



2005/ED/EFA/MRT/PI/8

Background paper prepared for the
Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2005
The Quality Imperative

Primary school teachers taking the strain in Sierra Leone

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2004

This paper was commissioned by the *Education for All Global Monitoring Report* as background information to assist in drafting the 2005 report. It has not been edited by the team. The views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author(s) and should not be attributed to the *EFA Global Monitoring Report* or to UNESCO. The papers can be cited with the following reference: "Paper commissioned for the *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2005, The Quality Imperative*". For further information, please contact efareport@unesco.org

PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS TAKING THE STRAIN IN SIERRA LEONE

The National Action Plan for Education For All in Sierra Leone states that 'a highly motivated teaching staff is a sine qua non for quality education. Everything possible must be done to ensue that our teachers are motivated' (p.44). The Plan recommends a comprehensive review of conditions of service, improved salary scales, prompt payment of salaries, provision of basic housing facilities, payment of remote area allowance, and science and mathematics subject allowances. However, acute fiscal constraints make these urgently needed measures very difficult to realise.

The ending of the eleven-year civil war in 2001 along with the implementation of major policy measures, including the abolition of tuition fees and universal school feeding, has led to a dramatic expansion of primary school enrolments. The total number of pupils has tripled in less than four years, but the increase in teachers has been less than half. There are almost 20,000 teachers working in 3430 primary schools in Sierra Leone. The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEST) would like to employ at least another 5000 but, up until very recently, has been unable to do so because of staff 'ceilings' agreed with the International Monetary Fund. As a result, around 20 per cent of primary school teachers at government-funded primary schools are not on the public sector payroll. Many of these are 'volunteer' or 'community teachers' who have little or no professional training and who are paid very little by their schools (see below). These community teachers typically account for over half of all the staff in government-funded primary schools in remoter, rural areas.

Since the mid-1990s, community schools have also been established in many villages and other communities, which do not have a government-funded primary school. Teachers at these schools are mainly secondary school leavers. They normally work for around two-three hours each day. Apart from occasional supplies of learning materials, the government provides no financial support for these schools, which are generally located in the most educationally under-served and poorest areas. NGOs have helped out with building materials, learning materials and in-service training for teachers.

The learning environment

The learning and working environment in primary schools in Sierra Leone is very difficult and, in certain key respects, is likely to be getting worse. As the EFA National Action Plan notes 'the pupil-teacher ratio in most institutions does not permit quality education' (p.13). The pupil- (payroll) teacher ratio has almost doubled during the last decade - from 32 in 1992 to 72 in 2003. Severe congestion in the majority of infant classes (1-3) renders meaningful learning almost impossible. In rural schools, in particular, there are typically well over 80

pupils in Class 1 and 2 classrooms¹. Two and three classroom schools are common in rural areas, which means that each classroom has up to three and sometimes even four classes. Similarly, given the pressure of numbers in urban schools, multiple class classrooms are the norm. With large numbers of children in very confined spaces coupled with no effective partitioning between classes, noise levels are such that teachers and pupils can barely make themselves heard. Double-shift schools are also common in urban schools.

Primary schools in the worst affected areas in the northern and eastern districts were abandoned during the latter part of the war. Over 80 percent of all primary schools across the country were completely destroyed or heavily damaged. The government with the assistance of its international partners is working as quickly as possible to rebuild and renovate these schools, but it is an enormous undertaking. The standard construction design is two blocks of three classrooms for each primary school. However, given the rapid growth in enrolments, more classrooms are already urgently needed in most schools.

Congestion is compounded by an acute shortage of furniture. In the large majority of rural schools, only a minority of children is seated on benches and chairs. The remaining pupils sit on stone or concrete blocks of various kinds or planks of wood or simply stand. It is very difficult to write since there is no proper surface to lean on.

Pay and promotion

A recent mini survey of primary schools revealed that head teachers, parents and pupils are generally quite satisfied with the performance and behaviour of teachers. Very few of the head teachers who were interviewed indicated that they would like to replace any of their teachers because of laziness, incompetence, or other reasons. The general view is that 'they are trying hard under very difficult conditions'. Teacher misbehaviour (laziness, drunkenness, lateness, improper sexual conduct, indiscipline) is not seen to be a major problem. An important factor is that most teachers at rural schools come from the immediate locality.

Teacher salaries have more than doubled in nominal terms since 1998 and teachers are now relatively well paid compared to equivalent occupations in the public service (most notably nurses). However, despite these improvements, most primary school teachers live in poverty. The net monthly pay for unqualified primary school teachers ranges from Leone 70,000-100,000 and from L.100,000-180,000 for qualified teachers. The average salary cost for all primary school teachers (which includes allowances) was L.138,000 per month (US\$50) in late 2003. Community teachers working at government-funded primary schools earn much less. Their pay ranges from L.3000-15,000 per month. Since these teachers are essentially volunteers, head teachers complain that their degree of management control over them is usually quite limited.

¹ The primary school cycle is from Class 1 to Class 6.

Even though the majority of teachers at community schools are remarkably committed, rural parents are too poor to be able to contribute very much towards supporting them. At many schools, the community pays in-kind by working on teachers' farms. Their very poor and usually irregular remuneration raises major concerns about the sustainability of community schools in the future. Under-staffing of community schools is already a major problem for most NGOs.

Primary school teachers are increasingly demoralised and most would leave the profession if they could. Most teachers have to maintain a household, which typically comprises of four-five people, on a salary of considerably less than two dollars a day. Pay levels, even for qualified teachers, are around three-four times less than the cost of a minimum needs wage basket for a four-person household. As one teacher put it 'I just work for my stomach'. In real terms, teacher's pay has fallen by over a half since the mid 1990s, but workloads have increased appreciably, especially for teachers in the infant (1-3) classes.

Poor pay has been compounded by the very late payment of salaries, which is the norm. This has becoming a burning issue with the national teacher union threatening strike action in early 2004. Housing conditions are also very poor in both urban and rural areas and many teachers in urban areas have to commute long distances (which in the capital, Freetown, is very time consuming). Apart from qualification upgrading or promotion to head teacher (see below), opportunities for career advancement are negligible and the salary-experience profile for qualified teachers is relatively flat (see figure). Salary anomalies are also pervasive with many teachers complaining about the lack of relationship between their qualifications and what they are paid. Teachers with the same or very similar years of experience and qualifications often receive very different pay, which is quite unrelated to actual performance.

Over two-third of primary schools in Sierra Leone are owned and managed by faith-based educational agencies, some of which expect teachers to make voluntary contributions ('tithes') from their salaries to the agency². For some 'missions', this has become their main source of revenue. In some cases, teachers make up for this income by requesting fee payments from children.

Seriously inadequate pay further reinforces the urban-rural divide in both primary and secondary education provision. Teachers want to work in urban areas where they can earn secondary (additional) incomes through private tuition (which are often referred to as 'syndicates') and other types of income generating activities.

There are pervasive concerns that the extent of after-school tuition adversely affects teacher commitment in official classes. It is even suggested that some

² MEST pays the salaries of teachers at government aided schools and also provides a small fee subsidy for each pupil.

teachers deliberately do not teach the full syllabus thereby forcing students to attend private classes. Even in rural primary schools, 'extension classes' after the end of the normal school day for Grade 5 and 6 pupils are the norm. The charges for these classes, which are used to supplement teachers' salaries, are a major burden for poorer households, which contribute to quite high drop out rates in these classes.

Given very high poverty levels in most rural areas, private tuition markets are too thin for teachers to be able to increase their incomes to any significant degree. Even so, teachers quite commonly sell cakes and sweets to their own pupils during break times at primary schools. At rural schools, pupils also frequently work on teacher's farms. In some schools, this activity is done on a regular and is effectively part of the school timetable.

Despite growing demoralisation, the overall rate of teacher absenteeism is surprisingly low. Certainly, the civil war seriously affected teacher attendance. Even in late 2001 when peace was returning to much of the country, teacher absenteeism averaged nearly 20 per cent. However, the absenteeism rate among a small sample of primary schools visited in early 2004 was less than 10 per cent. No reliable information is available on the level and trends in teacher attrition, but the EFA National Action Plan states there is 'high mobility' of teachers. Given limited opportunities for tertiary education, many students opt for teacher training courses with little or no intention of taking up teaching as a life-long profession.

System and teacher management

Management is generally weak at all levels of the education system - schools, districts, and ministry headquarters. The government's New Education Policy notes that 'the existing condition of the organization and management of education is grossly inadequate to meet the social, economic and human resource challenges of our time' (p44). The system needs to be 'professionalised' and 'decentralised'. MEST headquarters does not have the personnel to plan and manage effectively a large and rapidly growing school system

Allegations of mismanagement are widespread. The 2002 Governance and Corruption Study reported that nearly 70 per cent of public sector respondents indicated that misappropriations in MEST are 'frequent' and 40 per cent said that bribes for contracts are widespread. Within MEST itself, 72 per cent of respondents said that the purchase of jobs is 'common practice'.

With respect to human resources, the capacity of an organization to produce goods and services in efficient and effective manner depends critically on two sets of factors. Firstly, key personnel must have the commitment and motivation to manage what is, in the case of education, a highly complex service delivery system that extends right across the country. Again, salary levels are seriously

inadequate for MEST managers and professionals, and, as with teachers, salary anomalies are pervasive. More and more service delivery activities are being undertaken by NGOs because they have the organizational capacity to do this. However, much of this capacity is directly attributable to much better pay, the bulk of which is being funded by the main bilateral donors and multilateral agencies. NGO personnel typically earn three-four times the income of equivalent staff in MEST.

And secondly, education officials must have the skills and knowledge to manage effectively. Most MEST managers have not benefited from well-designed management development programmes, which focus on both the acquisition of key generic planning and management skills as well as more specialist, sector-specific competencies. Managers have occasionally attended management workshops of various kinds, but these have been too short and limited in scope to make much impact on management practice on a day-to-day basis. Furthermore, the experience from many countries indicates that, without significantly improved incentives, professional development activities are only likely to have a very limited impact on management performance.

At the district level, the supervision of schools is generally not effective. Most inspectors and supervisors are poorly trained and motivated, and lack the resources (especially transport) to be able to visit schools on a regular basis. Poor incentives also continue to undermine the development of effective management and planning capacity. As a result, NGOs are playing an increasingly important role in key areas, including in-service teacher training, textbooks, and school construction.

More generally, poor teacher administration and management is a major factor contributing to poor teacher motivation. The National Education Policy notes that 'routine exercises such as transfers, placements, promotion and discipline are often carried out in an ad hoc manner. This dampens productivity and commitment'. A key problem is that human resource management responsibilities are divided between MEST and the mainly faith-based 'employing authorities'. MEST provides the money to pay teachers and is responsible for professional supervision. The employing authorities recruit teachers, pay staff, and also take responsibility for school management. Head teachers are answerable therefore to both MEST and the agencies.

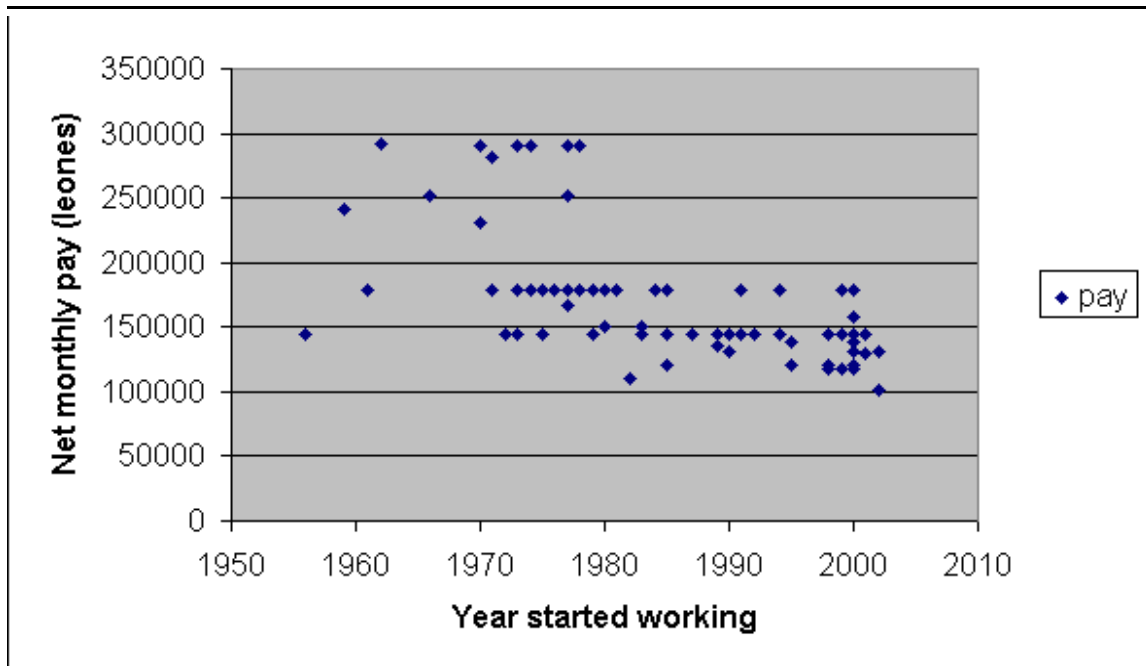
Most employing authorities are too small and do not have the management capacity and professional expertise to undertake these management functions efficiently and effectively. The government fully recognizes the seriousness of this situation and has recommended the establishment of a Teacher's Service Commission, which would take overall responsibility for all key human resource management functions (recruitment, deployment, training, and pay).

Other issues

Slightly more than one half of primary school teachers in Sierra Leone are qualified. However, most qualified teachers are concentrated in urban schools. In the worst affected districts, less than one-quarter of teachers are qualified, but in Freetown the capital, all but four percent of teachers have the basic Teacher Certificate qualification. Most rural primary schools have only one or two qualified teachers, one of whom is the head teacher who does not normally teach. No additional financial incentives are provided to teachers for working in schools in remoter, rural areas. Given the strong desire of most teachers to live and work in urban areas (and especially Freetown), very substantial incentives would be needed to get them to work in rural primary schools.

Trained teachers earn at least 50 per cent more than untrained teachers. Thus, the inequitable spatial distribution of trained teachers is an important reason why public expenditure on primary education is skewed so heavily in favour of better-off students who live in mainly urban areas. Unit salary expenditures are almost fifty per cent higher in Freetown than they are in the poorest northern districts.

Given poor salary and working conditions and sizeable pay differentials between unqualified and unqualified teachers, study leave is probably the most attractive financial incentive for serving teachers. Around one-in-eight primary school teachers were on long-term study leave in late 2003. Teachers receive full pay while on study leave, but no replacement teachers are appointed to take their place. This is a major concern for most head teachers.



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