



# The Sierra Leone School Leadership Programme

A competency-based approach to improve safety, inclusion, and teaching & learning

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The views expressed in this research note are those of the authors.

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## Acronyms

|               |                                                        |
|---------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>BOG</b>    | Board of Governors                                     |
| <b>CPD</b>    | Continuous Professional Development                    |
| <b>GBC</b>    | Girls and Boys Club                                    |
| <b>HOD</b>    | Head of Department                                     |
| <b>LLL</b>    | Local Leaders of Learning                              |
| <b>JSS</b>    | Junior Secondary School                                |
| <b>LGI</b>    | The Learning Generation Initiative                     |
| <b>MBSSE</b>  | Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education       |
| <b>SIP</b>    | School Improvement Plan                                |
| <b>SLP</b>    | School Leadership Programme                            |
| <b>SSEIP2</b> | Sierra Leone Secondary Education Improvement Programme |
| <b>SSS</b>    | Senior Secondary School                                |
| <b>SQAO</b>   | School Quality Assurance Officer                       |
| <b>TLC</b>    | Teacher Learning Circle                                |
| <b>TSC</b>    | Teaching Service Commission                            |
| <b>TTI</b>    | Teacher Training Institution                           |

## Executive Summary

The School Leadership Programme (SLP) aims to provide standardised and foundational professional development training for school leaders across Sierra Leone. The goal of the SLP is to ensure that all Junior Secondary Schools and Senior Secondary Schools have qualified, capable, and professional leaders who can lead safe, inclusive, quality learning for all pupils.

The purpose of this study is to better understand the challenges and opportunities around implementation of the SLP under Sierra Leone Secondary Education Improvement Programme, or SSEIP2, and what changes have resulted from the programme to date. The study sheds light on the experience of female participants given the government's goal to better support female school leaders and understand the barriers they face to accessing and holding leadership positions. The study also proposes potential avenues for tracking the impact of the programme moving forward.

The study used a mixed-methods approach, obtaining quantitative and qualitative insights from a variety of stakeholders involved in the programme, including a survey with more than 500 school leader participants, interviews with 20 school leaders and 60 teachers working with them, and 19 Local Leaders of Learning (LLs), which are the programme mentors for school leader participants.

The findings are presented across five key messages. The first three align with the structure of the programme, while the final two look more broadly at challenges to implementation and recommendations for improving the programme.

### **1. Shifts in school policy, mindsets, and behaviours promote safety and inclusion.**

Collaboration with different school stakeholders, including students, teachers, parents and the community, as well as School Quality Assurance Officers (SQAOs) and Boards of Governors was a key change reported by school leaders related to safety and inclusion. Another significant change to promoting inclusion reported by Local Leaders of Learning (LLs) and school leaders relates to positive shifts in attitudes and beliefs about ensuring marginalised students are supported, especially girls who are pregnant and students with disabilities. Another shift in beliefs is illustrated by the serious reduction in corporal punishment, which was reported by all participants. School leaders and teachers use a range of alternative and positive discipline strategies they learned in the programme in place of corporal punishment, including restorative approaches, restriction of privileges, assigning additional responsibilities, and classroom discipline that maintains student engagement in learning. However, some teacher resistance to eliminating corporal punishment altogether remains, due to long-held cultural beliefs around discipline or a lack of understanding of alternative behavioural management strategies. In addition to the strategies learned in the programme, teachers reported that school leaders go beyond their formal responsibilities, often supporting marginalised students using their personal resources.

### **2. A focus on direct instructional leadership changes teaching approaches, provides better teacher support, and builds stronger relationships among staff and with students.**

Almost all school leaders reported observing lessons, although the frequency varied. Some share observation responsibilities with their school leadership team — Vice Principals or Heads of Departments (HODs). Challenges to school leaders observing lessons included teacher absenteeism and workload; one female leader noted that her male colleagues were resistant to her observing them at first.

Almost all teachers (98%) said they received feedback after being observed; 100% of those said the feedback was helpful; and 98% said the feedback led them to change their teaching practice. Five themes emerged when teachers were asked about the impact of lesson observations: 1) improved lesson preparation; 2) more learner-centred teaching; 3) improved teaching in areas of weakness; 4) greater inclusion and responsiveness to learner needs; and 5) improved classroom management and teacher-student relationship.

School leaders also provided professional development for teachers across a wide range of topics, predominately through the use of teacher learning circles. Similarly, the frequency varies widely, and school leaders identified insufficient funding to incentivise teachers to attend as the primary challenge to providing professional development. Topics covered in professional development included student-teacher relationships and behaviour management (the use of corporal punishment and the teacher code of conduct); teaching and learning (student assessment, new teacher methodologies, teaching time, teaching methods and learning processes, engaging pedagogies, designing lessons, student engagement and issues that arise during lesson observations); inclusion (student absenteeism, students with disabilities); and administrative issues (registers). Teachers consistently reported that these professional activities have changed the way they teach and interact with students. For example, they made changes to pedagogical approaches (checking student understanding before moving to a new topic); lesson planning (improved after feedback from school leader); and attitudes toward students (using more positive language).

In general, most teachers felt supported by their school leader both professionally and personally. Teachers consistently reported that they feel comfortable seeking support from school leaders whenever they encounter classroom difficulties. They also said that school leaders facilitate collaborative learning among teachers.

### **3. Clear planning paired with deep collaboration promotes better problem solving for school improvement.**

Most school leaders reported developing a School Improvement Plan with teachers and other stakeholders. Some teachers said they use these plans throughout the year, but it is unclear how rigorously the plans drive planning and ongoing tracking of improvement goals.

School leaders and teachers most frequently used teacher and student attendance and student performance data as part of their day-to-day practice, and report that it is discussed informally. While 90% of teachers said their school leader had discussed student learning or attendance data with them in the past academic year, this differed sharply by gender: 97.7% of male teachers vs. 70.6% of female teachers. Teachers and school leaders also noted that they now recognise the importance of formative assessment, but it is unclear how frequently they collect this data and what methods they use to do so.

Collaboration came out as a strong theme in school improvement approaches. This includes team-based approaches to ensure safety and inclusion, school leaders facilitating teacher collaboration, school leaders collaborating with teachers and other school stakeholders, and school leaders communicating with each other to support problem solving in their schools. Teachers noted this collaboration as a driver of increased safety and inclusion and improved teaching practice.

### **4. Challenges to delivery of the programme.**

School leaders described a range of challenges they faced while participating in the programme, including lack of material resources, difficulty of finding enough time and capacity to balance programme demands with school duties, network and connectivity issues, and resistance from teachers, pupils, or the community to the programme's behaviour-change aspects, in particular, ending corporal punishment.

Female school leaders emphasised that the SLP is accessible to women and reported that open recruitment and publicly available information on the course actively encourages women to apply, but LLLs believe fewer women apply because they face challenges with digital literacy skills. When asked whether they had any doubts or hesitations before applying, female school leaders were primarily concerned about leaving young children at home and balancing an already heavy load of domestic and school responsibilities against the demands of a year-long course.

### **5. Most valuable aspects of the programme & practical recommendations for improving future iterations**

Participants found the highest value of the programme in the concrete, transferable knowledge and skills they learned and the resulting shifts in leadership mindsets and beliefs, confidence, and relationships. The module on safety and inclusion was cited as the most useful element of the programme content. LLLs reported that the most impactful aspects of the SLP are 1) the use of a competency-based approach to leadership development that includes practical assignments, school visits, and face-to-face engagement and 2) remote collaboration through WhatsApp groups where school leaders share new ideas and learn from each other through real examples of how they address challenges in their schools.

School leaders and LLLs made several recommendations for improving the programme moving forward. These included expanding the programme content for teachers, providing devices and network support, reducing the ratio of school leaders to LLLs, and decreasing the number of weekly tasks and assignments for school leaders.

It was recommended that the Teaching Service Commission (TSC) provide additional support to female participants as well as Head of Department (HOD) and senior teacher participants to ensure they can fully participate in the programme when faced with challenges to their authority from colleagues. This would require sensitisation of school leaders who have not completed the programme.

To better support women in the programme, female school leaders suggested a range of strategies, including encouragement and motivation from school staff and LLLs, adapting programme delivery to meet the needs of women with domestic responsibilities (such as adjusting meeting times and schedules), and creating an alumni group in which women could continue to provide peer support for each other and help recruit other women to the programme.

All LLLs agreed that the government should consider measuring learning outcomes to assess the efficacy of the programme in the future.

### **Considerations for future scale-up and sustainability of the programme**

Based on these findings, this section provides a set of considerations for the government, the teacher training colleges, and other relevant stakeholders for future scale up and sustainability of the SLP, as well as complementary system changes that could address some of the challenges raised by school leaders.

#### *Programme content and delivery*

##### **Safety & inclusion**

- School-based support and interventions aligned with SLP content and approaches could be mutually reinforcing and create greater impact.
- The programme should position safety and inclusion as a collaborative approach and the responsibility of all school staff, in addition to identifying single roles at the school level responsible for safety or inclusion (such as Inclusion Champions).
- Ongoing professional development for teachers and school leaders should focus on the inclusion of marginalised students, corporal punishment awareness, and clear behavioural management alternatives.
- Teacher training colleges should embed an awareness of the negative effects of corporal punishment in teacher education to support a shift in attitudes and beliefs before teachers begin to work in schools.

##### **Teaching & learning**

- The TSC should consider providing guidance on the expected frequency of lesson observation and professional development, taking into consideration different school sizes and the teaching loads of school leaders.
- Vice Principals and HODs should be trained to conduct lesson observations to support school leaders in large schools or those who struggle with heavy workloads.
- SQAQO visits should include guidance to school leaders to ensure quality lesson observations and teacher professional development (including content, frequency, and follow up). In addition, quality assurance tools should align with the principles and activities expected of school leader support for teachers.

- The TSC should ensure there are incentives related to teacher professional development and establish a system of professional credits tracked through the Teacher Management Information System. This could help address teacher reluctance to engage with school leader-led professional development.

### **School improvement**

- SQAOs should work with school leaders to review and monitor SIP progress throughout the year.
- In addition to attendance data, SQAOs should support school leaders and teachers in collecting and using formative performance data on student learning. Teachers noted that they are now aware of the importance of formative assessment, but it was unclear how they collected this type of data or how often.
- The SLP should continue to accept applicants in roles beyond Principals, such as Vice Principals, HODs, and senior teachers. However, the TSC should consider conducting awareness campaigns through District Directors and SQAOs to ensure schools are clear that the TSC supports these individuals to conduct programme practices. This could include securing Principal buy-in and support, especially if the Principal has not completed the programme.
- The programme should continue to emphasise in-person school visits from LLLs to facilitate trusting relationships that support identification of challenges participants face and collaborative approaches to addressing them.
- The TSC should encourage school leaders to continue supporting each other after completing the programme. The TSC could also consider providing light-touch continuous professional development through district-based groups led by 'system leaders' who have completed the programme.

### **Supporting female school leaders**

- The SLP should consider continuing open recruitment with publicly available information through a wide variety of platforms to ensure female school leaders are aware of the programme. Women who have completed the programme could be enlisted to help recruit other eligible female school leaders through WhatsApp groups or campaigns, for example.
- The SLP should consider allowing participants to apply through district offices, where District Directors can support those who do not have the relevant digital skills.
- The SLP should continue to aim for a minimum 30% enrolment of female participants each year to ensure development of a pipeline of female school leaders at secondary level.
- Where possible, the programme should allow for flexibility and adaptation in programme deadlines and call schedules for female participants who have domestic responsibilities.

### *System capacity to support school leader professional development*

The TSC should consider how to ensure direct, ongoing support for school leaders, previously provided by LLLs, as the programme shifts to delivery by teacher training colleges. While some LLL tasks could be included in District Director and SQAQO mandates, these roles are often already overwhelmed and unlikely to provide robust support. Teacher educators at the teacher training colleges should provide some of this support, though this might also need to be supplemented by a light version of the LLL role

### *Measuring programme impact*

In the next phase of implementation, the TSC and its partners would like to measure the impact of the SLP. As reported by the LLLs, the ultimate goal of the SLP is to improve teaching and learning. Analysis of student performance outcomes (such as BECE and WASCCE examination results) could be used to evaluate impact on learning, but it is complex to measure the indirect causal pathway from professional development for school leaders to student learning gains. Furthermore, there are shorter-term outcomes from improved school leadership that are important. However, the TSC should consider the option of a programme impact evaluation that includes learning outcomes.

The programme should consider a set of indicators that capture changes in school leader and teacher practice and school improvement, including:

- **Shifts in school leader competencies:** Competencies could be assessed by an external assessor; however, this approach could be very costly and ensuring the reliability and validity of the assessment might be challenging. Using SQAQO school visits to verify a small set of school leader competencies could be more feasible.
- **Changes to school quality and professional support for teachers:** School quality assessments, undertaken once a year through SQAQO school visits, could collect data on school leaders' support for teachers and school improvement practices to help measure the impact of the SLP.
- **360-degree verification of school leader changes and school impact:** The research described in this report sought perspectives from teachers about changes in their school due to the SLP. Feedback could be expanded to include District Directors, SQAQOs, parents and possibly learners to support verification of school leaders' self-reported changes in activities and behaviors and impact on their schools.
- **Articulation with other data sources:** The SLP could triangulate programme data with other sources of data, such as the Annual School Census and the hotline for reporting violence against children and youth.

## Background

In the last few years, the Sierra Leone Teaching Service Commission (TSC) has committed to improving school leadership to support better teaching and learning. In 2020, the TSC and the Education Commission (now the Learning Generation Initiative, or LGI) undertook a scoping study to better understand the state of school leadership in Sierra Leone. The result was a national professional development framework and the design for a national school leadership programme to provide comprehensive foundational training for all school leaders. This was complemented by the development of a school leader policy and guidelines.

The School Leadership Programme (SLP) was launched in 2024 by the TSC with the aim of providing standardised and foundational professional development training for school leaders across Sierra Leone. The programme was delivered in collaboration with Leh Wi Lan, with support from UK Aid through the Sierra Leone Secondary Education Improvement Programme (SSEIP2). The goal of the SLP is to ensure that all Junior Secondary Schools (JSS) and Senior Secondary Schools (SSS) have qualified, capable, and professional leaders who can lead safe, inclusive, quality learning for all pupils.

The SLP is a year-long course that uses a competency-based approach to improve the knowledge, mindsets, and practical skills of school leaders. It is open to Principals, Vice Principals, Heads of Department (HODs), and Senior Teachers to develop a pipeline of individuals who can take on senior leadership roles and to ensure greater representation of women, who are underrepresented as school leaders at the secondary level. The course uses a blended approach, including self study outside of school hours; face-to-face visits at the beginning and end of each module (twice per term); phone calls from Local Leaders of Learning (LLs); and peer collaboration and support through WhatsApp group sessions and chats.

Course content is aligned with the TSC's Professional Standards for Teachers and School Leaders and includes essential components of school leadership through three modules: 1) safety and inclusion; 2) teaching and learning; and 3) school improvement. School leaders receive a toolkit for each module. The toolkits serve as workbooks and contain resources for the course and space for LLs to provide feedback on progress. One module is completed each school term. In each, there are key ideas and competences that participants must master, which are assessed through a range of methods: written and practical assignments, participation in group WhatsApp calls, and the application of new ideas and skills in their schools. This triangulation of marks from different sources ensures that more than one perspective on performance is provided. The formal assessment is carried out by LLs who meet at the end of each module to standardise and moderate the application of the marking scheme.<sup>1</sup>

From 2024–2026, three cohorts of school leaders completed the course:

- **Cohort 1:** 150 school leaders selected from schools in five districts (Bo, Bombali, Kailahun, Port Loko, Western Rural)
- **Cohort 2:** 350 school leaders from the same five districts
- **Cohort 3:** 300 school leaders from all 16 districts

In alignment with the TSC's policy of supporting female school leaders, the programme used several strategies to increase female school leader participation. Materials used to advertise the programme used images of women with the text emphasising that women were strongly encouraged to apply. For the third cohort, District Directors were asked to identify female school leaders who would benefit from the programme, and programme staff followed up with these women directly. Female participants who graduated were encouraged to contact other women who might be interested in the programme.

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<sup>1</sup> To view the SLP materials, visit Sierra Leone's Education Knowledge Platform: School Leadership Programme <https://mbsseknowledgeplatform.gov.sl/material/school-leadership-programme/>

In 2025, senior representatives from the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE), the Ministry of Tertiary and Higher Education, the TSC, and higher education institutions agreed on refinements to the course and proposed new mechanisms for delivering it as an accredited professional development course at Teacher Training Institutions (TTIs).

In 2026, the TSC and five TTIs agreed to work together to start offering the course to a fourth cohort of school leaders in September 2026, with support from Mastercard Foundation to subsidise the newly introduced fees. The Government of Sierra Leone will also implement the new School Leader Policy that requires completion of the SLP to be eligible for a position as a school leader, thus incentivising school leaders to apply for and complete the course. Having a strong incentive to complete the course is increasingly important, as TTIs will charge fees from Cohort 4 onwards. The aim is to subsidise fees for this cohort and beyond, but school leaders will still be required to make a contribution.

## Purpose of the Study

With the end of the first phase of the SLP, the TSC and Leh Wi Lan wanted to capture progress of the programme to date and insights to inform future delivery. LGI undertook research at the end of the programme's third cohort (May–August 2026), given the initiative's role in scoping and designing the programme and its work as an SSEIP2 partner supporting the TSC on school leadership policy.

The purpose of this study is to better understand challenges and opportunities around implementation of the SLP and what changes at the school level have resulted from the programme to date. The study also sheds light on the experience of female participants, given the policy goals of the TSC to better support female school leaders and understand the barriers they face to accessing and holding leadership positions. Finally, this study aims to propose potential avenues for tracking the impact of the programme moving forward.

## Research Questions & Methodology

This study aimed to answer the following two primary research questions:

- **RQ1:** What have been the changes resulting from the School Leadership Programme to
  - a) school leader professional practice?
  - b) teaching and school improvement?
  - c) system capacity to support school leader professional development and practice?
- **RQ2:** What is required to support future **scale up and sustainability** of the School Leadership Programme?

To explore these questions, the study used a mixed-methods approach, obtaining quantitative and qualitative insights from a variety of stakeholders involved in the programme. The study employed five distinct tools across three stakeholder groups. The tools, participants, and sampling approaches are summarised in Table 1, below. Research instruments were designed around a conceptual framework that included the three core programme modules (safety & inclusion, teaching and learning, school improvement); factors related to women's participation in school leadership; and challenges faced by school leaders in the programme as well as recommendations for improvements to programme delivery.

Table 1: Details of the study research methods

| Research Instrument                             | Participants                                                                     | Sampling Approach                                                                           |
|-------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| An online survey with all SLP participants      | All school leaders who had participated in the programme from Cohorts 1, 2, & 3. | A census approach was used.                                                                 |
| An in-person focus group discussion with LLLs   | 19 LLLs                                                                          | A convenience sampling approach was used.                                                   |
| In-person interviews with school leaders        | 20 school leaders Cohorts 1, 2, and 3                                            | A mix of cluster and random sampling was used.                                              |
| In-person surveys with teachers                 | 60 teachers, 3 from each of the 20 selected schools                              | A mix of purposive and random sampling.                                                     |
| In-person focus group discussions with teachers | 60 teachers, 3 from each of the 20 selected schools                              | Purposive sampling was used. These were the same teachers that participated in the surveys. |

The survey with all SLP participants took a census approach and was sent via a link to all 800 school leader participants through WhatsApp. There were 528 responses. Demographic information for the school leader survey is in Annex 1.

The focus group discussion with LLLs used a convenience sampling approach, with participants drawn from Cohort 3. All LLLs had been part of the programme since the first cohort. Demographic information on the LLLs is in Annex 2.

School-level data collection used a mix of cluster and purposive sampling. The study constraints allowed for data collection at 20 schools across two districts. Bo and Bombali districts were selected with the TSC based on several factors, including: 1) they were two of the original five districts, and therefore included participants from all three cohorts; 2) logistical factors, including relative proximity to Freetown to address timing constraints; and 3) each had distinct profiles in terms of school performance indicators, such as pupil-to-qualified teacher ratio (PQTR). School selection criteria focused on ensuring representation from each cohort and from female participants proportional to the programme percentages: 18.8% for Cohort 1, 43.8% for Cohort 2, 37.5% for Cohort 3, and 30% female participants. After these criteria were met, participants with senior teacher roles were removed from the sample, and schools representing a mix of geographies (rural, peri-urban and urban) were prioritised.

As previously noted, the programme was open to a range of school leader roles; however, the school-level data collection focused on Principals, Vice Principals, and HODs. This study explored the changes school leaders have made in their schools because of the programme. Since senior teachers often do not have the authority to make some of the more significant changes required by the programme, they were not included in the school-level data collection. One senior teacher was included due to a record error. We have kept the data from this participant as it illustrates our assumption about the limitations of participating in the programme as a senior teacher. It is important to note that some of the schools selected had more than one school leader that had participated in the SLP. However, only one school leader participant was interviewed at each school, and this was not always the principal. Table 2 shows the characteristics of the selected schools and school leaders. A more detailed breakdown by district is in Annex 3.

Table 2: Characteristics of selected schools and school leaders

| School Geography |            |       | School Leader Role |                |     |                | School Leader Gender |        | School Leader Cohort |          |          |
|------------------|------------|-------|--------------------|----------------|-----|----------------|----------------------|--------|----------------------|----------|----------|
| Rural            | Peri-urban | Urban | Principal          | Vice Principal | HOD | Senior Teacher | Male                 | Female | Cohort 1             | Cohort 2 | Cohort 3 |
| 4                | 6          | 10    | 13                 | 3              | 3   | 1              | 13                   | 7      | 4                    | 8        | 8        |

Three teachers were selected at each school to participate in both the survey and focus group discussion. To be eligible to participate, teachers had to have been working for at least one year with the school leader who was being interviewed. After this criterion was met, enumerator teams randomly selected teachers at each school, attempting to obtain a relative gender balance.

It is important to note that in addition to the SLP, Lehigh Valley was running parallel interventions testing approaches to improve disability inclusion, school safety, and well-being in 200 schools across five districts. Eight of the schools that participated in this study also received that intervention. School-related activities from the intervention that might have influenced the findings of this study include:

- Schools were invited to select three teachers to act as Inclusion Champions to help identify students with disabilities, to connect them with external services where possible, and to promote disability inclusive teaching practices across the school. Some Inclusion Champions were Principals.
- Schools were supported to establish Girls and Boys Clubs (GBCs), which are learner-led spaces where students meet to learn about and discuss a range of topics including violence, sexual and reproductive health and rights, gender equality, disability inclusion, and personal well-being. These schools may already have been operating GBCs since they were introduced in SSEIP1; however, under SSEIP2, a new model was introduced in the schools that placed more responsibility on peer mentors (students) for leading GBC sessions and promoted grade-specific, mixed-gender GBCs. Some school leaders may therefore have been engaged in GBC training.
- Schools were supported to strengthen their School Safety Committee. These Committees were an SSEIP1 intervention; under SSEIP2, however, the structure of the Committees was revised, and they developed new terms of reference. Principals are members of the Committees and so may have received some training and support for this role, although not directly from SSEIP2.

## Research Findings & Discussion

This section presents findings from the research under five key messages. The first three respond to the research question around changes made as a result of the programme, while the last two capture the challenges and opportunities related to programme implementation to understand what is required for future scale up and improved delivery.

### Changes as a result of the programme

1. Shifts in school policy, mindsets, and behaviours promote safety and inclusion
2. A focus on direct instructional leadership changes teaching approaches, provides better teacher support, and builds stronger relationships among staff and with students.
3. Clear planning coupled with deep collaboration promotes better problem solving for school improvement.

### Implementation challenges and recommendations for improving the programme

4. Challenges to delivery of the programme
5. Practical recommendations for improving future iterations of the programme

Each section provides findings from across all research instruments, highlighting important examples and illustrative quotes from study participants. Discussion includes identification of patterns across participant groups and triangulation of school leaders' self-reported activities with teacher and LLL perspectives. However, the findings represent participants' perceptions and reported experiences and were not independently verified.

## 1. Shifts in school policy, mindsets, and behaviours promote safety and inclusion

The first module of the SLP covered a range of topics related to school safety and inclusion. This study focused on a few of those issues of most interest to the TSC, including:

- **Activities related to safety and inclusion:** To capture what activities school leaders undertake to promote safety and inclusion.
- **Teacher perceptions of safety:** To understand if any of the changes instigated by the SLP have influenced teachers' perceptions of safety for themselves and students.
- **The use of corporal punishment and alternative behaviour management:** To determine the extent of corporal punishment in SLP participant schools and what alternative strategies are used for behaviour management. Corporal punishment remains a widespread practice in Sierra Leone, and addressing it requires challenging cultural beliefs and long-standing approaches to behaviour management.
- **Support for marginalised students:** To better understand how the SLP supports the government's Radical Inclusion policy.

| Key messages                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many activities school leaders undertake to promote safety and inclusion focus on collaboration with a range of school stakeholders, including students, teachers, parents and the community, as well as School Quality Assurance Officers (SQAOs) and Boards of Governors (BoGs).</li> <li>• In addition to implementing inclusion strategies learned in the programme, school leaders went beyond their formal responsibilities, often supporting marginalised students using their personal resources.</li> <li>• One of the primary changes to inclusion reported by LLLs and school leaders was related to positive shifts in attitudes and beliefs about including and supporting marginalised students, especially girls who are pregnant and students with disabilities.</li> <li>• Teachers, school leaders, and LLLs attribute increased school safety to enforcement of the government policy on the elimination of corporal punishment.</li> <li>• All participant groups reported a significant reduction in corporal punishment; however, some teacher resistance to eliminating it altogether remains due to long-held cultural beliefs around discipline or a lack of understanding of alternative behavioural management strategies.</li> <li>• Some female and younger school leaders encountered resistance from male and older colleagues when implementing the policy prohibiting corporal punishment.</li> <li>• School leaders and teachers use a range of alternative and positive discipline strategies they learned in the programme in place of corporal punishment, including restorative approaches, restriction of privileges, additional responsibilities, and classroom discipline that maintains engagement in learning.</li> <li>• Teachers emphasised the collaborative approach school leaders take to alternative behavioural management, noting that they engage families directly to address underlying issues and reinforce the school's expectations.</li> </ul> |

### 1.1 Perceptions & activities related to safety & inclusion

**Both male and female teachers reported similar perceptions of school safety, with 70% reporting their schools as safe or very safe and 30% reporting them as not very safe.** Male teachers were slightly more likely to describe the school as “not very safe” for both teachers (30.2% for males vs. 29.4% for females) and students

(27.9% vs. 23.5%). Perceptions also varied by district. Teachers in Bombali were almost twice as likely as teachers in Bo to rate their school as “very safe” for teachers (32.3% vs. 17.2%), while Bo teachers were somewhat more likely to report their school as “safe” (51.7% vs. 38.7%).

School leaders interviewed described a number of measures that were introduced to establish a culture in which “every child is valued regardless of the agenda, ability, background, religion, or socioeconomic status.” These included **providing trainings for teachers on inclusion and collaborating with teachers. Teachers themselves reported that school leaders** delegate safety responsibilities to teachers, involve teachers in decision making, assign and emphasise teachers’ role in supervising students, encourage teachers to report concerns and to treat learners respectfully, and establish School Safety Committees. This collaboration extends to **engagement with parents and communities**. One teacher described her school leader’s efforts to increase safety in the school:

*“[The school leader] has played an important role in maintaining discipline and ensuring that the school remains a safe environment. Because teachers already have their own responsibilities, she helps coordinate responses whenever challenges occur. When serious incidents happen, she ensures that relevant stakeholders are involved, including community leaders, the School Management Committee, local authorities, and parents. She understands that maintaining safety requires teamwork, so she brings people together to find solutions.” — Teacher from Bo*

Most school leaders reported talking to their teachers and students (90%) and parents and community members (84%) about school safety, and more than half reported working with SQAOs (73%) and BOGs (62%) to assess the safety of their schools. **Teachers noted that collaboration creates a stronger, more accountable school community which is safer than one in which a single person is responsible.**

**Another key activity mentioned by school leaders includes sensitising students on inclusion** and supporting peers coming from low-income backgrounds. One school leader mentioned **setting up girls and boys clubs in which learners are taught about gender-based violence** and how it can be prevented. Other activities related to support for marginalised students are discussed in detail in the following sections.

**Enforcement of the no-corporal punishment policy was credited by a number of school leaders as a contributing factor for increased safety that children experience in school.** One school leader mentioned that she learned through the SLP how corporal punishment serves as a barrier to learning because it creates negative experiences for learners.

Although not mentioned by any of the school leaders interviewed, LLLs said that school leaders now **report gender-based violence to the Ministry**. Prior to the programme, some schools settled matters at the school or community level, but now school leaders know how to report using the national referral protocols, have cascaded this procedure to teachers and are making sure violence is not covered up in their schools.

One teacher gave a positive example of how their school addressed a safety concern for female staff.

*“The school administration takes the safety of female staff very seriously. I recall an incident involving inappropriate behaviour by a member of staff. The administration acted immediately, dealt with the matter firmly, and even involved the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education to ensure that appropriate action was taken. Their response reassured all female staff that our safety and wellbeing are taken seriously.” — Teacher from Bo*

## 1.2 Attitudes & support for marginalised students

School leaders were asked about how they support marginalised students, defined as pregnant and parent learners and students with disabilities or from low-income households. Eighty-percent of school leaders reported identifying marginalised students this academic year, **and the school leaders interviewed consistently mentioned how the SLP has changed their understanding of how to include and support these students.**

LLLs confirmed that before the SLP school leaders treated all learners equally, but through the programme they now see the need for differentiated support to include all students.

**School leaders reported a number of strategies they now use to support marginalised learners**, including identification of marginalised students; making relevant accommodations (for example, building ramps or seating students with hearing or visual impairments at the front of the classroom); collaborating with teachers; engaging parents; and discussing with students the harm of bullying marginalised peers. Teachers interviewed confirmed that school leaders undertake these activities and said that they encourage marginalised students to remain in school despite difficulties, try to help students who have left school to return, discourage bullying, make students feel comfortable and valued and offer emotional support.

**Teachers interviewed acknowledged the effort school leaders have made around inclusion of marginalised students.** Eighty-eight percent of teachers reported having supported a disadvantaged student in the past academic year; of those, 90.6% (48 of 53) said their school leader had helped them do so. One teacher explained:

*“Our school currently has two visually impaired students... Every morning, [the school leader] personally checks on their welfare. At the end of the school day, he contacts the School for the Blind to arrange transport so that the students can return safely to their boarding facility. He also encourages teachers to treat these students fairly and never discriminate against them because of their disability. Whenever necessary, he even assists by providing lunch for them. I have personally witnessed this on several occasions. In addition, he regularly communicates with both the students and their parents to receive feedback about their wellbeing and to ensure they are receiving appropriate care and support. Overall, he demonstrates genuine compassion and commitment towards students with special educational needs.” —School leader from Bo*

One of the most significant drivers behind these changes could be the fact that **the SLP changed some of the school leaders’ fundamental perceptions and beliefs about student inclusion and marginalisation**. One school leader explained that the SLP changed their perspective of pregnant learners:

*“.... especially when it comes to pregnant learners... I never wanted them to be part of those that have not experienced pregnancy... But after I've gone through the leadership, toolkit one, about safe and inclusive learning, and during our presentations, our WhatsApp classes, and our LLL presentation, I have changed my perception about pregnant girls not being included in schools.” —School leader from Bombali*

For the 14 school leaders who reported having pregnant and/or parent learners in their schools, support for these girls includes speaking with their families, encouraging them to come to school, allowing them to bring their children to class and breastfeed at school, and ensuring they are not bullied or teased by other students.

LLLs confirmed that before the SLP, students who became pregnant typically ended their schooling. However, they noted that the SLP encourages school leaders to keep these girls in school, and now pregnant students are encouraged to attend class and do not have to deal with being provoked or driven out by their classmates. One LLL gave an example that their school leaders sensitised students to the inclusion of pregnant learners, emphasising the negative effect of teasing peers.

There was a similar change in **school leader attitudes toward students with disabilities**. School leaders said these students were not engaged fully in class prior to the SLP. They spoke about encouraging students with special needs to become involved in classroom discussions and engaged the parents of these students, emphasising the importance of treating them as they would other children.

Another important finding is the extent to which **school leaders provide support beyond their formal responsibilities**, often using their personal resources to ensure that vulnerable learners stay in school. At one

school with visually impaired students, the school leader said that “sometimes they even come to my office, [and say] ‘Principal, today I don’t have money. We need lunch whatsoever.’ Sometime, when I call the bus driver, he will say, ‘No. We don’t have fuel.’ So I have to use my portion of money.”

### 1.3 Extent of use of corporal punishment

Eighty-seven percent of all school leaders surveyed reported that there was no corporal punishment in their schools this academic year. Fourteen of the 20 school leaders interviewed reported that corporal punishment is no longer allowed in their school. The other six school leaders who said corporal punishment is still used in their schools said it has been minimised. There was no geographic difference in the reported use of corporal punishment. It is important to note that some school leader definitions of corporal punishment did not align exactly with what is put forward in the SLP. For example, most school leaders agree that corporal punishment includes using a cane on students but some would not include students kneeling on the floor. However, enumerators clarified the definition with school leaders during interviews.

LLs reported that school leaders have largely stopped the use of canes for flogging. One mentioned that he goes to the schools unannounced and does not find them using flogging, which is a change he attributed to the programme, especially since those school leaders who have not gone through the programme are still using canes.

School leaders reported that they received resistance from some of their teachers when asked to stop corporal punishment. This was particularly difficult for female school leaders and school leaders with teachers who had been in the school longer than them.

*“...although we find it very difficult for us to stop that, especially as a female, for you to challenge a male teacher in a school is not easy. But we also we stand firm to see that Leh Wi Lan effort will not go in vain.” —School leader from Bombali*

Another female school leader also stated that her teachers made threats to leave the school when she informed them that there would be no corporal punishment. School leaders pointed to the teacher code of conduct and policy on corporal punishment to encourage these teachers to get on board. One school leader mentioned that the SQAQO also re-enforced that there should be no corporal punishment.

**The teachers interviewed understood that national policy prohibits corporal punishment and confirmed that their school leaders had communicated this expectation. However, some teachers reported still using corporal punishment on their students or struggling to identify alternative options for behaviour management.** Eighty percent of the 60 teachers surveyed said they had not used corporal punishment in the past year. Of the 12 teachers who reported using corporal punishment, most said they had done so rarely: five reported using it “once or twice” and six “a few times,” with only one reporting frequent use. This is consistent with school leaders’ description of a practice that, where it persists, has been “minimised” rather than eliminated. One teacher provided the following account:

*“For example, before this academic year started in September, we discussed things we wanted to change and things we wanted to add. Personally, I wanted to bring back stronger discipline because I felt students were no longer respecting teachers. Before, students feared punishment. But [the school leader] said we should not bring back flogging in the school. She does not support beating students. So that was part of the changes we discussed.” —Teacher from Bo*

Many teachers interviewed acknowledged the value of alternative discipline strategies when it comes to the safety of students. **Teachers at two schools said that the lack of corporeal punishment has led to more students coming to school,** as they used to stay away for fear of being hit. Teachers also attribute school safety to strict supervision of students by teachers, as well as clear rules and disciplinary procedures.

### 1.4 Use of alternative behaviour management strategies

School leaders interviewed describe a range of alternative and positive discipline strategies to corporal punishment that they learned in the programme, with most emphasising that pupils should remain engaged in learning. Despite training at different times, school leaders across cohorts described many of the same alternatives to corporal punishment, which can be clustered into four broad categories, as seen in Table 3.

Table 3: Alternative behaviour management strategies reported by school leaders

| Category               | Examples                                                                                                   | Number of times mentioned |
|------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Maintain learning      | Standing in class, extra academic work, engaging with other students                                       | 14                        |
| Restorative approaches | Apologising, reconciliation (including hugging), counselling/coaching, involving parents and the community | 10                        |
| Restricting privileges | Missing lunch with peers, suspension                                                                       | 7                         |
| Responsibility tasks   | Cleaning, fetching water, tending the school garden                                                        | 6                         |

A notable feature across the interviews was the emphasis on keeping students in the classroom so they continued learning, rather than excluding them. More than half of the school leaders mentioned alternative methods intended to correct negative behaviour while maintaining access to instruction. Several school leaders stated that removing children from lessons was counterproductive:

*“We will not ask you to go outside so that you will miss the class. Stand up and listen... then we ask you to sit down.” —School leader from Bo*

Just two school leaders reported the use of suspension, which was described as a last resort used only after other approaches – including counselling and involving parents or community members – had failed.

Interviews with **teachers emphasised the collaborative approach school leaders take to behavioural management, noting that they engage families directly to address underlying issues and reinforce the school's expectations.** This points to an approach in which parental engagement is seen as an important part of behaviour management, not simply a last resort.

*“Whenever a student repeatedly misbehaves or disciplinary concerns arise, we invite the parents to the school. [The school leader] meets with them and explains the student's behaviour and the concerns raised by teachers. Together, we discuss practical ways that parents can help improve the child's behaviour both at home and at school. The aim is to ensure that parents are actively involved in supporting their children's development.” —Teacher from Bo*

**Teachers tended to use similar approaches to behaviour management as school leaders.** The survey with teachers showed that male teachers were more likely than female teachers to report a wider range of strategies. Table 4 summarises the behaviour management strategies used by female and male teachers.

Table 4. Alternative behaviour management strategies, by gender of teacher (n=60; multiple responses allowed)

| Method                              | Female (n=17) | Male (n=43) |
|-------------------------------------|---------------|-------------|
| Cleaning / picking up trash         | 6 (35.3%)     | 18 (41.9%)  |
| Standing / kneeling / raising hands | 6 (35.3%)     | 19 (44.2%)  |

|                              |           |            |
|------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Repeated writing             | 5 (29.4%) | 2 (4.7%)   |
| Advise                       | 3 (17.6%) | 3 (7.0%)   |
| Involving parents            | 2 (11.8%) | 10 (23.3%) |
| Suspension                   | 1 (5.9%)  | 5 (11.6%)  |
| Extra assignments            | 0 (0%)    | 6 (14.0%)  |
| Financial support to student | 0 (0%)    | 1 (2.3%)   |

## 2. A focus on direct instructional leadership changes teaching approaches, provides better teacher support and builds stronger relationships among staff and with students

The second module of the SLP focuses on specific practices to improve teaching and learning in schools. This study focused on a few key factors of interest to the government and programme, including:

- **Teacher lesson observation:** To understand the frequency of lesson observations by school leaders, what methods they use to observe, and whether they provide feedback to teachers.
- **Teacher professional development:** To capture what activities school leaders report around teacher professional development, and whether teachers find it useful and change their teaching as a result.
- **Support for teachers:** To illustrate the types of support school leaders provide to teachers and how frequently teachers ask their school leaders for help and on what issues.

### Key messages

- Almost all school leaders reported observing lessons in the past academic year, though the frequency varies from once a year to once a week. Some share observation responsibilities with their school leadership team (Vice Principals, HODs).
- Challenges to school leaders observing lessons included teacher absenteeism and workload; in addition, one female leader noted that her male colleagues were resistant to her observing them at first.
- LLLs suggested that school leaders do lesson observations with a pedagogical focus more frequently and give feedback in a more professional manner than before the programme.
- 98.2% of teachers said they received feedback after being observed; 100% of those said the feedback was helpful; and 98.2% said the feedback led them to change their teaching practice.
- Five themes emerged when teachers were asked about the impact of lesson observations: improved lesson preparation, more learner-centred teaching; improved teaching in areas of weakness; greater inclusion and responsiveness to learner needs; and improved classroom management and teacher-student relationship.
- Most school leaders reported that they provided some form of professional development for teachers in the past academic year, which was confirmed by LLL and teacher responses.
- The frequency of training varied, and school leaders identified insufficient funding to incentivise teachers to attend as the primary challenge to providing professional development.
- Topics covered in professional development included student-teacher relationships and behaviour management (the use of corporal punishment and the teacher code of conduct); teaching and learning (student assessment, new teacher methodologies, teaching time, teaching methods and learning processes, engaging pedagogies, designing lessons, student engagement and issues that come up during lesson observations); inclusion (student absenteeism, students with disabilities); and administrative issues (registers).
- According to teachers, the most common approach to professional development was the use of Teacher Learning Circles (TLCs).

- Teachers consistently reported that these professional activities have changed the way they teach and interact with students.
- The dominant pattern is that school leader support is frequent and part of everyday school sessions.
- Teachers consistently reported that they seek support from school leaders whenever they encounter classroom difficulties and feel comfortable doing so.
- Teachers said that school leaders facilitate collaborative learning among teachers, help them clarify pedagogical topics, and improve their confidence and teaching.

## 2.1 Observing teaching in classrooms

The survey of all programme participants showed that almost all school leaders report having observed teacher lessons and provided feedback at least once this academic year, with 45% reporting 'many times', 38% 'a few times' and 8.2% 'one time'. **All school leaders interviewed reported having observed lessons at least once this academic year.** Some school leaders reported undertaking lesson observations as frequently as once or twice a week. **A few school leaders noted that they either delegate or share lesson observation responsibilities with other leaders in their school or HODs.**

Most school leaders said they sit at the back of the class, observing the teacher and taking notes on what they are doing well and where they need to improve. They do not interrupt the lesson unless the teacher makes a mistake that needs correction immediately (such as a content or spelling error). A few reported that they use the tablets and Tangerine programme (provided by the first phase of Leh Wi Lan) to capture lesson observation information.

*"In fact, I have a whole tablet, which was accorded to me by Leh Wi Lan, and this tablet, there is a system that is inserted in it, which is called Tangerine, that we used at least to observe our teachers. I always use that tablet, and I also have my handouts to take down what some of the things that I used to at least looking out for whilst the teacher is teaching." —School leader in Bombali*

After the lesson, the school leader discusses areas where the teacher could improve. A few school leaders noted that they follow up on these areas during future observations to see if the teacher had improved. One school leader provided feedback in writing to the teacher to help them remember what the teacher was working on so they could follow up during the next observation. One school leader noted that if teachers are doing well, they stop monitoring them and focus classroom supervision on those who are not improving.

*"Like, when I've observed you, then where I see there are lapses I will jot them down. And before I go to your weaknesses, I go to your strengths first. I call on you where you did very well. I appraise you. Then I now point out where you need improvement. We'll sit together, we'll discuss it. I said this is what he was supposed to do, he did this one, but this time, do this one better. And next time, when we come, we will start from what we discussed the last time. Let me see if there were improvement before we go to another." —School leader from Bo*

Issues that school leaders focus on while observing teacher lessons are focused on two key areas:

- **Pedagogical elements** such as how the teacher introduces a lesson and describes the goal of the content, the level and type of student engagement in the material, the use of child-centred approaches, how they ask questions, whether they attempt to engage all students, how they group students, and how they identify and correct student mistakes
- **Classroom management and relationships** including use of positive and negative language with students, whether the teacher comes to class on time, how to enter the classroom, how they manage their teaching time, and what type of relationships the teacher has with the students

One school leader noted that in addition to observing lessons, they will ask students about a teacher's approach and receive feedback from the students' perspective. Challenges reported by school leaders to observing lessons included teacher absenteeism and workload; in addition, one female leader noted that her male colleagues were resistant to her observing them at first. She explained:

*"[A]t first, I got series of challenges... especially for the male teachers, for a female to be a head of department, and you have men down there, they are not happy at all. But I also stand firm to see that they do the correct thing. And time to time, they try to understand the system, and now we are doing well." —Teacher from Bombali*

**LLTs reported that school leaders do lesson observations with a pedagogical focus more frequently than before the programme.** They emphasised that through observations, school leaders have gotten to know their teachers better, and teachers have a better understanding of why observation is important. They also noted that school leaders used to give teachers negative feedback in front of their colleagues; however, **since the programme, they provide feedback in a more professional manner that is well received by teachers.**

Interviews with teachers confirmed that school leaders do observe lessons using the approaches described. Teachers interviewed in 19 of the 20 schools explicitly stated that their school leaders observe lessons and provide feedback in private and guidance to improve their teaching. This is corroborated by the teacher survey, in which **98.2% of teachers said they received feedback after being observed; of those who answered yes, 100% said the feedback was helpful and 98.2% said the feedback led them to change their practice.** Five themes emerged when teachers were asked about the impact of lesson observations.

**Improved lesson preparation:** Teachers consistently reported preparing lesson notes more carefully, writing clearer learning objectives, and feeling better prepared to enter the classroom. Several said that regular monitoring encouraged them to prepare because they knew their notes would be reviewed.

*"Another important benefit of preparing lesson notes is that they ensure continuity of learning. If a teacher is unexpectedly absent because of illness or another emergency, another teacher can use the prepared lesson notes to continue teaching the class. This prevents students from missing lessons and helps maintain consistent curriculum coverage." —Teacher from Bombali*

*"The observations have led to significant improvements in my teaching. Preparing lesson notes in advance has encouraged me to study the lesson more thoroughly before entering the classroom. As a result, I feel more confident during lessons and am better prepared to answer students' questions." —Teacher from Bombali*

**More learner-centred teaching:** Teachers described moving away from teacher-centred methods, such as dictating notes, to approaches that actively involve students through questioning, discussion, and problem-solving. They mentioned that they now focus on checking whether all students understand before moving on to a new topic.

*"Previously, teachers mainly focused on explaining concepts to students directly. Now, we focus more on student-centred approaches. For example, instead of spending the entire lesson explaining a topic ourselves, we create opportunities for students to discuss ideas, solve problems, and participate in activities." —Teacher from Bo*

*"The feedback encouraged me to check students' understanding throughout the lesson rather than assuming they had understood the content. Instead of asking only general questions to the whole class, I now ask individual students to explain concepts before moving on. If students are unable to answer correctly, I revisit the topic before continuing. This has made*

*my lessons more interactive and has improved students' understanding.” —Teacher from Bombali*

**Improved teaching:** Teachers said the feedback after lesson observations helped them identify mistakes they would not otherwise have recognised and improved their teaching methods.

*“Most of the time, as teachers, we struggle because we entered the teaching profession immediately after completing WASSCE [West African Senior Secondary Certificate Examination], but from these observations of the principal, we can now take care of the class. Whenever he observes me teaching and notices mistakes, he brings them to my attention.” —Teacher from Bombali*

**Greater inclusion and responsiveness to learner needs:** Teachers described becoming more attentive to students with disabilities, slower learners, and those who need additional support.

*“This student was hearing impaired, and though I am an inclusion champion at the time, I did not understand the system. So I was teaching, but because of her condition, she could not hear me. And then I called her a fool, not knowing that she could not hear me. But later [the school leader] called me and explained that child has a disability. She cannot hear.” After that day, I went back to the student and apologised.” —Teacher from Bo*

**Improved classroom management and teacher-student relationships:** Several teachers reported changing how they interact with students based on school leader feedback. This includes reducing shouting, not asking students out of class, greeting students, and using positive behaviour management strategies. Some explained that school leaders encouraged them to replace punitive responses with constructive alternatives that keep students engaged in learning.

*“Another important lesson we learned is the importance of building positive relationships with students. Teachers should not only enter the classroom and teach; they should also interact with students respectfully.” —Teacher from Bo*

## 2.2 Providing teacher professional development

The survey of all school leaders showed that 84% report having provided professional development for teachers this academic year, and almost all school leaders interviewed reported the same (19). The one programme participant who was not able to provide professional development was not in a Principal or Vice Principal position, and noted that this was outside the scope of their role and authority. Most school leaders interviewed reported having one to two training sessions with teachers per term. Only one school leader reported having provided only one training this year.

Male school leaders reported providing professional development more frequently than female school leaders: approximately 37% of men reported doing so many times, compared with 22% of women, while women were more likely than men to report never providing professional development (15% vs. 5%).

Teacher-reported frequency is approximately consistent with this – among the teachers who reported receiving training, 37.7% reported training took place more than twice this year, 49.1% reported a couple of times, and 13.2% reported only once (two schools). School leaders said that training tended to take place during TLCs, staff meetings, or lunch hour. The frequency that school leaders reported holding TLCs ranged from twice per term to once per month, with one school leader reporting that they held them once a week. The primary challenge to providing professional development highlighted by school leaders was sufficient finances to incentivise teachers. At least three school leaders mentioned that teachers expect some form of refreshment or meal for attending professional development.

LLTs reported that school leaders provide professional development, including a focus on pedagogy and inclusion, through one-on-one meetings, TLCs, staff meetings, feedback after lesson observation and checking lesson plans. According to teachers, the most common approach was the use of TLCs, although they also described staff meetings, workshops, seminars, and school-based training sessions. In many schools, these sessions involved all teaching staff, together with the principal and HODs, and was compulsory. Several teachers explained that school leaders who attended external workshops or the SLP shared what they learned with the rest of the staff:

*“The School Leadership Programme helped us understand that teaching is not only about delivering information; it is also about ensuring that every learner benefit from the lesson.” — Teacher from Bo*

The training frequency reported by teachers varied across schools, from fortnightly, twice a term, once per term, twice a year, or whenever a need was identified. Teachers at the two schools reporting that no formal professional development had been done, provided the following explanations: at one school, that this type of training was done primarily through teacher classroom observation and feedback; and at the other, that the principal had just stepped into post.

**School leaders reported that professional development topics covered student-teacher relationships and behaviour management** (the use of corporal punishment and the teacher code of conduct); **teaching and learning** (student assessment, new teacher methodologies, teaching time, teaching methods and learning processes, engaging pedagogies, designing lessons, student engagement and issues that come up during lesson observations); **inclusion** (student absenteeism, students with disabilities); and **administrative issues** (registers).

*“And then also the inclusion, how to promote inclusion in the school because we have learned about this radical inclusion policy. We used to tell them, explain to them the teacher's code of conduct, the reporting mechanism, and then if there is any case like SGBV [sexual and gender-based violence], how we should go about it, the reporting mechanism. All these things we used to tell them, sensitise them. And then more, how to encourage, involve the marginalised learners, learners [with] disadvantage. How we can involve them fully into the learning process? For example, parent learners, pregnant learners, sometimes, when you're teaching, they will feel bad. They will walk out of the class. How will you encourage this kind of learner?” —School leader from Bo*

**Teacher responses on professional development topics broadly matched school leaders, but they focused primarily on teaching** (lesson planning, schemes of work, child-centred teaching approaches, classroom management, assessment, record-keeping); and **safety and inclusion** (school safety, the Teacher Code of Conduct, corporal punishment, gender-based violence and physical violence, inclusive education, and alternatives to corporal punishment).

**Teachers also reported learning specific instructional approaches**, including group work and strategies to increase pupil participation. Teachers can share their classroom challenges during these sessions and get guidance on better instructional approaches and professional practices.

*“One of the most valuable lessons has been recognizing that every learner deserves equal attention. Previously, there was often a tendency for experienced teachers to be assigned to the highest-performing classes. However, I now deliberately choose to teach classes with lower-performing students because I believe every learner deserves quality instruction.” — Teacher from Bo*

**Teachers consistently reported that these professional activities have changed the way they teach and interact with students.** One teacher mentioned that the training on gender-based violence has changed the way they interact with female learners; they no longer hold or touch them inappropriately. Many mentioned moving

from teacher-centred to more interactive methods. Others stated they have improved their lesson planning and classroom management.

*"Yes. Before, I was hesitant and lacked confidence when speaking in front of students or explaining concepts to them. Now, particularly through our sessions with the principal, it's better." —Teacher from Bombali*

They described the sessions as opportunities to learn from colleagues, because experienced teachers share subject expertise and newer teachers receive guidance and mentoring. They also stated that it has improved the performance of students who were initially considered weak. In some cases, these students achieve equal to better results in national examinations than students from higher-performing classes.

When asked whether teachers provide any feedback after professional development or trainings, a few school leaders noted that teachers do give them feedback. **At least two school leaders noted that, following training on corporal punishment, some teachers resisted abandoning the practice because they thought it was necessary for students to behave correctly.**

*"Teachers ... some are saying if they remove corporal punishment, they remove the cane, we will not handle the pupils well. The pupils will not be disciplined, the pupils will not learn. But then there are so many teachers that have bought the idea and the particular condition that's also pupils are not to be beaten like that. They will learn because if the cane is there, there will be some amount of reservation in the pupil to answer questions because they'll be afraid. But if there is no cane, no corporal punishment, then the pupils feel free to speak up, to speak out, they are encouraged to say, they will learn. Learning will increase because they are feeling free and they will do. So that's why we deliberated on it." —School leader from Bombali*

**Two school leaders mentioned that teachers noted positive changes to the way they assess students after training on summative and formative assessments.** Another school leader noted that even if most teachers don't provide direct feedback, he observes their lessons, checks their lesson notes, and sees changes to the teachers' practices and approaches.

*"A lot of them will not give feedback, but we go through monitoring to measure and to ascertain whether there are changes that is occurring within what we are telling them. So following up is where we get our feedback." —School leader from Bo*

### 2.3 General support for teachers

**Almost all school leaders interviewed (17) reported spending time supporting teachers, and all indicated that teachers regularly ask for help when they encounter challenges.** In two of the 14 schools where the school leaders were the Principals, they stated that teachers first go to the HOD for support, which only gets escalated to them if it cannot be resolved by the HOD.

**The dominant pattern is that school leader support is frequent and part of everyday school sessions. However, not all school leaders were able to provide support as frequently.** One principal indicated that they only stepped in when teachers requested assistance or when problems were identified during monitoring. Another respondent said that limited time prevented them from providing as much support as they would like. They explained that teaching responsibilities restricted opportunities to coach colleagues:

*"I should have done more, but because we need to cover our classes... I do not have too much time to talk to my teachers." —School leader from Bombali*

**Teachers consistently reported that they sought support from school leaders whenever they encountered classroom difficulties,** such as lesson preparation, subject content, teaching methods, classroom management

or access to teaching and learning materials. Teachers stated they feel comfortable asking school leaders for help whenever they encounter challenges in their teaching.

*“Sir, we are struggling to understand this concept. Can you help us explain it in a simpler way?” He then helps us break the topic down so that we can understand it better and explain it effectively to our students.” —Teacher from Bo*

In one school, the teachers stated that because of the administrative duties of the school leader, who is the principal, they receive limited support from them and instead go to the Vice Principal when they need help. Some teachers mentioned they seek support from both the school leader and their HOD.

**In some schools, teachers reported that school leaders facilitated collaborative learning among staff** by encouraging them to share expertise and work together, especially when one teacher had greater knowledge of a particular topic. **Almost all teachers (96.6%) reported having collaborated with another teacher in their school this year.** Most teachers also reported that their school leader actively encourages this: 76.7% said their school leader encourages collaboration “all the time,” 21.7% said “sometimes,” and only 1.7% said “never.” Male teachers were somewhat more likely than female teachers to report “all the time” encouragement (79.1% vs. 70.6%).

**Several teachers explained that school leaders support them, without undermining their confidence in front of students,** but instead provide guidance privately or demonstrate lessons that teachers can observe and later apply in their own classrooms. This was confirmed by a school leader who reported:

*“There was a teacher who was struggling how to teach a particular concept on Language Arts, question tags... So during one Teacher Learning Circle, that particular topic was taught by my very self.” —School leader from Bo*

**Many teachers said that after discussing difficult topics with the school leaders, they were able to return to the classrooms with a clearer understanding of the content and greater confidence in their teaching.**

*“What I appreciate most is that they provide this support in a way that does not undermine my confidence in front of students. Sometimes they demonstrate a lesson while I observe, allowing me to learn new teaching techniques that I can apply in future lessons.” —Teacher from Bombali*

**Others explained that feedback on lesson preparation, teaching methods, and classroom practice helped them to improve the quality of their instruction over time.**

*“Sometimes, after this support, students are able to achieve very good results because the teacher has gained a clearer understanding of the topic.” —Teacher from Bo*

### **3. Clear planning coupled with deep collaboration promotes better problem solving for school improvement**

The third toolkit of the SLP focuses on specific practices for school improvement. This study focused on the following practices, including:

- **Development of a School Improvement Plan (SIP):** To understand the extent of SIP use, including for school leaders who had already completed the SLP.
- **Use of school-level data:** To capture what types of data are used by school leaders and for what purposes.
- **Forms of collaboration:** To illustrate the extent and types of collaboration that school leaders use for school improvement and problem solving.

### Key messages

- Most school leaders reported developing a SIP the past academic year, with similar responses from teachers and LLLs.
- SIPs were predominately developed with teachers and other school stakeholders, aside from a few instances in which school leaders developed the SIP themselves. Some teachers reported discussing progress on the plan together with the school leader throughout the year.
- Approximately 78% of teachers knew about the goals in the SIP, which they said focused on student issues, infrastructure and facilities, teacher professional development, and administrative issues.
- One teacher reported that the SIP was used to foster collective responsibility and shared decision-making.
- School leaders most frequently reported using teacher and student attendance data and student performance data. They primarily use this data to monitor and address student and teacher attendance, for school improvement planning, continuous professional development (CPD) and TLCs, assessment, observation, and improving learning outcomes.
- While 90% of teachers said their school leader had discussed student learning or attendance data with them in the past academic year, this differed sharply by gender: 97.7% of male teachers vs. 70.6% of female teachers.
- Discussion with teachers about student data occurs during staff meetings, departmental meetings, and informal conversations.
- Teachers interviewed mentioned that they use school data as part of their day-to-day practice. Similar to school leader reports, teachers most frequently describe using student attendance and learning data.
- Over half of school leaders interviewed reported communicating with other school leaders for support with problems and challenges in their schools. Almost all noted that this was done through WhatsApp groups, some of which were started during the SLP.
- School leaders seek support from each other about issues such as student discipline and learning, leadership styles, and teacher management.
- Teachers at most schools visited (16) reported that their school leaders regularly collaborate with them. This takes a variety of forms, including support for problem solving between teachers and with students; encouraging teacher collaboration; creating a positive work environment; and supporting teachers with both professional and personal challenges.
- One example from teachers showed how leadership training for different roles at the school level can support potentially overloaded school leaders and promote a more distributed leadership model.

### 3.1 Development of a School Improvement Plan (SIP)

**The majority of school leaders interviewed (18) reported having created a School Improvement Plan (SIP) this academic year.** Of the two who did not, one school leader was using a SIP from the previous year, as they explained that there were many items on the previous one not accomplished. The other school leader was in Cohort 3 and noted that the SIP they developed as part of the school leadership programme is supposed to serve for the next academic year (2026/27).

For school leaders that did have a SIP, most noted that **these were created with their fellow teachers and school leaders by surfacing the main challenges facing the school and developing strategies to address these.** A few school leaders said that they also worked with parents, the Community Teacher Association, and members of the BOG. One school leader mentioned that the SQAQ supervised their SIP process. Only one school leader reported that they first developed the SIP by themselves and then sought input and agreement from teachers. LLLs confirmed that previously Principals and Vice Principals tended to make the SIPs themselves, but

since the SLP they now engage including teachers and other stakeholders in the design, which means that most concerns are now fully identified and addressed.

One programme participant, a HOD, provided a detailed explanation of the SIP process:

*“He [the principal] will come down to us to ascertain how to prepare the plan as the first thing. And then after which, we try to identify problems within the school that needs to be addressed. Some people can be seating accommodation for the children. Some could be on a blackboard damage. Some could be focused on the availability of recent textbooks within the school. Some could be classroom management. So we look at all those areas... We acquire what we think is a felt need for the children. And those felt need will bring them up as a way of inclusion into the school improvement plan. And within preparing the school improvement plan, we have the objective of it and then the activity itself, who is responsible to ensure this activity is being accomplished, at what date do we think we can achieve this, and so those plans is set for the school, and it's available with the principal.” —School leader from Bo*

Teachers at 17 of the 20 schools said that their school has a yearly SIP, approximately matching school leader reports. **Across the survey, approximately 78% of teachers knew about the goals in the SIP.** When asked about the goals set out in the SIP, teachers reported a range of priorities, including **issues related to students** such as academic achievement, discipline, inclusion, absenteeism, grade promotion, and performance in specific content areas (such as science and English language). Many teachers reported that **school infrastructure and facilities** were a main priority in the SIP. Other priorities included **teacher professional development and administrative issues**, such as the academic calendar.

**A couple of teachers reported that they knew about the SIP, but they were not involved in developing it.** However, most teachers were included in the development of the SIP. Some were involved directly from the beginning while others were informed about the plan after the school leaders had created it.

*“We refer to it as the SIP, and it was developed through discussions among the school leadership and teachers. The school leadership does not develop the plan alone. Teachers are involved because they understand the challenges and needs within their different departments. For example, teachers identify the resources and support needed to improve their departments.” —Teacher from Bo*

*“The School Improvement Plan is generally developed through the school's leadership structure. Initially, the leadership team prepares the plan, after which it is shared with teachers for implementation. Although teachers may not participate in every stage of its development, we are informed about the activities we are expected to carry out and our respective responsibilities.” —Teacher from Bo*

When discussing what drives development of the SIP, teachers at one school in Bo related that the SIP is developed **based on their school subsidy and the funds they receive for the year**. However, a teacher at another school described a more **reflective process of development**:

*“We reflect on questions such as: What have we achieved? What challenges are affecting teaching and learning? What areas need more attention? What priorities should we focus on in the next academic year? After these discussions, we identify the most important areas and include them in the improvement plan.” —Teacher from Bo*

In several schools, teachers felt that **the SIP was used to foster collective responsibility and shared decision-making**. Teachers reported discussing progress on the plan together with the school leader throughout the year as problems arose or through scheduled termly meetings. A couple noted that they conduct an end-of-year review of the SIP to determine priorities for the next academic year.

*"The plan is not something that is created and forgotten. We continue discussing progress and challenges throughout the year. During meetings, we review what has been achieved and what still needs attention. This allows us to adjust our strategies when necessary... The purpose of the plan is not just to have a document. It is a working tool that guides the school's improvement efforts. We regularly reflect on our progress and identify areas where additional action is needed." —Teacher from Bo*

### 3.2 Use of school-level data

From the survey with all programme participants, school leaders reported using data most frequently **to monitor and address student and teacher attendance and absenteeism** (46%). Data were also commonly used for **monitoring and school improvement planning** (16%), **CPD and teacher learning circles** (15%), **assessment, observation, and improving learning outcomes** (15%), while uses for parent engagement, enrolment, and ensuring professional standards were mentioned less often.

When asked which data they used most often in their schools, the 20 school leaders interviewed most frequently reported using **teacher attendance data** (13 school leaders), **student attendance data** (19) and **student performance data** (9). Two school leaders mentioned using tablets from Leh Wi Lan to collect data on school performance (such as student attendance) for MBSSEE and Leh Wi Lan.

In terms of how this data is used, school leaders mentioned using **student attendance data to track absenteeism**. A few school leaders noted that they followed up with parents and guardians if the attendance data showed that students were frequently absent.

A few school leaders noted **using attendance data to identify students who had dropped out or to track participation of marginalised learners** (those who are pregnant or have a disability). The school leaders noted that if the students were absent, they followed up with their parents to ensure they would come to school. This often involves addressing issues like bullying from peers.

*"Well, we use the data to identify problems that are going on in the classroom. Like, for instance, if we know that marginalised pupils, those that are having hearing impaired or sight issues, we use that data to track them whether they are coming frequently or they are not coming. If they are not coming, we know that there must be some problems either with the home or in the school. So we consult the teachers and put together and see what actions to take." —School leader from Bombali*

Another school leader mentioned that because of the school leadership programme, they are interested in setting up a record to identify and keep track of marginalised students. Finally, one school leader mentioned using **student enrolment and attendance data to ensure the school received its subsidy**.

School leaders also discussed how they use **student learning data**. One noted that he tracks student performance each term, while another emphasised the importance of year-to-year analysis of student performance:

*"...the previous years, I know the performance of the pupils. I have it. I have the data. So I will also look at how they perform or how they are going to perform [for] this comparison. If there is some slight differences or major differences, oh, something is wrong somewhere. So I'll begin to look. Either it is me creating this problem or the teachers are not teaching as I'm expecting or the pupils are not learning. So I have to look at all of these areas... I do comparison from one year to another year, how the progress is taking place, whether progress or deterioration." —School leader from Bombali*

Another school leader explained that they **use the TLC to discuss student assessment data and strategies to address learners that are behind**.

Many school leaders reported the use of **teacher attendance data to ensure teachers were not absent**. If habitual absences were noted, school leaders talked to the teachers and sometimes their families. If the teacher continued to be absent, some school leaders take the issue to the BOG. **Two school leaders discussed teacher attendance and teaching time with their SQAQ** and developed a plan with them to address issues. Finally, one school leader reported using **teacher observation data** for teacher promotion recommendations to the BOG.

**While 90% of teachers said their school leader had discussed student learning data or attendance with them in the past academic year, this differed sharply by gender: 97.7% of male teachers vs. 70.6% of female teachers.** These discussions occur during staff meetings, departmental meetings, and informal conversations.

Teachers interviewed mentioned that they use school data as part of their day-to-day practice. Similar to school leader reports, teachers most frequently describe using student attendance and learning data.

**Student attendance data:** This is most frequently mentioned by teachers and, according to them, one of the most important data they use. It is used to monitor absenteeism, punctuality, and dropout patterns.

*“As teachers, we have a responsibility to protect students. Taking attendance helps us monitor students’ safety, and the attendance system helps the school monitor students and ensure they are safe.” —Teacher from Bo*

A teacher mentioned how the SLP has helped their school leader ensure that proper attendance and performance data are kept. They explained that previously there had been an issue with absent students having grades recorded. However, through the SLP, the school leader has ensured that results are recorded only for students who write the exams.

**Student learning data:** This includes test scores, report cards, continuous assessment results, and examination results. These help teachers keep track of any changes in academic performance, identify the different paces of learners and the subjects students struggle with and adjust their teaching accordingly to meet the needs of all students.

*“[P]erformance data helps us identify subjects where students are experiencing difficulties. Through departmental meetings, teachers discuss results, identify challenges, and develop strategies to improve student outcomes.” —Teacher from Bo*

**Enrolment data:** Including total enrolment, class sizes, gender disaggregation, and enrolment changes. Teachers use this data to track students with declining attendance or academic performance, which often leads to identification of marginalised students, such as those from poor households who stop coming to school because they cannot afford lunch. When this happens, they investigate the situation and agree on a solution to support the student.

### 3.3 Forms of collaboration

School leaders reported a range of ways they collaborate with stakeholders within and beyond their schools. This section will focus on school leader collaboration with their teachers and other school leaders.

**Thirteen school leaders interviewed reported communicating with other school leaders for support with problems and challenges in their schools. Almost all noted that this was done through WhatsApp groups, some of which were started during the SLP.** One school leader explained:

*“[W]e still have our forum since that time, 2024. So we usually compare our schools and also the problems that we encounter during this process.” —School leader from Bombali*

A few school leaders noted that they use the WhatsApp groups or call other school leaders as the need arises. Others estimated that they communicate with other school leaders about once or twice a month. One school

leader even recounted visiting another participant's school to learn about what types of alternative forms of discipline they were using.

Programme participants communicate with other school leaders about challenges and issues in their schools. One school leader detailed the types of issues they discuss, including **student discipline and learning, leadership styles, and teacher management.**

*"We collaborate with school leaders because ... when you talk about disciplinary measures, when you talk about the learning process, you have to collaborate. You know, we take different styles of leadership from our colleagues and then disciplinary measures from our colleagues, the way they do things and the way we do things. So we learn from each other. I have my neighboring schools here, consulting and principals as we did [in] the course. So many about the learning process in the school, about the challenges in the school, the problems, how to handle teachers, how to get them to do their work effectively. And so we do all of those topics in collaboration. How to instill discipline on teachers and pupils as well."—School leader from Bombali*

LLLs confirmed that school leaders leverage their connections with other school leaders nearby or through WhatsApp to tackle problems they face in their schools. They report that, before the SLP, school leaders tended to handle challenges in isolation.

As discussed in previous sections, school leaders collaborate with teachers on many different school-related issues. This section focuses on some of those that have not been covered. **Teachers at most schools visited (16) reported that their school leaders regularly collaborate with them.** This takes a variety of forms, including support for problem solving between teachers and with students; encouraging teacher collaboration; creating a positive work environment; and supporting teachers with both professional and personal challenges.

*"[The school leader] works very well with teachers. She communicates openly with staff members and maintains positive professional relationships with everyone. She is approachable, listens carefully to teachers' concerns, and treats staff with respect. Her leadership style encourages cooperation and creates a supportive working environment where teachers feel comfortable sharing their ideas and concerns."—Teacher from Bombali*

**Several teachers mentioned that school leaders support problem solving when there are issues among teachers and challenges with students.** One teacher mentioned that collaboration with the school leader has especially supported identification and support for marginalised students.

*"I would also add that collaboration has helped us identify students who require additional support. Through classroom observations and discussions, we are able to identify students who may have challenges such as difficulties with vision, learning, or participation. For example, if we notice that a student cannot see the board clearly from the back of the classroom, we can adjust their seating arrangement. These actions may seem small, but they make a significant difference in helping students participate effectively."—Teacher from Bo*

**In one illuminating example, teachers talked about how their senior teacher, who participated in the programme, was able to provide a first line of guidance and problem-solving before involving the school leadership team.** This illustrates how leadership training for different roles at the school level can support potentially overloaded school leaders and promote a more distributed leadership model.

*"To us, [the senior teacher] is more than just a school leader. He is like a parent. Whenever something happens, we first consult him before involving the principal. Many issues are resolved through his guidance without needing to escalate them further. For example, if a student is accused of theft or another disciplinary offence, [the senior teacher] encourages us*

*to invite the student's parents and discuss the matter together before considering any other action.” —Teacher from Bo*

Teachers reported that **school leaders also encourage teacher collaboration**, including observing colleagues' classes and offering feedback, joint problem-solving, and team teaching. A few teachers noted that this approach improves the quality of teaching.

*“Team teaching is another approach we use where teachers work together. Teachers from different departments, such as Science, Arts, and Commercial subjects, collaborate and share ideas. Through this approach, teachers learn from each other. When you eventually go into the classroom to teach, you are better prepared because you have received guidance from senior teachers, heads of departments, and the school leadership. This teamwork improves the quality of teaching because teachers are not working alone.” —Teacher from Bo*

Quite a few teachers mentioned that their **school leader creates a positive working environment** where mutual respect and accountability, trust and team-based working are fostered.

*“The Principal is approachable and supportive. He regularly observes teachers' work and acknowledges good performance. When a teacher performs well, he offers words of encouragement and publicly recognises their efforts. This motivates teachers to maintain high standards of professionalism. He also maintains positive relationships with staff outside formal meetings. During breaks, he interacts with teachers in a friendly and respectful manner, creating a welcoming and supportive working environment. Overall, he is a humble leader who values teamwork and mutual respect.” —Teacher from Bombali*

A couple of teachers also mentioned that **school leaders support them personally**, not just professionally, such as with illness, family issues and financial hardship.

#### 4. Challenges to delivery of the programme

This section discusses the challenges faced by school leaders and LLLs in the programme. There is a particular focus on the experience of female participants and what they identified as gender-related challenges to the programme.

##### Key messages

- School leaders described a range of challenges they faced while participating in the programme, including material resources, difficulty of finding enough time and capacity to balance programme demands with school duties, network and connectivity and technology, and resistance from teachers, pupils, or the community to the programme's behaviour-change aspects, especially ending corporal punishment.
- LLLs reported challenges in accessing remote or hard-to-reach participant schools, inefficient clustering assignments, and managing school leader coursework that was often submitted late.

Female school leaders did not identify challenges related to programme application. Most female participants reported hearing about the SLP from a colleague or through communications about the programme by Leh Wi Lan or the TSC. They emphasised that open recruitment and publicly available information on the course actively encourages women to apply. A few also noted that women are explicitly and “strongly” encouraged to apply by colleagues.

- LLLs mentioned that they believe fewer women apply to the programme because they face challenges with knowing how to type and use the computer.

- When asked whether they had any doubts or hesitations before applying, female school leaders were primarily concerned about leaving young children and balancing an already heavy load of domestic and school responsibilities against the demands of a year-long course.
- Almost all female school leaders reported that the SLP is accessible for women. Gender-specific challenges that surfaced focused on balancing domestic responsibilities with programme expectations and challenges to authority and respect from male colleagues.

#### 4.1 Challenges faced by school leaders and LLLs

School leaders described a range of challenges they faced while participating in the programme, with most respondents raising more than one. The two most common challenges — material resources and the difficulty of finding enough time and capacity to balance programme demands with school duties — were each raised by over half of school leaders interviewed (12). Connectivity and technology were also commonly reported (9), as was resistance from teachers, pupils, or the community to the programme's behaviour-change aspects, such as ending corporal punishment (8). This aligns with the broader survey with all programme participants, in which almost half of school leaders said they struggled to participate in the WhatsApp group (47%) and complete their coursework (38.1%), among other challenges (32%), including more general network and internet connectivity issues. Consequently, improved network and connectivity and a reduced course load are the two primary recommendations for changes to improve the programme.

School leaders reported that they generally have **issues with financial and material resources** (such as delayed or reduced government subsidies), which impacts what they can do as a school leader, including SLP activities. With regards to the programme specifically, school leaders highlighted that resource issues tended to focus on **problems with devices**: tablets that were supplied but later “spoiled” or were never replaced, uneven distribution of tablets and internet-enabled devices between cohorts, and a lack of electricity to keep phones and tablets charged, sometimes for days at a time. One school leader described their situation in the following way:

*“The greatest challenge is about the tablet supply to us. It is not, uh, that much, uh, effective. It's challenging because the tablets we used to observe, the teachers in classes, we used to send data about everything happening surrounding the school, but sometimes it gets spoiled. That is the most challenging, and we find it difficult to be replaced. Sometimes we'll complain to the head office.” —School leader from Bo*

LLLs emphasised that school leaders they support do face difficulties with adequate network and data, often having to travel outside of their towns to participate in calls because of bad connections. They also mentioned that the digital application process is a barrier for a lot of school leaders to applying for the SLP and suggested that school leaders be allowed to apply through hard-copy applications at TSC offices.

Another difficulty for school leaders in the programme related to workload and **finding enough time and capacity to participate fully in the programme**. This was most often framed as fitting SLP sessions, WhatsApp discussions, and night-time or weekend classes around full-time school administration and, for several female participants in particular, domestic obligations. School leaders described managing this by rescheduling programme sessions to weekends, forming WhatsApp groups with colleagues to catch up on missed content, using voice notes instead of live calls, and consciously “cutting down on commitments” to protect study time.

*“It was too demanding. You have to balance the school work. At the same time, you have to balance the school learning training activities. For instance, at all point in time, we are in school, and then they just call us that we need to go to a centre for two days training. I was already prepared to go for the training. But I had no option to deny it except I have to go there. I went there and I was part of the training for two days. While all at seasons were in the school to attend to.” —School leader from Bombali*

LLs confirmed that the workload was one of the primary challenges for the school leaders they supported. Most programme participants are Principals that have a high level of responsibilities, and LLs said that while school leaders attempt to delegate to other senior staff, many are often unwilling to take on additional responsibilities. When they do take on delegated activities, they often do them only partially. One LL emphasised that this is particularly the case with rural schools.

A few school leaders described **resistance from teachers, pupils, or the wider community to the behaviour-change elements the programme** — above all, replacing corporal punishment with alternative discipline. One school leader framed this as follows:

*“[M]y biggest challenge here is how the African child who thinks the rod is the only way that can be used for him or her to be disciplined. So, change that mentality of saying, we don’t want to use the rod on you but rather, let us use our alternative means is a challenge in our schools. But we mentor them.” -School leader from Bombali*

The LLs are a critical component of the SLP delivery and support for school leaders. As one of the key stakeholders in the delivery of the programme, it is important to understand the challenges they face. These focused on logistical issues and management of school leader coursework.

One major challenge echoed by several LLs is **difficulties accessing participant schools**, as well as school leaders experiencing problems meeting LLs for assessment. This was due to limited transport in river line communities (such as Bonthe Island) and the poor quality of the road network, particularly during the rainy season. Another logistical **issue was the clustering assignments of schools**, which LLs said were not always done efficiently. Two LLs gave examples in which multiple school leader participants from the same school were assigned to different LLs.

**Managing school leader coursework** was the other major challenge surfaced by LLs. This included ensuring school leaders cooperated and brought enough data to participate in the WhatsApp discussions and calls. Given their heavy workload, school leaders often did not submit tasks on time, even when LLs followed up multiple times. Some LLs emphasised that there is no accountability or repercussions when school leaders do not submit on time, except that they will not graduate from the programme. Given that the programme is not required to hold a school leader position, there is not a strong incentive for school leaders to complete tasks in a timely matter. This adds to LL workloads, as they may have many backed up submissions to assess and give feedback on at the same time. For this reason, one LL recommended making the SLP mandatory for all school leaders.

#### 4.2 Challenges to female participation in the programme

##### Recruitment

One of the initial challenges faced by the programme was recruitment of female school leaders. Women represent less than 14% of all teachers at secondary level in Sierra Leone.<sup>2</sup> Given the government’s goals of promoting women in school leadership and the Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment Act (2022) requiring 30% female representation in government agencies, the programme aimed to have approximately 30% female participants.

When female participants were asked about how they learned about the SLP, the **most commonly reported method was hearing about it from a colleague**. Four of the 8 female school leaders interviewed said they learned about the programme from someone they worked alongside, though this took different forms. For example, one attended a workshop in place of an ill colleague and was later personally encouraged to apply by the facilitator. Another school leader learned about it directly from her principal, who had participated in an earlier cohort and saw her as a strong candidate. The remaining accounts were linked to **communications about the**

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<sup>2</sup> World Bank Gender Data Portal. Percent of female teachers at secondary level. Data from 2024.  
<https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/indicator/se-sec-tchr-fe-zs>

**programme by Leh Wi Lan or the TSC.** One described a Leh Wi Lan representative proactively visiting her school with applications after noticing that no one there had applied. Another said she learned about the programme directly from the TSC, which informed her of the opportunity and encouraged her to apply:

*“Okay, before I entered into it, yes, [I heard about it] from TSC, teaching service commission, they told me about the school leadership programme and they even encouraged me to join, and I never regretted it.” —School leader from Bombali*

## Application

This study asked specific questions about the experience of female participants to better understand the specific challenges they face to applying for and participating in the SLP.

**When asked about accessibility of the application process for women, all but one of the teachers interviewed described the SLP application process as accessible to women, and no one characterised it as inaccessible outright.** Reasons given for its accessibility included straightforward eligibility requirements; public recruitment and information about the programme; interview panels perceived as fair and unbiased; active encouragement from colleagues, programme coordinators and district staff to recruit women; and the sense that a meaningful share of each cohort was female.

*“Yes. It's accessible for women because women can go. They are free to go and because they are also encouraged to go. In fact, they are strongly encouraged. That was the word I had. It's accessible.” —School leader from Bombali*

**Respondents emphasised that open recruitment and publicly available information on the course actively encourages women to apply. A few also noted that women are explicitly and “strongly” encouraged to apply by colleagues,** including male colleagues who have completed the course. Several school leaders also recalled specific personal experiences of feeling supported or “protected” during their own interviews, despite initial nerves about being challenged by panel members.

Relatedly, another school leader, while also affirming that the process was accessible — even more so to women than men, in her view, given women's caretaking and counselling strengths — raised a concern about how candidates are selected at the school level. If Principals are left to nominate people informally, they may favor family or friends over more capable staff, creating a bias and leaving others without a fair chance.

**When asked whether they had any doubts or hesitations about the programme before applying, five female school leaders interviewed indicated that they did.** These school leaders were primarily concerned about leaving young children and balancing an already heavy load of domestic and school responsibilities against the demands of a year-long course. Two of the five also pointed specifically to time constraints, questioning whether they could reconcile lectures and coursework with running a large school (alongside their obligations at home).

One school leader recalling her initial **hesitation over family responsibilities**, said:

*“Of course. The first time I attended the programme and they tell us what we are what we're supposed to do, then I want to take a step back because thinking that I have family commitment, I have my children, I don't have enough time for me to do this kind of programme again. But I said, no, the devil is a liar, let me go and try. And indeed, when I go there, there is a great improvement now for me.” —School leader from Bombali*

One respondent described **initial fears that the course would require payment** once she began attending, but when that turned out to not be the case, she had an increased sense of safety and confidence that led her to encourage other women to enrol.

LLLS reported that some women believe that the programme is primarily for men, and that there is a **cultural bias** women have when considering participating. One LLL also mentioned that in Falaba, few women applied because they faced **challenges with knowing how to type and use the computer**.

### Accessibility of the programme

When asked about accessibility of the programme, all eight female school leaders interviewed **affirmed that the SLP is accessible for women**. This was corroborated by the school leader survey, in which, among the women respondents, perceptions of programme accessibility were very positive: 82% described the programme as very accessible and 18% as accessible. Multiple respondents related their answers to issues of cost and logistics: the course is delivered locally with no transport expense, allowing participants to study from home, and its flexible, self-paced structure lets them fit study and assignments around their own schedules.

*“The programme, we are not paying transport to go and take this course. It's already at our doorstep. You will be sitting in your room, then you will be doing the course. So it's accessible, very much accessible.” —Teacher from Bo*

**Discussing gender-specific challenges to participating in the programme**, four out of the six female school leaders who answered the question reported challenges they attributed to gender. Several focused on **authority and respect**. One school leader, a HOD, described male colleagues initially treating her as inferior and resisting her corrections until her principal intervened to affirm her authority regardless of gender. The same respondent also described resistance, and even threats of confrontation, from male staff when she enforced a no-corporal-punishment policy, which was eventually resolved with support from school supervisors.

*“My greatest challenge was that, um, for a woman to be a head of department and you have men at the bottom is not easy. Thinking that they are superior than me, and even at times in terms of lesson notes, whenever I make correction, they will feel inferior unless I take them to my principal, and thank God my principal is not supporting them. He used to tell them that you have to accept that this is your HOD. No matter the gender, you need to accept them. So I try to manage up with that, and now they are okay with me.” —Teacher from Bombali*

One LLL confirmed that a female HOD receives resistance from her male colleagues, especially since she is younger than they are. This includes not taking on her feedback after lesson observations and bullying her when she attempts to intervene in corporal punishment. The LLL flagged that this was especially worrisome given that some of these male colleagues had themselves completed the SLP.

Another set of challenges concerned **balancing familial issues with programme obligations**. One respondent had to fight to be allowed to sit a missed test after her child was hospitalised and questioned whether a male colleague would have been treated similarly. She and another respondent both pointed to the ongoing difficulty of managing household duties alongside programme responsibilities and coursework. One respondent also described having to manage her husband's suspicion about her interactions with male colleagues from the programme. LLLs confirmed that the female school leaders they support mostly encounter challenges with domestic responsibilities keeping them from fully participating in the SLP.

## 5. Most impactful elements & practical recommendations from participants for improving the programme

### Key messages

- Responses on the school leader survey described the programme's primary value in terms of two broad areas: 1) concrete, transferable knowledge and skills, and 2) shifts in leadership mindsets and beliefs, confidence, and relationships.
- School leaders interviewed tended to focus on the programme content, and most frequently cited the toolkit on safety and inclusion as the most impactful element.

- LLLs reported that the most impactful elements of the SLP are the use of a competency-based approach that relies on practical assignment, school visits, and face-to-face engagement. LLLs also found the WhatsApp groups very important since this is where school leaders and LLLs share new ideas and learn from each other through real examples of how they address challenges in their schools.
- In-person engagement was also attributed to helping address concerns from female leaders as well as senior teachers and HODs who face challenges implementing practical assignments due to the limitations of their roles in the school.

Several recommendations were made by school leaders and LLLs for improving the programme moving forward. These included expanding the programme to the primary level and to more teachers, using grassroots approaches to recruit participants, adding more devices and network support, reducing the ratio of school leaders to LLLs, and reducing the number of weekly tasks and assignments for school leaders.

- LLLs recommended that the TSC provide additional support to female, HOD, and senior teacher participants to ensure they can fully participate in the programme.
- All LLLs agreed that in the future the programme should consider measuring learning outcomes as a way to assess the efficacy of the programme.
- To better support women in the programme, female school leaders suggested a range of strategies, including encouragement and motivation; adapting programme delivery to meet the needs of women with domestic responsibilities (such as adjusting meeting times and schedules); and creating an alumni group where women could continue to provide peer support for each other and help recruit other women to the programme.

### 5.1 Most impactful elements of the programme

Responses on the school leader survey described the programme's primary value in terms of two broad areas. The first relates to concrete, **transferable knowledge and skills**, including general knowledge and skills gained through the programme (32.8%), the development and use of SIPs (13.8%), professional development practices such as classroom observation, coaching, and monitoring (9.9%), and data-driven decision-making and the use of SMART goals (6.3%). The second reflects **shifts in leadership mindset, confidence, and relationships**. This was particularly evident in responses concerning leadership, management, and confidence (33.3%), radical inclusion and inclusive education (16.3%), collaboration, peer learning and stakeholder engagement (14%), positive discipline and school safety (8.5%), and mentorship and support from LLLs (4.4%). Respondents described becoming more confident in their leadership roles, challenging practices such as corporal punishment and discrimination, placing greater emphasis on the inclusion of marginalised pupils, and drawing on peer networks, WhatsApp groups and LLLs for advice, encouragement and shared learning. These benefits were further supported by practical enablers, including the provision of materials and resources such as tablets and toolkits (7.2%), while a smaller number of respondents highlighted programme logistics and career-related benefits, such as strengthening their CVs and gaining professional recognition (1.9%).

**When asked about the most useful part of the programme, school leaders interviewed tended to focus on the content, and most frequently cited the toolkit on safety and inclusion as the most impactful.** School leaders described this as transformative both for their own outlook and for practice in their schools: several spoke of the shift from excluding or segregating children with disabilities to building ramps and integrating all pupils into mainstream classrooms under the principle that "disability is not inability." A handful of school leaders pointed to the usefulness of content on teaching and learning and school improvement, including how to build a school improvement plan and better monitor classrooms. One leader singled out a specific skill: gaining confidence and competence using the internet and search engines on a smartphone to access educational information.

LLLs found certain elements of the SLP delivery and approach most impactful for school leaders and their schools. They mentioned **the importance of a competency-based approach that relies on practical assignments and school visits**, in which school leaders must demonstrate the application of what they have learned and LLLs provide feedback. LLLs found this approach to be a very practical, concrete, and verifiable way of understanding

what school leaders had learned and where they needed to improve. They also reported that the **school visits and face-to-face engagement** were helpful in identifying challenges, finding solutions, and supporting school leaders to improve. One LLL mentioned that often school leaders are not as open about challenges in online sessions and group calls, but the **trusting relationship built from in-person engagement allows for those challenges to be surfaced. This is especially true for concerns from female leaders as well as senior teachers and HODs who face challenges implementing practical assignments due to the limitations of their roles in the school.**

Another impactful aspect mentioned by LLLs include the **WhatsApp groups, in which school leaders and LLLs share new ideas and learn from each other through real examples of how they address challenges in their schools.**

Teachers expressed gratitude for the programme and highlighted specific benefits and impact of their school leader participating in the SLP. This included supporting teachers to focus more on students, and learning that school improvement requires collaboration across all roles working together.

*“The programme reminds us that everything we do as teachers and leaders should ultimately improve students’ experiences. Whether it is improving safety, supporting vulnerable students, or strengthening teaching methods, the goal is to ensure that students receive quality education.” —Teacher from Bo*

## 5.2 Recommendations to improve the programme moving forward

**The most frequent recommendation for the programme moving forward, as mentioned by six interviewed school leaders, was to widen access to the training.** These school leaders recommended that the programme be extended to staff beyond Principals, Vice Principals, and HODs to reach classroom teachers, arguing that teachers have the most direct daily contact with children and should not be left out of training that impacts them. A few of these participants further suggested that the course be made compulsory, or even a licensing requirement, for anyone entering the teaching profession since university training alone does not cover everything needed in the classroom. This recommendation was strongly echoed in the all-cohort survey, in which 11% of respondents suggested expanding participation and inclusion. One participant made the case for broadening access this way:

*“I want you people to make this thing as inclusive... you limited it only to school leaders or either heads of department. But it is better enough we have that space where all our teachers could also benefit from this because they are impacting the knowledge to the children. We will not be there in the classroom once they are teaching. But then if they themselves are also being given, even the CPD, those hours we do things it’s not enough.... but if we can have this kind of programme extended to all our teachers. They can benefit that one also and can do better things. That will improve learning.” —School leader from Bo*

On a related note, LLLs recommended that the **programme be expanded to primary schools and that applications and advertisements should happen at the grassroots level**, as they believe that many school leaders are not aware of the programme. They suggest the SLP should be advertised across all types of platforms.

Four school leaders called for **more resources and materials to support delivery** — in particular, better network connectivity, and devices such as tablets, phones, power banks, and solar chargers, several of which participants noted Leh Wi Lan had already been providing (outside of the SLP) and which had reduced dropout. A few also asked for lectures to be sent as audio recordings rather than relying only on written booklets, so that those who cannot attend live sessions can still keep pace.

LLLs made a few logistical suggestions to the delivery model, including **reducing the ratio of school leaders to LLLs**, from 15 to 10, and **decreasing the number of weekly tasks and assignments for school leaders** to make the programme more manageable for them. This aligns with the most frequently raised issue in the school leader survey concerning **time and workload**. Twenty-one percent of respondents describe course units, contact

hours, and assignment deadlines as too compressed alongside competing school duties. Survey respondents also suggested adjusting programme scheduling around holidays, weather, and other competing demands (9%).

LLs also recommended that the **TSC provide additional support to female, HOD, and senior teacher participants to ensure that those** who struggle with support from their colleagues are not blocked from enacting programme activities at the school level.

A number of additional recommendations emerged from the school leader survey, including **more structured peer learning and cluster-based collaboration among school leaders** (6%), **expansion of the curriculum** (6%), and **stronger formal certification or institutional recognition of the programme** (4%), including suggestions such as university accreditation or degree-equivalence. Importantly, some school leaders expressed concern that their certificates, which are not accredited, could be at risk since the programme is now being delivered by teacher training colleges. One school leader noted that this could result in Cohorts 1-3 programme certificates becoming obsolete if there is a change in leadership or policy.

All LLs agreed that, in the future, the programme should consider **measuring learning outcomes as a way to assess the efficacy of the programme**. Even if other outcomes are included to measure programme objectives and progress, they emphasised that the ultimate goal of the programme is to improve school leader support for teaching and learning.

### *5.3 Recommendations on increasing and supporting female participation in the programme*

From the survey with school leaders, female respondents most frequently suggested (29.5%) that the SLP could better support female school leaders by providing **mentorship, leadership training, empowerment, and sensitisation**. They mentioned that these would increase women's confidence, leadership skills, and readiness to take on school leadership roles. Most male school leaders (28.1%) agreed that these are the best ways the SLP could support female leaders as well. Respondents also emphasised the importance of **encouragement, motivation, incentives, and effective communication** (15.4%), alongside creating an **enabling environment that removes barriers, providing networking opportunities with more female mentors and LLs** (12.1%). Encouraging greater participation of women in the programme was mentioned by 55 school leaders, while others (41) called for additional resources and financial support, including scholarships, reduced programme costs, and priority access to training. **Many also highlighted the need to adapt programme delivery to women's family and caregiving responsibilities by adjusting meeting schedules or extending course durations for female school leaders** (6.8%).

The eight female leaders interviewed offered several similar ideas for how the SLP could better support women, including direct encouragement, financial adjustments, improved organisational and logistical structures, and community sensitisation.

The most frequently mentioned type of support was **encouragement**. Several female school leaders described how the programme had already increased their confidence and leadership voice, and they felt that actively encouraging more women to enrol in the programme — including personal follow-up from facilitators — was an important form of support. Others suggested that female officials from the TSC and MBSSE should visit schools specifically to talk to and encourage other women, given that domestic responsibilities often keep women “at the back” despite visible examples of women's leadership elsewhere. Relatedly, one school leader suggested prioritising including more women as school leaders, reasoning that women bring particular sympathy and protection to children, including from corporal punishment. During the programme, one respondent explained that the LL would personally call women who were reluctant to attend sessions, often giving them more attention than male colleagues. LLs also recommended encouraging female school leaders to apply and providing examples of women who had successfully completed the programme.

One school leader proposed that **alumni create a cohort-level WhatsApp forum and a dedicated women's organization** to sustain peer support after the program, including school-to-school visits to recruit and encourage other women, alongside a call for more advertisement or “eye openers” to reach women who are eligible.

During the programme, LLLs recommend a range of strategies to support and encourage female participants, ensuring they know they have a right to be in the programme. One LLL recommended being flexible with group sessions and making accommodations for school leaders with children. Another suggested giving female school leaders explicit responsibilities in the group to motivate them. One gave an example of how they had paired a female school leader facing challenges with a nearby principal who provided additional support. For those female school leaders who are senior teachers or HODs and face resistance from their colleagues, LLLs recommend that the TSC intervene and support them. Finally, LLLs suggested that recognising and awarding female leaders might also help motivate them to participate in the programme.

**Financial barriers and adjustments** were the next most frequently cited recommendation by female school leaders. Suggestions included reducing programme fees for women, offering discounts or scholarships specifically for female teachers, and working through past school leaders/alumni to negotiate reduced costs. These suggestions all refer to future cohort,s as no fees were charged for Cohorts 1-3.

Finally, several respondents spoke more broadly, without specifying a particular mechanism, about wanting the programme (and its partners, including Leh Wi Lan and the TSC) **to promote women in leadership as a matter of policy and practice** — ensuring qualified women are actually placed into leadership positions. One school leader, reflecting on how schools and missions allocate leadership positions, put it this way:

*“It’s a very big question and challenging question again. That’s one is really what we want Leh Wi Lan to stand for the women because there are schools that they don’t want to give chances to women at all to be school leaders. You are qualified for that position, but because you are a woman, they think that you will not lead them. They will not allow you to lead because they think that women should not be heard. That’s their own mentality. But now, only few schools or missions really give priority to women to lead their schools. So [we] really want Leh Wi Lan to be emphasizing that so long this person is qualified.” —Teacher from Bo*

## Considerations for the Future of the Programme

The SLP aimed to improve school leader knowledge, skills and practice across three primary domains: safety and inclusion; teaching and learning; and school improvement. The competency-based approach of the programme allowed this study to explore concrete changes to practice for both school leaders participating in the programme (Cohort 3) and those who had completed it (Cohorts 1 & 2). Self-reported changes and activities by school leaders were triangulated with reports from LLLs and teachers working with those school leaders. Based on these findings, this section provides a set of considerations for the TSC, MBSSE, the teacher training colleges, and other relevant stakeholders related to future scale up and sustainability of the SLP, as well as complementary system changes that could address some of the challenges raised by school leaders.

### Safety and inclusion

Findings reveal that school leaders across programme cohorts are undertaking a range of actions to ensure safety and inclusion in their schools. Collaboration across stakeholder groups came across as one of the most meaningful practices to improving support for the most marginalised. One significant practice that could lead to longer-term change is the shift in attitudes and beliefs across all study participant groups about why and how marginalised students should be included, particularly girls who are pregnant and students with disabilities.

The data also reveals this attitude shift in the use of corporal punishment, with a significant reduction in reported use. However, findings also suggest that some teacher resistance remains to eliminating it altogether, possibly due to long-held cultural beliefs about discipline or a lack of understanding of the efficacy of alternative behavioural management strategies.

- ◆ As noted in the methodology, in addition to the SLP, Leh Wi Lan ran a parallel safety and inclusion intervention in some of this study's schools. Although this study did not investigate the relationship of the two programs, given the strong findings on changes made to safety and inclusion, it is possible that school-based supports and interventions aligned with SLP content and approaches could be mutually reinforcing and create greater impact.
- ◆ The programme should position safety and inclusion as a collaborative approach and the responsibility of all school staff, in addition to identifying single roles at the school level responsible for safety or inclusion (such as Inclusion Champions).
- ◆ Ongoing professional development for teachers and school leaders should focus on the inclusion of marginalised students, corporal punishment awareness, and clear behavioural management alternatives.
- ◆ Teacher training colleges should embed an awareness of the negative effects of corporal punishment in teacher education to support a shift attitudes and beliefs before teachers begin to work in schools.

### Teaching and learning

Improvements in school leaders' direct instructional support for teachers were illustrated through reported increases in lesson observations, provision of professional development, and facilitation of teacher collaboration, which led directly to changes in teaching. However, the frequency of use of these practices varied widely. Some of the challenges to providing direct instructional support — such as school leader workload due to teacher shortages — call for long-term investment and workforce planning. Others, such as teachers' expectations of incentives to participate in professional development, require adjustments to school culture and structural changes to the teaching profession, such as tracked professional credits and clearer and more diverse career pathing.

- ◆ The TSC should consider providing guidance on the expected frequency of lesson observation and professional development, taking into consideration different school sizes and the teaching loads of school leaders.
- ◆ Vice Principals and HODs should be trained to conduct lesson observations to support school leaders in large schools or those who struggle with heavy workloads.

- ◆ SQAQO visits should include guidance to school leaders to ensure quality lesson observations and teacher professional development (including content, frequency, and follow up), In addition, quality assurance tools should align with the principles and activities expected of school leader support for teachers.
- ◆ The TSC should ensure there are incentives related to teacher professional development and establish a system of professional credits tracked through the Teacher Management Information System. This could help address teacher reluctance to engage with school leader-led professional development.

### **School improvement**

Most school leaders reported developing a SIP with teachers and other stakeholder groups. These plans tend to focus on infrastructure and facilities, although issues related to students and teacher professional development were also frequently reported goals. Some participants noted that the plans are revisited either on a termly basis or at the beginning and end of the school year. A few respondents noted that they are used to inform the plans for the next school year. However, more research is needed to understand how useful the plans are to long-term school improvement.

- ◆ SQAQOs should work with school leaders to review and monitor SIP progress throughout the year.
- ◆ BOGs mandates should include review and sign off of the SIP.

School leaders most frequently reported using teacher and student attendance and student performance data. Teachers and school leaders report using this school level data as part of their day-to-day practice, primarily to monitor and address student and teacher attendance, for school improvement planning, CPD, assessment, observation, and improving learning outcomes. Teachers and school leaders recognise the importance of formative assessment, but it is unclear how frequently they collect this data and what methods they use to do so.

- ◆ In addition to attendance data, SQAQOs should support school leaders and teachers to collect and use formative performance data on student learning. Teachers noted that they are now aware of the importance of formative assessment, but it was unclear how they collected this type of data or how often.

Collaboration came out as a strong theme across all the finding areas. This includes team-based approaches to ensure safety and inclusion, school leaders facilitating teacher collaboration, school leaders collaborating with teachers and other school stakeholders, and school leaders communicating with each other to support problem solving in their schools. Several examples illustrated how leadership training for different roles in the school can support potentially overloaded school leaders and promote a more distributed leadership model that can address critical issues such as inclusion of marginalised students. The findings did show that often non-Principal roles struggle with authority to enact programme activities and approaches, and can receive resistance from colleagues. LLLs reported that in-person school visits can help surface and address some of these issues.

- ◆ The SLP should continue to accept applicants in roles beyond Principals, such as Vice Principals, HODs, and senior teachers. However, the TSC should consider conducting awareness campaigns through District Directors and SQAQOs to ensure schools are clear that the TSC supports these individuals to conduct programme practices. This could include securing Principal buy-in and support, especially if the Principal has not completed the programme.
- ◆ The programme should continue to emphasise in-person school visits from LLLs to facilitate trusting relationships that support identification of challenges participants face and collaborative approaches to addressing them.
- ◆ The TSC should encourage school leaders to continue supporting each other after completing the programme. The TSC could also consider providing light-touch CPD through district-based groups led by 'system leaders' who have completed the programme.

## Supporting female school leaders

Most female school leaders feel that the SLP is accessible and supportive of women's participation. Primary concerns from female participants related to balancing domestic duties and professional responsibilities with the demands of a year-long course. Another gender-related issue included challenges from male colleagues to female school leader authority when they try to enact practices from the programme.

- ◆ The SLP should consider continuing open recruitment with publicly available information through a wide variety of platforms to ensure female school leaders are aware of the programme. Female participants who have completed the programme could be enlisted to help recruit other eligible women school leaders through WhatsApp groups or campaigns, for example.
- ◆ The SLP should consider allowing participants to apply through district offices where District Directors can support those who do not have the relevant digital skills.
- ◆ The SLP should continue to aim for a minimum 30% enrolment of female participants each year to ensure development of a pipeline of women school leaders at secondary level.
- ◆ Where possible, the programme should allow for flexibility an adaptation in programme deadlines and call schedules for women participants who have domestic responsibilities.

## System capacity to support school leader professional development

The SLP provides ongoing, direct support to each school leader participant through LLLs, who lead sessions on programme content, facilitate WhatsApp groups, visit participant schools, assess school leader tasks, and provide one-on-one phone calls to offer guidance and feedback. LLLs are faculty at teacher training institutes, which are taking forward provision of the programme starting with the next cohort. This illustrates an increased system capacity to support school leader professional development beyond what is currently possible with district officials and SQAOs.

- To guarantee this level of support for school leaders continues, teacher training institutes will need to secure resourcing for LLLs and ensure a feasible ratio of LLLs to school leaders is maintained as the programme expands.
- District and SQAQO engagement with school leaders should align with and support SLP competences. SQAQO tools have already been revised to reflect SLP priorities.

As noted in the findings, some school leaders expressed concern that their certificates, which are not accredited, could be at risk since the programme will be delivered by teacher training institutes moving forward that will provide a formally recognised certification.

ed certification.

- ◆ To ensure programme certificates do not become obsolete if there is a change in leadership or policy, the TSC could consider asking teacher training institutes to retroactively confirm certification to participants from Cohorts 1-3.
- ◆ The TSC will need to consider how to feasibly quality assure the school leader programme that will be offered by teacher training institutes moving forward.

## Measuring programme impact

In the next phase of implementation, the TSC and its partners would like to measure the impact of the SLP. As reported by the LLLs, the ultimate goal of the SLP is to improve teaching and learning. Analysis of student performance outcomes (such as examination results, including the Basic Education Certificate Examination, or BECE, and the West African Senior School Certificate Examination, or WASSCE) could be used to evaluate impact on learning, but it is complex to measure the indirect causal pathway from professional development for

school leaders to student learning gains. Furthermore, examinations are not necessarily a strong measure of learning and there are important outcomes from improved school leadership.

- ◆ The TSC should consider the option of a programme impact evaluation that includes learning outcomes. An impact evaluation could also collect data from students and their caregivers to ensure their perspectives on impact are captured and to triangulate self-reported changes made by school leaders and teachers.

In addition to tracking standard monitoring metrics, such as completion rates and the participation of women, the programme should consider a set of indicators that capture changes in school leader and teacher practice and school improvement.

- ◆ **Shifts in school leader competencies:** As part of the SLP, school leaders assess their own competency at the start of each module. The competencies are drawn from the TSC's Professional Standards for Teachers and School Leaders. Competencies could be assessed by an external assessor, but that would likely be very costly and ensuring the reliability and validity of the assessment could be a challenge.
- ◆ **Changes to school quality:** In the 2025/26 school year, the MBSSE introduced a new process for measuring school quality. SQAOs are required to visit schools once a year to assess the quality of the school in six areas. They use a standard tool for data collection, and the results are displayed on an accessible dashboard. The aim is for schools to use the data to prepare their annual School Improvement Plan. This assessment of school quality is relatively new, but it could also provide information to measure the impact of the SLP.
- ◆ **360-degree verification on school leader changes and school impact:** The research described in this report sought feedback from teachers about changes in their school due to the SLP. Collection of feedback could be expanded to include District Directors, SQAOs, parents, and possibly learners to support verification of school leaders' self-reported changes in activities and behaviors and impact on their schools.
- ◆ **Improvement to the professional environment for teachers:** Effective school leaders create an enabling professional environment for teachers in their schools. They ensure opportunities for professional development and promote professional collaboration among teachers. However, this measure faces similar challenges to measuring school leader competencies – it could be costly and ensuring the reliability and validity of the assessment could be a challenge.
- ◆ **Articulation with other data sources:** The SLP could triangulate programme data with other sources of data, such as the Annual School Census and the hotline for reporting violence against children and youth.

While no single measure is likely to effectively capture the impact of the SLP, a combination of measures could provide a more comprehensive picture of the changes attributable to the programme.

## Annexes

### Annex 1: Demographics from school leader survey

| District           | Total (n=528) | Male (n=396; 75%) | Female (n=132; 25%) | Cohort 1 (n=84; 16%) | Cohort 2 (n=155; 29%) | Cohort 3 (n=291; 55%) |
|--------------------|---------------|-------------------|---------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Bo                 | 66            | 53                | 13                  | 20                   | 34                    | 12                    |
| Bombali            | 58            | 44                | 14                  | 14                   | 30                    | 14                    |
| Bonthe             | 18            | 7                 | 11                  |                      |                       | 18                    |
| Falaba             | 7             | 7                 |                     |                      |                       | 7                     |
| Kailahun           | 28            | 26                | 2                   | 11                   | 13                    | 6                     |
| Kambia             | 16            | 14                | 2                   |                      |                       | 16                    |
| Karene             | 19            | 14                | 5                   | 1                    | 1                     | 16                    |
| Kenema             | 33            | 19                | 14                  | 1                    |                       | 32                    |
| Koinadugu          | 8             | 6                 | 2                   |                      | 1                     | 7                     |
| Kono               | 34            | 28                | 6                   |                      |                       | 34                    |
| Moyamba            | 19            | 13                | 6                   |                      |                       | 19                    |
| Port Loko          | 81            | 65                | 16                  | 20                   | 43                    | 19                    |
| Pujehun            | 13            | 10                | 3                   | 1                    |                       | 12                    |
| Tonkolili          | 12            | 9                 | 3                   |                      |                       | 12                    |
| Western Area Rural | 57            | 45                | 12                  | 13                   | 30                    | 14                    |
| Western Area Urban | 57            | 45                | 22                  | 2                    | 3                     | 52                    |

\* Two respondents did not indicate their district: one male respondent from Cohort 3 and one female respondent from Cohort 1. Therefore, district counts exclude these two respondents.

### Annex 2: Demographics from focus group discussion with LLLs (n=19)

|            | Over 40 years old | Under 40 years old | Age unspecified |
|------------|-------------------|--------------------|-----------------|
| Female (8) | 6                 | 1                  | 1               |
| Male (11)  | 5                 | 3                  | 2               |

### Annex 3: Demographics of teacher survey (n=60)

|         | Female | Male |
|---------|--------|------|
| Bo      | 8      | 21   |
| Bombali | 9      | 22   |

#### Annex 4: Characteristics of selected schools and school leaders by district

| Bo district |                  |                             |                      |
|-------------|------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------|
| School No.  | School Geography | School leader role & gender | School leader cohort |
| 1           | Rural            | Principal (Female)          | 3                    |
| 2           | Peri-Urban       | Vice Principal (Male)       | 1                    |
| 3           | Rural            | Principal (Male)            | 2                    |
| 4           | Urban            | Principal (Male)            | 1                    |
| 5           | Urban            | Senior teacher (Male)       | 2                    |
| 6           | Urban            | Principal (Male)            | 2                    |
| 7           | Urban            | Head of Department (Male)   | 3                    |
| 8           | Urban            | Principal (Male)            | 2                    |
| 9           | Peri-Urban       | Head of Department (Male)   | 3                    |
| 10          | Peri-Urban       | Principal (Female)          | 3                    |

| Bombali district |                  |                             |                      |
|------------------|------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------|
| School No.       | School Geography | School leader role & gender | School leader cohort |
| 1                | Rural            | Principal (M)               | 2                    |
| 2                | Urban            | Principal (M)               | 2                    |
| 3                | Urban            | Head of Dept (F)            | 1                    |
| 4                | Peri-Urban       | Principal (F)               | 2                    |
| 5                | Rural            | Principal (M)               | 3                    |
| 6                | Urban            | Vice Principal (F)          | 3                    |
| 7                | Urban            | Principal (F)               | 2                    |
| 8                | Peri-Urban       | Principal (M)               | 1                    |
| 9                | Urban            | Principal (M)               | 3                    |
| 10               | Peri-Urban       | Vice Principal (F)          | 3                    |