

Closing the Gaps in Learning

INFORMATION BRIEF



Introduction

The Government of Sierra Leone is committed to inclusive, quality education for all school aged children. Yet, Secondary Grade Learning Assessments (SGLA) and other research show achievement and learning are consistently and significantly below expected curriculum learning levels. This represents a 'learning gap' – a shortfall of what pupils have learned at any stage in their education career compared to what the education system and society expect they should know and be able to do. These learning gaps widen as students progress from primary school and continue through secondary school resulting in lost human potential challenging Sierra Leone's growth and development.

To address these learning gaps, Leh Wi Lan piloted two remedial education initiatives. The first, in 2018, used an adapted form of the Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL¹) model in which pupils were assessed, put into ability streams for Maths and English, with the lower ability stream taught their usual maths lessons with the teacher using adapted Lesson Plan Manuals (LPMs) instead of the set grade level LPMs. Then, in 2019, Leh Wi Lan adapted the Winning Teams² model, in which pupils worked in study groups after school, completed learning assessments using games and received tutoring on individual learning gaps from former Senior Secondary School leavers.

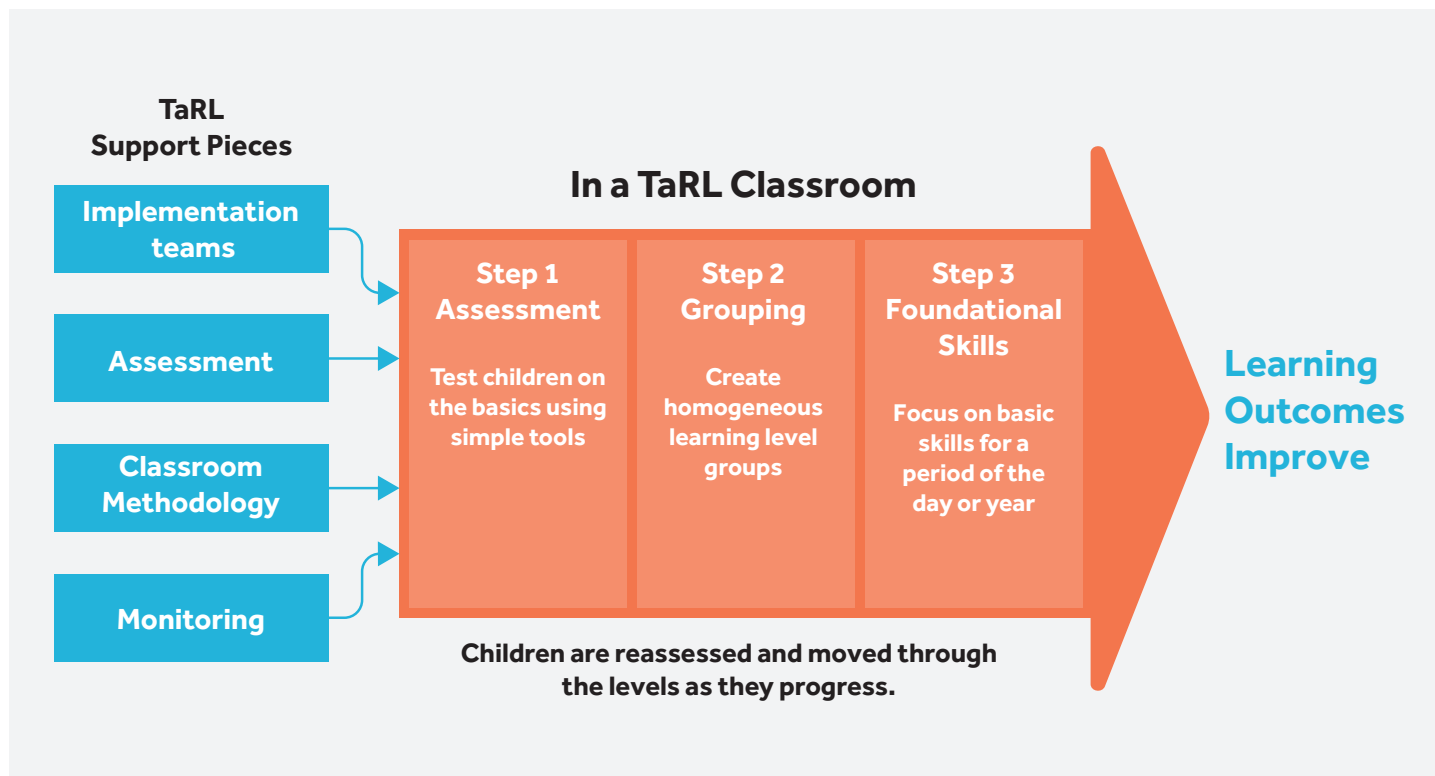
This information brief summarises Leh Wi Lan's learning from these initiatives, drawing findings and insights into innovative approaches to remediation to inform future policy and practice needed to close persistent learning gaps in Sierra Leone secondary schools.

It focuses on the two remedial programmes for learners but acknowledges the wider learning context and the importance of effective and adequately resourced systems, safety, access, inclusion, health, nutrition and economic wellbeing to pupil learning – and the poor teaching quality addressed separately by Leh Wi Lan under efforts to support teacher professional development.

How the remedial approaches were adapted for use in Sierra Leone secondary schools

Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL)

TaRL was adapted for secondary English and Maths in three pilot districts in Sierra Leone. At the start of term pupils were assessed and put into ability streams for English and Maths. Teachers taught the streamed classes using a set Lesson Plan Manual that was adapted for lower ability streams to include more foundational skills. Twenty six junior secondary schools and 95 teachers participated. The pilot was held in Port Loko, Kailahun and Kambia.



Source: <https://www.teachingattherightlevel.org/>

Winning Teams

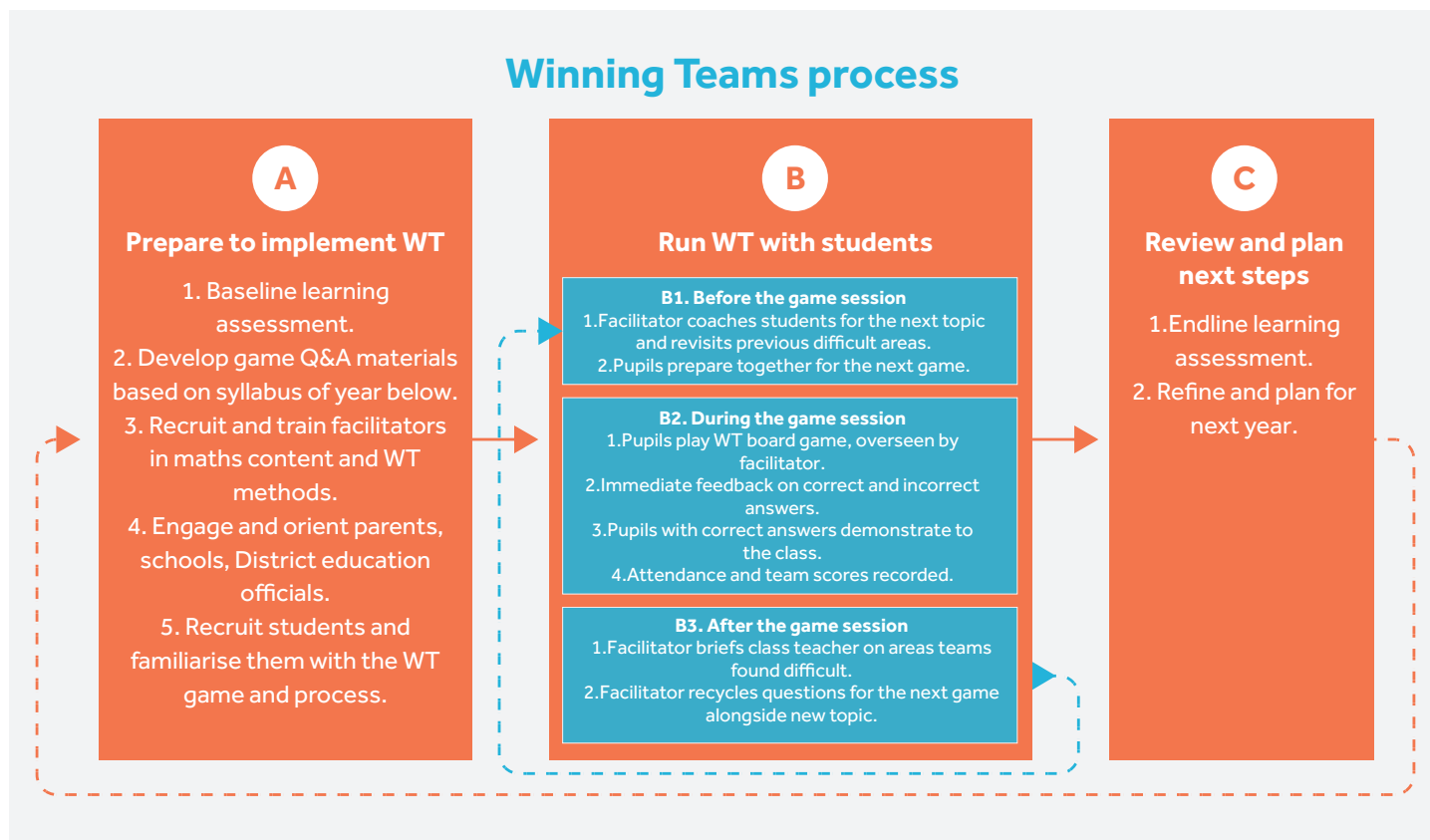
Winning Teams is an approach developed in South Africa. It was piloted in Sierra Leone through Leh Wi Lan in three Districts: Koinadugu, Falaba and Moyamba. The activity was introduced initially for pupils at Senior Secondary 2 level, in 20 schools, for approximately 2,800 pupils. The focus then shifted to supporting Junior Secondary 2 level pupils in 10 schools (about 1,800 pupils), and continued the next year supporting the same cohort when they progressed to Junior Secondary 3 level.

The final cohort supported through Leh Wi Lan was JSS1 pupils, revising Primary 6 level learning content. The schools involved in this iteration comprised the 10 Junior Secondary schools already experienced in running the activity, along with an additional 10 schools, each of which was paired with one of the experienced schools, in a 'buddy' peer-to-peer support arrangement. In these 20 schools, approximately 2,500 JSS1 pupils took part, more than half of whom were girls.

Winning Teams has its own materials, most noticeably a board game, with quiz questions, and procedures which make it a team game, in which four teams of pupils compete against one another to answer questions correctly. The sessions include the game, facilitated preparatory learning, follow-up remediation on points of difficulty, and feedback to pupils and to teachers alike on performance and difficulties in learning. Key to the approach is that pupils learn together, help one another, and develop their peer-support and group-learning skills, as well as engaging in additional learning activities and receiving assistance from facilitators.

For use in Sierra Leone, tutoring content and facilitator training and support materials were developed and produced directly based on the Sierra Leone curriculum, Lesson Plan Manuals and Pupil Handbooks. For more detailed information on the Winning Teams materials produced, visit: <https://mbseknowledgeplatform.gov.sl/material/winning-teams-facilitation-materials-2/>

The cyclic pattern of implementing Winning Teams with learners is summarised in the accompanying diagram.



Findings

The learning gap at secondary level is significant and closing it requires system changes as well as a shared understanding of both how children learn and the purpose of learning in secondary schools in Sierra Leone. Leh Wi Lan believes increasing learning outcomes requires teachers to focus on what students are learning, rather than on what the teacher is teaching. The pupils need to be able to engage actively, feel confident and ask questions so they can develop critical functions and direct their own learning. This shift is cultural and not only determines expectations for the workforce but also what children need from education. The introduction of the Secondary School Curriculum is a positive step in this direction.

Teachers should know the 'actual' learning levels of all pupils in their class. Leh Wi Lan introduced a simple learning assessment to be conducted by teachers at the start of JSS1. As a result, many teachers learned that pupils' learning levels were vastly different from their National Primary School Examination (NPSE) scores. This understanding helped teachers adjust their delivery of lessons to learner needs from the start of JSS1. For example by re-capping Primary 6 content or going at a slower pace. In Winning Teams, Leh Wi Lan also saw the value of continuously assessing learning so teachers could be aware of pupil learning levels at any point in time. In this way, learning assessment is more than a baseline. It is a continuous checking and responding process.

Teachers need to be able to check learning and develop the skills to move pupils forward in their learning. Many teachers in Sierra Leone require continuous professional development (CPD) to monitor learning and provide ongoing tailored support to pupils, which ideally should become a foundation of how teaching is delivered. CPD can helpfully focus on:

- Methods to check learning in overcrowded classrooms
- Practising dialogue and giving feedback to move learning forwards
- Better subject knowledge to give them the confidence to know if something is incorrect and/or a misconception and be able to ask questions to guide the learner to a correct answer.

Pupils can be leaders of their own learning, and peer learning is key. Learning by doing and peer learning put students at the forefront of the learning process, developing independent thinking which enhances their cognitive skills and ability. Leh Wi Lan provided additional opportunities for peer learning both within and outside of lessons. Scripted lesson plans supported teachers to ensure a proportion of their lessons focused on learners practising the new concepts in pairs or groups. Outside of school, Leh Wi Lan supported study groups where pupils learned together and tested their learning on a regular weekly basis through Winning Teams.

"I learned to work in a group to solve Maths problems, which is not common in my class, and, during the game, I got direct feedback from the community facilitators. This improved my timing in dealing with Maths compared to the class lessons."

Pupil

"I learned that there are slow and shy learners in any class or group but that these pupils can do well when they are grouped with average and fast learners."

Teacher participant in school-based teacher research

"The players sit facing each other during the game so they can see each other. When a team responds to a question, the other players applaud, and this type of activity keeps the players motivated and happy"

Winning Teams facilitator



Pupil learning and practising Mathematics while playing the Winning Teams game.

Confidence, attitude, and enjoyment matters. In Winning Teams games were used to motivate and engage pupils. As a result, pupils report enjoying the learning and they want to learn more. Leh Wi Lan found that this was especially true for learning Maths, as there is often some negative stigma and apprehension when learning concepts in this subject. Leh Wi Lan also found this is true for teachers because a teacher who is confident and enjoys the subject is also motivated and can inspire more learning.

"The game helps in boosting confidence and encourages students to love Maths. The performance of students has improved and interest has increased as a result of the game in the school."

School actors focus group discussion

More time is needed to practise and master new concepts in the secondary curriculum. Evidence from lesson observations shows that timetabled lessons and term time are insufficient to cover the curriculum.

"Learning through practice has been missing. We need the programme to be in every other school so all children will benefit."

District level official

"[Winning Teams] has created more opportunities for deprived pupils to have more learning time, increased their knowledge, skills in maths."

School actors focus group discussion

Teachers need time to cover the curriculum at a pace that is suitable for most learners and in a way that allows time to apply and practise new concepts. Increasing learning time in school is key to closing gaps. This means guiding school leaders, through supportive supervision, to maximise learning time by starting the school term on time, and minimising teacher absence and administrative activities (see diagram below in recommendations section).

Providing opportunities outside of lessons for pupils to practise what they learn and receive feedback on their learning also helps address learning gaps and many schools developed additional learning to cope with losses due to COVID-19. In supporting additional learning time, Leh Wi Lan used guided study sessions delivered at no-cost to pupils by recent school leavers. Testimony of experience from students, facilitators and teachers was widely that these outside class sessions were helpful.

This was supported by indications in one snapshot sounding, for example, that after one term of attending the Winning Teams study sessions, learning had improved. When a baseline and endline test was given to pupils in four schools in Moyamba District at the start and end of one term, average improvement scores in the schools engaged in Winning Teams were 13% and 27% (in those not engaged in Winning Teams it was 4% and 9%), while at four schools in Koinadugu and Falaba Districts, the same comparison showed 56% and 56% score improvement in two schools which were using Winning Teams against 36% and 2% in two schools not involved in Winning Teams. Clearly, we should not read too much into these figures out of context, and they are part of a wider and more complex picture. However,

they reinforce perceptions of those involved that the activity was beneficial in terms of learning as well as in terms of developing confidence and enjoyment.

"I always look forward to playing the Winning Teams game every week because it brings teamwork and effectiveness in our Maths lessons. It has become one of our simpler subjects."

Pupil

"Through the revision most pupils have caught up lessons they have lost and that has made an improvement in their performance. Also, their confidence in Maths has increased".

School actors focus group discussion

"Our children can now solve their homework regularly."

Parents focus group discussion

"The games have helped our pupils to be confident, and their performance in Maths has improved. There has also been increased interest in the subject compared to the period when the games were not available in school."

Parents focus group discussion



A team confer to agree their answer in the Winning Teams game.

The Learning and School Safety Study (LASS) in 2021 assessed 2,000 secondary school pupils and interviewed principals in 250 schools in five regions of Sierra Leone. In the 2022 study, 1,174 pupils³ in 150 secondary schools were tested, and the principals of those schools were interviewed⁴.

Many schools employed a range of learning recovery strategies when they re-opened.

- Free after-school classes
- Increased teaching time in schools
- More learning materials
- Monitoring pupil performance.

Overall, learning achievement has not fallen as might have been expected despite challenges for learners and teachers.



English JSS3: More pupils performed above primary level in 2022 than in 2020 (no change from 2021 to 2022)



Maths SS3: More pupils performed above primary level in 2022 than in 2021 or in 2020⁵

Various sources of learning are useful for closing learning gaps if delivered in a coordinated way. In Winning Teams, pupils reported learning concepts in new ways which enhanced their understanding and improved their learning. The use of technology, delivery by teachers, peer learning with classmates, the use of books, and support from tutors, such as former students, all represent various sources of learning. Leh Wi Lan found that each of these approaches is valid and when combined have a collective impact on closing learning gaps. Further, these approaches work best when they are co-ordinated and systematically delivered in such a way that they re-enforce one another.

Recommendations

No single solution will close the gaps in learning in Sierra Leone's secondary schools. However, based on learning from the two remedial education initiatives Leh Wi Lan applied, we have identified the following four priority areas in which education decision makers and managers can intensify and extend their emphasis:

Adequate, quality learning time to cover the curriculum content	More pupil-led learning opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pace and level of curriculum matches the pace and level of learners, with sufficient learning time in school. • Learners supported to practise, revise and master concepts, extending learning outside the time in lessons . • Reducing lost learning time in the school term, the school day and in timetabled lessons. • Teachers equipped with sufficient subject knowledge, continuously building skills to provide quality learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encouraging and supporting pupils to find answers and solutions collaboratively. • Building pupils' confidence to speak out, test ideas, share opinions, to learn through reflection, experiment and 'dialogue' . • Pupils and mentors supporting peers through questioning, explaining and constructive feedback . • Pupils take responsibility for their learning by understanding their own learning gaps and where they need to go .
Inclusion and engagement for all learners	Regular formative assessment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adapting teaching to the needs, abilities and interests of the individual learner. • Making learning fun using games, interaction, and different teaching methods. • Varying learning sources, ensuring these complement each other. • Building a safe and positive learning environment for pupils to thrive. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding where the pupil is in their learning and being able to move them forwards. • Building teachers' skills to carry out assessments for learning, not just assessments of learning. • Using assessment to address misconceptions when pupils answer incorrectly, to help learners get to the right answer. • Learner, teacher and education system all diagnose learning gaps and take ownership to improve.

¹ TaRL is an adaptable, holistic approach which helps education systems focus on the basics and improve learning for all. <https://www.teachingattherightlevel.org/>

² Winning Teams provides a comprehensive development model for learners and educators using an engaging and collaborative learning process to develop and build core knowledge, providing opportunity to become economically active. www.wteams.com

³ Achieved sample (590 girls and 584 boys), from a nationally representative, stratified sample drawn of 1,200 pupils (600 girls and 600 boys).

⁴ Learning and School Safety (LASS) Study 2022, Briefing note 1: Status of pupil learning outcomes in junior and senior secondary schools two years on from school closures in Sierra Leone. MBSSE (Leh Wi Lan), March 2023.

⁵ However, the 2022 study noted that 'no SSS3 pupils demonstrated senior secondary level competency in Maths, suggesting significant gaps with learning expectations.'

This Information Brief was produced under Leh Wi Lan, a six-year programme that supports the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) to improve learning outcomes for boys and girls at secondary school and to increase enrolment, retention and wellbeing of girls and children with disabilities.

Leh Wi Lan is managed by Cambridge Education and funded by UK aid from the UK government. For more information visit

<https://mbsseknowledgeplatform.gov.sl/> or <https://mbsse.gov.sl/leh-wi-lan>.