

WHAT ARE WE LEARNING? ADDRESSING SECONDARY SCHOOL EDUCATION IN SIERRA LEONE

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ABSTRACT

The study is based on addressing the factors affecting secondary school education as part of the Free Quality Education initiative in Sierra Leone. The objectives of the study were to ascertain teacher qualification and experience and school –based factors in relation to education in secondary schools. The study employed a survey design and a qualitative research strategy. The findings revealed that teacher qualification and experience affected learning. In addition, school based factors such as overcrowded classrooms, high student-teacher ratio, poor library and laboratory facilities also affected education and learning outcomes. Accordingly, the study suggested initiatives could be designed to enable professional development opportunities and foster a culture of collaboration and innovation for teachers. Also, provision of adequate and relevant teaching and learning materials would contribute towards ameliorating the problems in secondary school education.

INTRODUCTION

The study probed factors that affect secondary school education in Sierra Leone. It delves into teacher training, qualification and school-based

factors presumed to influence education in the country. Ehiemere (2023) affirmed that good and effective teachers are crucial in increasing student accomplishment, cognitive and affective development. Lombard (2015) asserted that reflective practice is a necessary component of good learning and that teachers who have been exposed to the fundamentals of education facilitate effective learning. The author is of the view that the key components in enhancing instruction is the caliber of the teacher, teaching and learning materials and the quality of the processes that take place within the school.

It is pertinent to point out that effective teaching and learning have become a global concern. As result, many countries are now investing in their education systems. The activity of learning is fundamentally based on one's educational philosophy. Sibomansa et al. (2021) averred that the more we learn about the teacher, the more we are likely to understand how effective teachers are created. In addition, the author maintained that we need "torch lighters"– teachers who stand out and set themselves aside from the competition for effective teaching to take place. Over the years, secondary school education has come under fire for failing to produce competent students.

Sierra Leone has made significant some strides to raise the quality of education in order to improve the human capital through significant investments in the educator sector. Successive governments have provided human and materials resources such as teaching and learning materials, qualified personal, physical structures, trained and qualified teachers and funds. In spite of all these efforts, students have failed to perform in both public and sub-regional examinations. It is against this backdrop that there is need to investigate the factors affecting public secondary education in Sierra Leone.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

For many decades, Sierra Leone that was once known as the "Athens of West Africa," has lost its luster in the field of education. Even successive governments' investment of roughly 20 percent of the national budget on education has not solved the problem. Monetary and other forms of support provided to the basic and senior secondary education sectors are insufficient. Standards have dropped to the extent that the ordinary learner's capacity and ability to perform after leaving school and make meaningful contributions to society is becoming blurred. Employers now have mixed feelings regarding the credibility of the certificates and degrees issued to many graduates who are unable to express themselves or perform tasks assigned to them. Another major problem is the large number of untrained and unqualified teachers in the various subject's areas who are in the classrooms, especially in the rural areas of the country. Teaching and learning materials; important components for delivering effective instruction are inadequate not matching the significant increase in school enrolment due to the Free Quality Education Project initiated by the government. Based on the foregoing discussions, it can be inferred that

there is need to investigate the factors relating to education in secondary schools in Sierra Leone.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions were addressed:

To what extent does teacher qualification and experience affect secondary school education in Sierra Leone?

To what extent does school-based factors affect secondary school education in Sierra Leone?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Factors that affect Secondary School Education

Chanda and Mwila (2023) posited that low teacher training and qualification are responsible for the for the subpar quality of education in sub-Saharan Africa. It implies that qualified teachers are necessary for high-quality education. Typically, qualification and training are used to measure teacher quality and performance especially in formal contexts where promotion is decided. However, there is also a propensity among stakeholders such as parents and students to evaluate a teacher's effectiveness based on how well the students perform in exams. The Beckley Report 2018 of Sierra Leone (Beckley 2018) highlighted three major criteria that could be employed to describe a teacher's quality in relation to their qualifications and training. Accordingly "there are teachers who have never received official training to teach, those whose credentials do not meet the standards to teach certain classes they are employed for and individuals who are qualified to teach at the level they are at". These categories correspond with the SDG 4 indicators, which include the percentage of instructors who possess the minimal credentials necessary to deliver instruction at the pre-primary, primary, and secondary levels.

In addition, the number of teachers in each of these three categories of qualification and training indicate that at every level of the educational system in Sierra Leone, at least 50 percent of the teachers are qualified to teach. The Junior Secondary School (JSS) has the highest percentage of competent teachers, with 63 percent of teachers certified to teach at that level and 10 percent not qualified to teach at the same level. On the contrary, at the Senior Secondary School (SSS), 58 percent of the teachers are qualified to teach at that level and another 30 percent have some qualification that is required to teach. At the primary school level, 58 percent of teachers are certified to teach. However, 42 percent of them have not received any form of professional teaching training (Beckley, 2018).

There is growing concern that teachers' standing, and morale are declining even as expectations on them are rising (Thong & Ngoc, 2022). Their effectiveness as well as recruitment and retention efforts are seriously impacted by low morale (Ahmad et al., 2013). The adoption of shorter teacher training programs and lessened admission requirements,

lower standards and promote the idea that teachers' prestige in society is diminishing (Padhi, 2021). The author is of the view that those who view themselves as teachers even though they are not certified amid those who are certified, devalues the profession itself.

Lombard (2015) echoed that teachers' knowledge and actions have the greatest influence on students learning and performance. Apart from the quality of the teacher, Lombard highlighted other factors that influence students' performance such as class size, curriculum and infrastructures. In addition, Lombard argued further that ineffective teachers have more negative effects on learning than other factors such as inadequate resources, family and socio-economic background.

Fourie (2015) asserted that teachers are the main source of information and the most potent agents of change. In addition they are the main driving force in relation to social and economic development as well as the most significant resource for academic advancement and success. The author claimed further that students' academic performance in both internal and external exams is measured by the teachers' efficacy. Chanda and Mwila (2023) averred that teachers are essential in the teaching and learning process; therefore, an effective teacher would be considered someone who achieves the intended outcomes while carrying out his or her professional responsibilities. Therefore, it can be inferred that teacher's efficacy and efficiency in the classroom are immediately reflected in the academic performance of their students.

Ehiemere (2023) argued that the most important element influencing students' academic performance is the teacher's competence in relation to the subject matter and the teaching methodology. It has been argued that ineffective teachers are responsible for students' poor academic performance. Idoko et al. (2017), maintained that before making such assertion, teacher's efficacy and quality should be evaluated through a wide range of factors such as lesson planning, knowledge of subject matter, confidence, methodology, working conditions, and incentives. The term 'teaching and learning materials' refer to all items that the teacher and students utilize within the classroom to accomplish certain goals. They include maps, models, boards, chalk and books. Having these materials could conceptualize abstract information from concepts, practice certain abilities and draw some conclusions from what they are handling. Teaching aids can be visual or audible (radios), printed (textbooks, charts), or non-printed (actual items, machinery) (Padhi, 2021).

According to Idoko et al. (2017), the utilization of teaching materials is crucial since it encourages children to learn. It provides a variety of stimuli and helps to keep students' attention and focus throughout the lesson. On the other hand, learning materials make information clearer especially in situation in which a notion is too complicated to be explained simply with words. They are more effective in increasing interests and it fosters an environment where students participate actively in indoor and outdoor activities. Proper utilization of teaching and learning materials provide the learner with real-world experience (Mupa & Chinooneka, 2015). Thong

and Ngoc (2022) argued that shortage of instructional materials contributed to the poor performance of students in national examinations. The author maintained further that inadequate teaching and learning materials deny students from receiving a quality education. In addition, inadequate class space, over -crowded classrooms, non-functioning libraries and laboratories contribute to poor student performance. Brainerd (2021) highlighted that inadequate and insufficient teaching and learning materials pose a serious obstacle to quality education in the country. Even though the Ministry of Basic Senior Secondary School (MBSSE) education sector plan and policy require provision of core basic textbooks for all school going children, that has not been the case (MBSSE, 2020). The author affirmed that the Ministry's long term's goal over the years under the Universal Education Policy and the SDG 4 initiative is to provide enough text books for every school going child to use at home in addition to the one in school. In addition, Brainerd maintained that the curriculum becomes irrelevant when high-quality teaching and learning materials are unavailable. Another serious problem is that school authorities resell school materials that have been provided by the ministry to parents.

Teacher experience is crucial in education. Kane et al. (2016) maintained that teachers' experience contributes to student achievement especially when it comes to student performance in standardized tests. The authors of the view that test scores are higher for students with experienced teachers than those with less experience. In line with Kane et al, Ingersoll (2018) echoed that experienced teachers are more likely to manage their classrooms which is essential in student engagement and learning. In addition, those who are experienced are more likely to develop a better understanding of students learning needs and differentiated instruction resulting in better learning outcomes. Teacher experience shapes instructional strategies. Scherer (2019) asserted that veteran teachers do employ a variety of pedagogical skills that are relevant in implementing evidence based practices.

METHODOLOGY

The research methodology entailed a comprehensive desk review carried out prior to the empirical data collection in order to obtain a contextual background of the topic under investigation. A survey design that employed a quantitative research strategy which includes administration of questionnaire was used to undertake the study. The research population comprised school heads, teachers, and students. Basic random sample and purposive sampling were employed. A sample representing 50 pupils (10 from each selected school), 25 teachers (5 from each selected school), 5 Head of schools (1 from each selected school) was randomly selected. Data analysis involved categorizing, synthesizing, summarizing and describing quantitative data collected and interpreting the information gathered qualitatively through observation. The researcher abided by ethical considerations such as voluntary participation, confidentiality,

privacy and anonymity. Participants were informed regarding the purpose of the study and their consent to participate was solicited.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Teachers Qualification and Experience Regarding Secondary School Education

Teachers play a crucial role in the education of children especially when they help them to learn by imparting knowledge and by setting up a situation in which students could and will learn effectively. It is their responsibility to make the children learn and gain knowledge. The study sought to establish their professional qualifications and experiences to meet these tasks. Findings revealed that 59% have an undergraduate degree, 25% a Master's degree and 16% a Diploma in Education as indicated in Table 4.1 below. Sibomansa et al. (2021) asserted that teachers are central in the delivery of quality of education. Basically, the author is of the view that the academic qualifications and experiences of teachers have direct and positive impact on the quality of students' performance.

Table 4.1: Qualification of Teachers

Qualification	Teacher
Master	25%
First Degree	59%
Diploma in Education	16%
Total	100%

Source: primary data

The study also sought to establish teachers' experience from the first year of their appointment until the time of the research. This technique was considered very important as it ascertained the level of a teacher's experience, a factor that would determine their promotion and professional development. Table 4.2 summarizes the findings regarding the years of teaching experience for teachers. The table illustrates that 28% of the teachers had taught for a period of 10 to 14 years, 20% from 15 to 19 years, while 16% of them had taught for a period of 5 to 9 years, 8% had taught for a period of 1 to 4 years and only 16% teachers had been in their jobs for more than 25 years (quarter of a century). It means that many teachers had a long teaching experience, indicating that the (majority) of teachers had a good working experience which implies that they could prepare students to learn. Their experiences were crucial in establishing positive relationships with students and maintaining effective classroom management. On the contrary, those with limited experience had difficulties in managing their classroom resulting in poor students' academic performance (Padhi, 2011). Based on the foregoing analysis, it can be inferred that teachers' experience and qualification have positive impact on learning performance.

Table 4.2: Years of Experience

Years of Experience	No. of Respondents	Percent
1 - 4	2	8

5 - 9	4	16
10 - 14	7	28
15 - 19	5	20
20 - 24	3	12
Above 25	4	16
Total	25	100

Source: primary data

Research has revealed that lesson preparation is crucial in providing quality education. Table 4.3 presents the number of hours that teachers spent on lesson preparation. It indicates that most teachers (56%) spent three hours on lesson preparation, 28% 2 hours and, 12% 1 hour, while 4% spent 3 hours and above. Most of the teachers spent a good amount of time on lesson preparation implying that lessons are prepared well. Good lesson preparation results in effective lesson delivery, thereby leading to effective learning. It helps students to engage in the learning process. (Lombard, 2015) averred that it is impossible for a teacher to prepare lesson materials within a very short period and then assume that it is good lesson preparation. For effective lesson delivery, the teacher must put enough time to prepare a good lesson.

Table 4.3: Time Spent on Lesson Preparation

Lesson Prep Time	No. of Respondents	Percent
1 hour	14	56
2 hours	7	28
3 hours	3	12
Above 3 hours	1	4
Total	25	100

Source: primary data

School-Based Factors that Affect Secondary School

According to Table 4.4, most (61%) of the respondents were of the view that the schools lack functional laboratories and 39% agreed. It implies that most secondary schools have outdated laboratory facilities that could not meet the educational needs of students. This was also confirmed through the researcher's observation of the laboratory facilities in the schools. In relation to the arrangement of stockpile of books and other materials in the library, respondents (54%) were dissatisfied, 38% agreed and 8% were not sure. Based on the foregoing analysis, it can be deduced that most secondary schools lack proper functioning libraries to enhance learning.

Table 4.4: School-based factors

No	Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	The school has a functional	14%	24%	-	35%	26%

	laboratory					
2	The library is adequately stocked with relevant books	7%	31%	8%	40%	14%
3	Adequate sitting arrangements	39.1%	21.8%	-	22.5%	17.5%
4	The staffroom is adequate for all the teachers.	15%	35%	-	44.3%	5.8%
6	The school has sanitation facilities for boys, girls, and teachers.	33.4%	40.6%	-	19%	7%
7	The location of the school is favorable to teachers.	25%	50%	-	21.3%	4.5%
8	The school has enough land	6%	35%	-	51%	8%
9	The support given to school by Government.	28.3%	43.6%	-	25.1%	22.9%

Source: primary data

The majority of (60%) respondents agreed that the classrooms had adequate sitting space and (40%) disagreed. It means that most of the secondary schools have adequate classroom sitting arrangements to ensure conducive learning environment. In relation to the adequacy of staff rooms, the response rate was a 50 to 50 split.

Regarding sanitation facilities for boys, girls and teachers, (74%) agreed that they are adequate 26% disagreed. It indicates that in most secondary schools, sanitation facilities are adequate and functional for all categories. Interviews conducted to ministry inspector officials reaffirmed the above but that most of the facilities were not well maintained especially the ones for the boys and there is gap in relation to number of toilets per students. In relation to land space for extension of the schools, (59%) disagreed and 41% agreed that there is enough land available. The fact is that most secondary schools do not have enough land space to put up new structures. The majority of (75%) of respondents averred that the location of the schools is unfavorable for teachers. Only 25% disagreed.

In relation to the support from the government (72%) agreed that it is adequate implying that the government provides adequate support to the secondary due to the free quality education Project. One head teacher commented that the subvention funds come regularly and are not delayed.

Table 4.5: Teacher-Student Ratio

Teacher-Student Ratio	No. of Respondent	Percent
40 – 45 Students	8	16
46 – 50 Students	15	30
Above 50 Students	27	54
Total	50	100

Source: primary data

Overcrowded classroom makes it difficult for a teacher to deliver instruction effectively and harder for students to learn and could also lead to aggression. In addition, it can lead to lack of concentration, less personalized instruction and increase in disciplinary problems. On the contrary, a classroom with more space and a small class size can produce better results, a focused learning and opportunities for students to participate. Another factor that is crucial to effective learning and classroom management is teacher-student ratio. It is an important indicator in relation to student success and achievement since a lower ratio could provide individualized attention for students which can lead to better learning outcomes.

Table 4.5 illustrates that 54% of the classrooms had above 50 students, 30% with 46 to 50 and 16% 40 to 45 students per class. In this kind of situation, the teacher finds it difficult to manage the class and maintain discipline resulting in hindrance to effective teaching and learning. On the contrary, smaller classes tend to be quieter and easier to manage. (Ojo & Nkoyane, 2016) agrees that smaller classes benefit all learners because it provides individual attention by teachers. The authors are of the view that students in large classes tend to drift away during instruction and that is the main reason parents tend to choose school with small class size for their children. One can infer that class size is an indicator of a quality school.

Table 4.6: Support Staff in the Schools

Support Staff	No. of Respondent	Percent
5	15	60
8	6	24
10	4	16
Above 10	0	0
Total	25	100

Source: primary data

It is pertinent to point out that the supporting staff is crucial in the running of schools. Therefore, the researcher sought to establish the number of categories of employees in the schools surveyed. Data revealed that in majority of the schools, 60% had 5 support staff, 24% with 8, while 16% with 10 respectively. It is illustrated in Table 4.6 which reports that the schools had a good number of support staff. They are responsible for

performing tasks such as opening and closing school doors, cleaning offices, toilets, classrooms and the school compound, thereby providing services that contribute to students' education.

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

The study addressed factors affecting secondary school education Sierra Leone. The research questions were to ascertain teachers' qualification and experiences and school-based factors in relation to secondary school education. Findings revealed that teachers possess the requisite qualification, skills and experience essential for effective teaching and learning. They devoted enough time to lesson preparation and most of them have schemes of work, lesson plans and records of work.

In addition, the Free Quality Education Project initiated by the government increased student enrolment resulting in overcrowded classes in almost all the public schools in the country and most of them lack the necessary resources to operate effectively. The majority of respondents maintained that the libraries are not functional and outdated since they are not adequately stocked with relevant books. In relation to toilet/ sanitation facilities, respondents agreed that they are functional for all categories although few schools lacked adequate facilities. The location of the schools for teachers was rated good while there was disagreement regarding land space for expansion of infrastructures.

Conclusion

Based on the findings regarding secondary school education, teacher qualification, experiences and other school-based factors such as overcrowded classrooms, high teacher- students' poor library and laboratory facilities affected education and learning outcomes in secondary schools. In addition, not having enough schools to meet the demand of Free Quality Education is also a contributing factor. In conclusion, to improve the quality of secondary school education and maintain effective teaching and learning outcomes, more needs to be done. It should not be business as usual. Both the government and school administrators must work together to develop strategies that will ensure effective teaching and learning.

Recommendations

Based on the findings derived, the following recommendations for addressing secondary school education are proffered:

Provision of adequate teaching and learning materials such as textbooks, reference books, maps, charts, models and photography to ensure teaching and learning.

Recruitment of more teachers, improve pay and conditions of service. Appreciation for good work such as tokens, allowances and promotion. In addition, professional development opportunities and foster a culture of

collaboration and innovation. This could motivate them and minimize staff turnover.

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