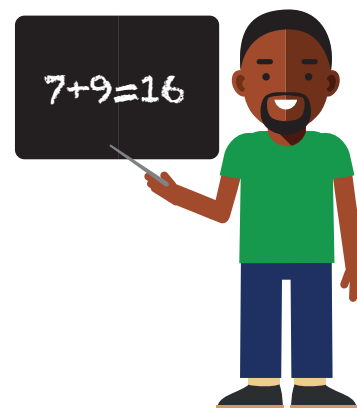
Common teaching aids, teaching guides, and the use of MEST lesson plans

Almost all teachers across the four regions and both grade levels used at least one teaching aid in their classrooms, defined in this case as an object or device used by a teacher to enhance classroom instruction. Figure 1 reports the most commonly used teaching resources. These were mainly traditional aids with a substantial majority of teachers (85 per cent) reporting using textbooks and over two-thirds (71 per cent) using blackboard and chalk. Understandably, the least used resource was multimedia (audio/visual) equipment and internet resources (5 per cent teachers) presumably because there is no electricity and internet in most schools. The most commonly used teaching aids were similar at JSS and SSS level, but more SSS teachers used internet resources and science equipment, and fewer used posters and charts.

Figure 1: Common teaching aids used by teachers



A vast majority of teachers use at least one teaching aid, though mainly traditional aids like textbooks and blackboard/chalk



4

The length of the standard school day in secondary schools in Sierra Leone is approximately 5.5-6 hours (including breaks) in single shift schools and 5-5.5 hours in double shift.

5

The start of the survey in mid-May 2017 was immediately preceded by a period of over three weeks of school closure due to a national voter registration exercise in the country.

Likewise, almost all teachers used some form of teaching guide to plan and prepare for their lessons, with a substantial proportion of teachers already reporting the use of MEST lesson plans (68 per cent).⁶ Other important teaching guides were textbooks (60 per cent) and lesson notes (55 per cent). For JSS English/maths teachers not using the MEST lesson plans, this was usually because they had not received them yet (17 per cent) or hadn't been trained on how to use them yet (7 per cent).

A vast majority of teachers had positive feedback on MEST lesson plans and their ability to use them. This is captured in Figure 2 below. Teachers reported they can generally understand the use and purpose of lesson plans to facilitate learning. They considered the lesson plans to be well structured and helpful for pupils to learn better. However, it appears that teachers might be facing difficulties on two fronts:

- They seem to be struggling to incorporate all the prescribed activities in the lesson plans within the duration of one period.⁷
- Teachers also appear to be concerned that some of the lesson plan content (especially examples used to explain concepts) do not relate well to the context and lived reality that pupils are familiar with.

Both these issues are potential area for consideration and further revision for lesson plan developers. More qualitative inquiry, including classroom observations, is also required to comment further on the *effectiveness* of lesson plan usage.

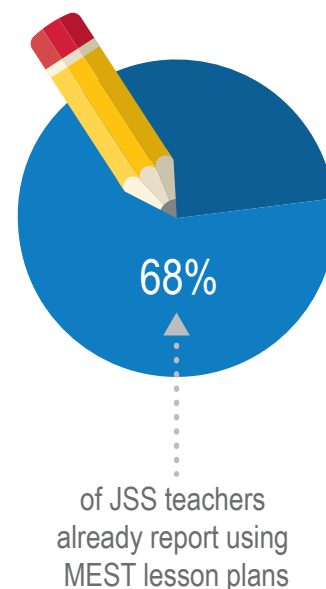
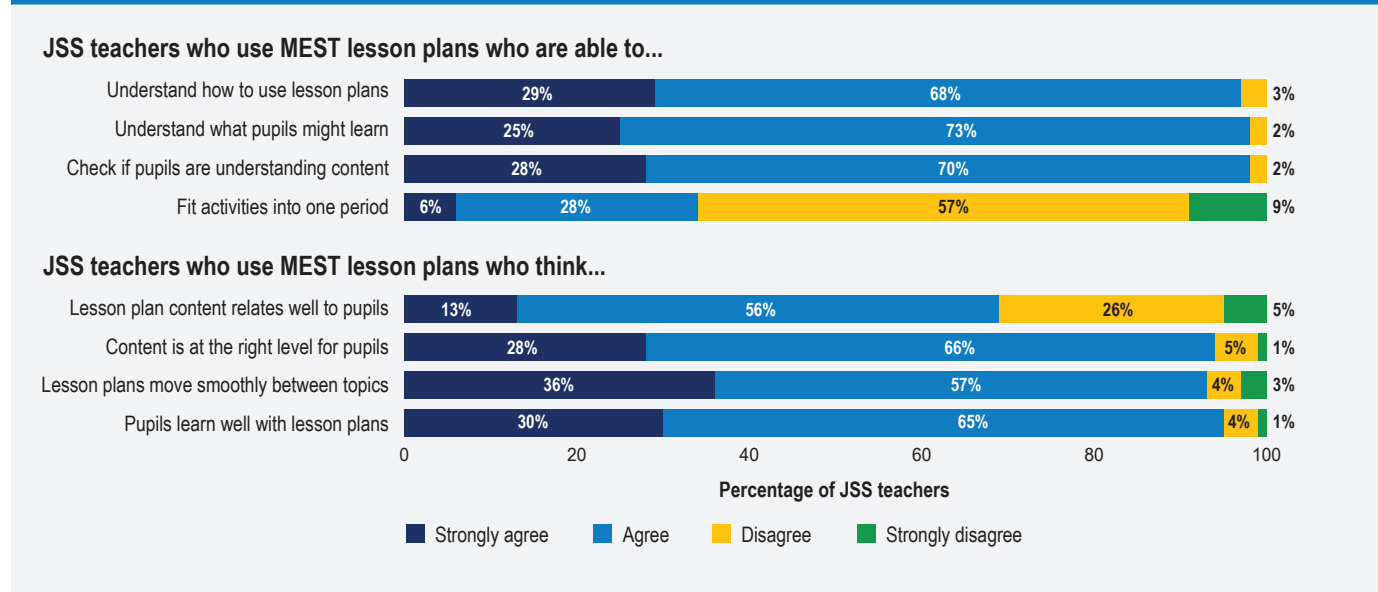


Figure 2: Teachers' views on use and appropriateness of JSS lesson plans



Provision of supportive supervision and pedagogical support

Staff meetings appear to be well-established in the secondary school system in Sierra Leone, with approximately 93 per cent of teachers and 99 per cent of principals reporting that they have had staff meetings in the previous term (January to April 2017). On average, schools roughly appear to have one staff meeting per month. While it is difficult to fully capture the effectiveness of these meetings within a quantitative survey, responses suggest staff meetings largely deal with day-to-day school issues and administration, rather than focusing on pedagogy and learning. The most commonly reported topics of discussion during these staff meetings were exams and teacher absenteeism or lateness by teachers and pupils.

6 ▶

In April 2017, MEST distributed lesson plans in Language Arts and maths among 40,000 primary and JSS teachers, with the aim of supporting them in delivering high quality classroom instruction. When data collection for this learning assessment survey was taking place in May/June 2017, JSS teachers had recently received lesson plans and were being trained in using them. This provides an opportunity to capture the baseline picture of whether and what percentage of JSS teachers have started using these materials, and their initial perceptions on the usefulness of these materials. The sub-sample included in this analysis is 805 teachers and principals who taught English or mathematics to at least one JSS grade since MEST currently provides printed lesson plans only at the JSS level and only for these two subjects.

7 ▶

This could be driven by a range of factors, such as teachers' own mastery of the subject material (especially if they lack subject specialism); or constrained lesson time (especially in shift schools); or the lesson plans indeed being more ambitious than what teachers can feasibly deliver within one period.

In addition, nearly three quarters (73 per cent) of teachers reported having smaller, formal one-on-one meetings with their principal or head of department in the previous term, at an average of four meetings over the term.

Responses from both teachers and principals suggests that most junior and senior secondary schools in Sierra Leone have active systems of internal lesson observation.⁸ Lesson observations were usually conducted by the principal, vice principal or head of department, and results suggest that teachers were observed roughly once a week (on average 12-13 internal lesson observations per term). There is no established national guideline for the required number of observations within a given time period to compare this with and it is difficult to comment on the *effectiveness* of these observations within the constraints of this survey. However, it seems more than two-thirds of the observers did not stay for the entire duration of the class and a majority of them did not maintain any notes or records from the observation.

External supervision visits are also conducted by various actors across JSS and SSS schools. A vast majority of principals (86 per cent) reported receiving at least one external supervision visit in the previous term, with the average school receiving four visits in the term. These visits were mostly conducted by MEST inspectors (reported by 51 per cent principals) followed by school supervisors (37 per cent), district or city councillors (28 per cent), and representatives from NGOs/mission (26 per cent). The primary purpose of supervision visits was to check teachers' and pupils' attendance, and check other school records. External supervisors were also said to observe lessons while they were visiting (36 per cent of principals reported this).

In addition nearly all (98 per cent) JSS and SSS schools reportedly had parent-teacher or community-teacher associations (PTA/CTA). The majority of these bodies are active, having met at least once in the previous term.



Box 2: Implications of key findings

- Teachers are not teaching for a considerable proportion of their time in school, and **instructional time** in class is also affected by disruptions linked to low student attendance. School leadership can be encouraged and supported to address this, potentially through involvement of the community- or parent-teacher associations (CTAs/PTAs) which appear to be fairly active.
- It is encouraging to note a large proportion of teachers reporting the use of and giving positive feedback on JSS **lessons plans** even though these have been distributed quite recently. Further distribution, teacher training and support, and coverage of other subjects and SSS grades should be pursued. This survey could be complemented by qualitative inquiry into the effectiveness of lesson plan usage. In addition, potential problem areas identified by teachers, such as length of modules and relevance of content to local contexts should be considered by lesson plan developers for further revision and improvement.
- From the evidence, the secondary school system in Sierra Leone feels like a case of **isomorphic mimicry**.⁹ Schools are implementing lots of 'best practice' processes, low pupil-teacher ratios, use of teaching aids and lesson plans, lots of lesson observations and staff meetings, external supervision and CTA/PTA activity, but pupil learning outcomes are still low. MEST and partners need to understand why this is the case, and if so, how best to break this 'camouflage' and re-centre schools to put learning at the front-and-centre of all incentives, actions and behaviour.

8 ▶

Almost all principals (93 per cent) reported that they had conducted lesson observations during the previous term. This was substantiated by 64 per cent of teachers reporting their lessons had been observed in the previous term.

9 ▶

'Isomorphism and 'isomorphic mimicry' are terms from evolutionary biology, which refer to different organisms evolving to look similar without actually being related, particularly to gain an evolutionary advantage. Lately the term has caught on in the area of education, courtesy of Lant Pritchett, and is used to refer to fundamentally dysfunctional education systems that look like well-performing systems. Such dysfunctional systems pretend to conduct teaching and learning like the kind that goes on in functional education systems, but without their core underlying functionalities and therefore do not actually deliver much learning.

About the project and contact details

Leh wi Learn/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, especially for girls. This briefing note was produced under *Leh wi Learn*'s monitoring, evidence and research workstream as part of the baseline annual learning assessment. Any views and opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of UK Department for International Development (DFID) or the Sierra Leone Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEST).

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