



Patterns of School Enrolment and Retention Before and After the *Free Quality School Education Policy* in Sierra Leone

Policy Brief

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Summary

Sierra Leone continues to rank very low in terms of the Human Development Index and poverty levels remain high. It also has one of the world's highest adolescent pregnancy rates.

The education sector is key for economic and social development of any nation and is particularly important for addressing gender inequality, among other critical issues. Investment in and utilization of a country's human capital is therefore critical. The extent of the phenomenon of Out-of-School Children (OOSC) in Sierra Leone has attracted much attention, and has resulted in government putting in place measures, such as the introduction of the Free Quality School Education (FQSE), to encourage school enrolment. In support of government efforts, some non-governmental organisations have also embarked on Accelerated Education Programmes (AEP) to help address the issue.

OOSC have been defined as 'children of primary or lower secondary school age who are not enrolled in primary or secondary education;' including 'a small number of children in pre-primary education and in non-formal education' (UIS, 2005).

In 2017, it was recorded that 64,243 (34.7 per cent) of children aged 6-18 years, who are within the official age of primary to senior secondary education nationally were out-of-school (UNICEF 2018a).

The trend in OOSC in Sierra Leone according to the MICS (2017), shows that the higher the levels of schooling, the higher the number of children out-of-school. The drop out rate increases across higher levels of schooling. Whilst the share of children

out-of-school at the primary level was recorded at about 18%, that for junior secondary school (JSS) was recorded at 19% and that for senior secondary school at 36%. The proportion of out-of-school children who are females is comparatively lower than that for males at the primary and JSS age categories. However, at the Senior Secondary School level, there are more females who are out-of-school (39.7%), compared to males (31.4%).

The higher number of female out-of-school-children can be attributed to the relatively high rates of child marriage and early childbearing among adolescent girls in Sierra Leone, which is contributing to the low levels of educational attainment among girls.

The analysis done in this Policy Brief shows that overall, the FQSE has had a significant impact on enrolment rates across all the levels of schooling. Other interventions such as the School Feeding Programme, the Inclusive Education Policy, the Accelerated Education Programme and Girls Focused Programme implemented by NGOs such as Save the Children and BRAC have also played important roles in getting children back to school and in keeping them there till completion. This notwithstanding, the analysis also shows that there are large proportions of children, largely girls, who still remain out of school for a combination of reasons, including early pregnancy and marriage, and the hidden costs of schooling that parents and caregivers cannot afford. This makes the out-of-school phenomenon in the country a critical issue to be addressed if Government is to fully realize its goal of Human Capital Development.

Data Sources and Methods

In developing this Policy Brief, different sources of information, mainly publications from UNICEF, UNESCO and the World Bank were searched for and utilized based on their relevance to the topic under review. Additionally, government administrative information such as the 2015 population census, and school-based statistics such as the EMIS' Annual School Census were also utilized. Additionally, government-based reports such as the Education Sector Plans and OOSC reports were used to inform this Policy Brief.

Economic and Human Development Context

The recent COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the contraction of real GDP by an estimated 2.7% from a growth of 5.4% in 2019. Sierra Leone is ranked 182 out of 189 countries in the 2019 Human Development Index and poverty levels remain high with 57% of the population living on less than US\$1.22 per day. Families continue to practice child labour, which results in many children not enrolled in school and poor performance at school for those enrolled. In 2019, Sierra Leone recorded one of the world's highest adolescent pregnancy rates, with 108 births per 1000 adolescents (World Bank, 2020) and ranked 155 out of 162 countries on the Gender Inequality Index.

In Sierra Leone, statistics show that more than half (57%) of the population, 15 years and over, are not literate and about half of those who leave primary school, come out without being able to read or write. The proportion of women who are literate is lower than that of men. The share of teachers at the various levels shows that there are more female than male teachers at

the pre-primary and primary levels at 88% and 31% respectively; whilst the share of female teachers at the JSS and SSS levels are at 16% and 8% respectively.

Country Context of Girls Education

The combined negative impact of the 10-year civil war from 1991 to 2021, the Ebola Virus Disease in 2014, and the COVID-19 pandemic that started in 2019, was particularly devastating for adolescent girls in Sierra Leone. During the Ebola epidemic, for example, the country saw an increase in teenage pregnancy and many girls had to drop out of school as a result of this (Graham et al., 2021).

In recent times, though there have been relatively high gross enrolment rates at the primary level, significant repetition and drop-out rates at the upper primary level, and at the junior and senior secondary levels and above remain a concern. This is higher among girls and students from low-income households.

The schooling of girls is mainly affected by too many repetitions. This is an indication that many children who start school in a given year, may drop out before the end of the cycle. The high repetition and drop-out rates are indicators of inefficiency within the education system. It is possible that those who drop-out of school would not have acquired the necessary numeracy and literacy skills they need to fully participate in economic development.

Whilst the FQSE programme encourages those who are not in school to enroll, children who have been out of school for two years or more need the appropriate support to allow them to catch-up and re-enter the school system. This is particularly true of girls.

The OOSC Situation

Many girls living in rural areas and some living in urban areas of Sierra Leone have never been to school, and of those who have attended, some drop out of school either in primary (6-11 years of age) or secondary school (12-17 years of age) as a result of early pregnancy, early and forced marriage or because they need to earn an income. The barriers to education faced by girls in Sierra Leone are significant and can be found at various levels, reinforced and amplified by harmful socio-cultural norms and practices.

According to the 2016 assessment of OOSC, about three out of every ten out-of-school girls (28.6%) are excluded from education as a result of teenage pregnancy (GoSL & UNICEF, 2016).

Table 1: Share of children in and out of school by level and gender

| School Level | In School (%) | | | Out of School (%) | | |
|--------------|---------------|-------|-------|-------------------|-------|-------|
| | Boys | Girls | Total | Boys | Girls | Total |
| Primary | 79 | 84 | 82 | 21 | 16 | 18 |
| JSS | 36 | 36 | 36 | 20 | 18 | 19 |
| SSS | 30 | 28 | 29 | 31 | 40 | 36 |

Source: MICS, 2017

The MICS 2017 report shows the share of children in school across higher levels of education; and that there are more girls than boys out-of-school at the senior secondary school level.

Formal School Enrolment

The figure below shows that enrolment is highest at the primary level (consistent with what is depicted in Table 1). A declining trend is seen from the primary to the junior secondary and then the senior secondary levels. Enrolment at the pre-primary level of those in the given age bracket, is very low. This could be due to the lack of importance put on this level of education. And this is a

very important age category that needs to develop through early childhood education. An interesting trend depicted in the figure is that both boys' and girls' enrolment falls significantly between primary school and junior secondary school, and falls slightly at the senior secondary level, with girls falling a bit more than boys at that level. The indication here is that it is at these levels that the greatest drop out rates occur, with slightly more girls falling out of school at the SSS level than boys.

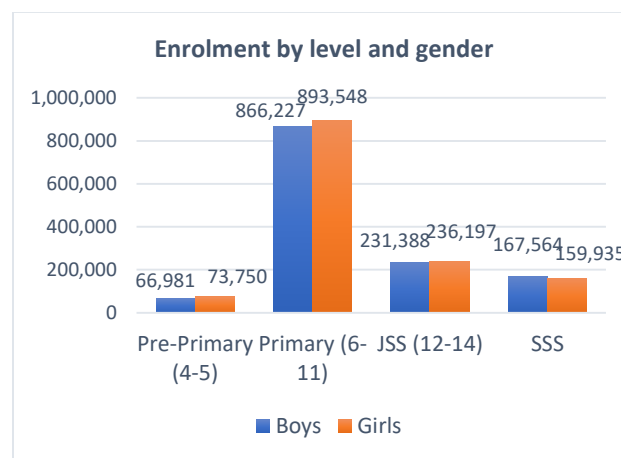


Fig. 1: School enrolment by level and gender (Source: Annual School Census Report, 2020)

At risk of dropping out

Despite the increase in enrolment, there are still children enrolled in school, who are at risk of dropping out and not having an opportunity to complete their education. At the primary level, only about 12.6% of children are at risk of dropping out.

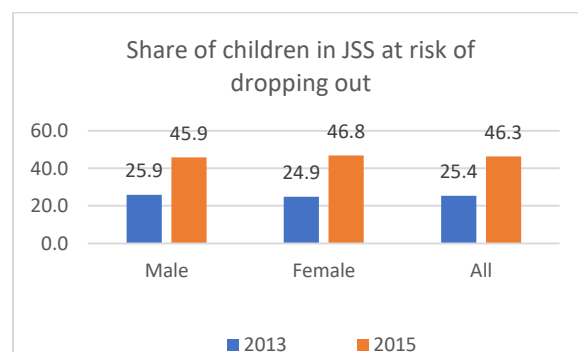


Fig. 2: Share of children in JSS at risk of dropping out (Source: Annual School Census Data, 2015)

A comparison of the 2013 and 2015 data on ‘at risk of dropping out’, shows that the share of children in junior secondary who are at risk of dropping out almost doubled from 2013 to 2015. This shows that there are factors that continue to hinder retention at the various levels of schooling. Whereas there were more males than females at risk of dropping out in 2013, the share of females at risk of dropping out was higher than that of boys in 2015. It should be noted, however, that this was during the time of the Ebola virus disease, which left many girls vulnerable, and could have been a contributing factor to the higher share of girls at risk of dropping out at the JSS level.

The study by Graham et al. (2021), for example, showed that 14,000 young girls fell pregnant during Ebola, and adolescent pregnancy soared by up to 65 percent in some communities. When schools reopened, these girls were prevented from returning due to a GoSL edict prohibiting visibly pregnant girls from attending school or taking exams.)

Completion Rate

To realise the gains from the investment put into educating someone, they will need to complete their education. At the various levels of schooling, it is also vital that pupils complete the level they have enrolled in. Although completion rates are reported to have increased over the years across all levels, there are still many children who do not complete school.

The Proxy Completion Rate (PCR) in 2015, was 75.3% for the primary level, 40.6% for JSS and 22.2% for SSS. The MICS 2017 study showed that more girls complete

primary school, whereas more boys complete the JSS and SSS levels. The completion rate decreased for the primary and senior secondary levels between 2015 and 2017, whereas an increase in completion rate was recorded at the junior secondary school level, from 40.6% in 2015 to 44.2% in 2017.

Table 2: Completion rates by school level and gender

| | Male | Female | Total |
|------------------|-------|--------|--------------|
| Primary | 63.3% | 65.1% | 64.2% |
| Junior Secondary | 47.3% | 41.9% | 44.2% |
| Senior Secondary | 27.4% | 17.5% | 21.7% |

Source: Statistics Sierra Leone, 2018

Whilst some students fail to complete the level of education within the required number of years, there are those who do not complete schooling. One of the main reasons for this is the repetition of classes which discourages them from proceeding. Repetition rates at the primary, JSS and SSS levels were 12.6%, 11.3% and 6.7% respectively (MBSSE, 2019).

The Annul School Census estimates the gross completion rate (GCR) at the different school levels and the figure below shows that completion rate decreases as the level of schooling increases for both sexes (again consistent with what Table 2 depicts). The relatively lower GCR for the senior secondary school level, indicates a lower level of retention of pupils at this stage and that it becomes more challenging for pupils to proceed from one grade level to the next.

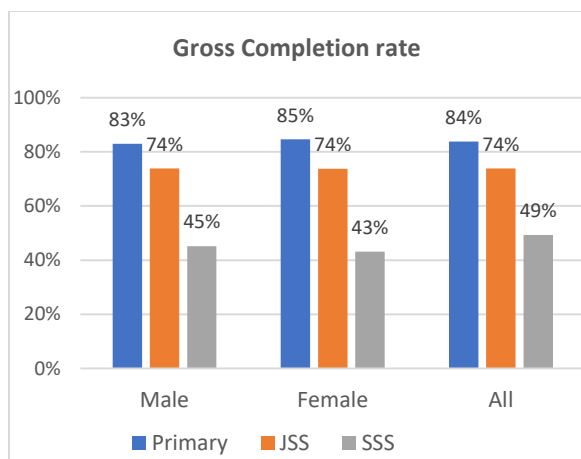


Fig. 3: Gross school completion rates by level and gender (Source: Annual School Census Report, 2020)

Transition Rate

The transition rate which indicates the rate at which pupils move from one level to another level in their education tends to be high at both the primary and JSS level. The transition rate from primary to junior secondary is higher for females than males, indicating that more girls moved through from the primary to the junior secondary school level.

Table 3: Share of Gross Completion and Transition Rate per level

| Level | Gross Completion Rate (2019) | | | Transition Rate (2020) | | |
|---------|------------------------------|--------|------|------------------------|--------|-------|
| | Male | Female | All | Male | Female | All |
| Primary | 79.6 | 79.7 | 79.6 | 96.9 | 98.1 | 97.6 |
| JSS | 68.9 | 68.1 | 68.5 | 112.2 | 106.3 | 109.2 |

Source: Annual School Census Data, 2015

On the other hand, more boys than girls transitioned from the junior secondary to the senior secondary level. Out-of-school children transitioning into the formal school system, could account for the higher transition rates in comparison to the gross completion rate.

Major Education Interventions

The 2018-2020 Education Sector Plan (ESP) specifies interventions across the four areas of *access, equity and completion; quality and relevance; systems strengthening; and*

emergency preparedness and response as a way of improving the sector.

The introduction of the Free Quality School Education programme implemented in government assisted schools in 2018 has noticeably improved access to schooling. National school enrolment recorded a growth of 34% between June 2018 and June 2019 (an additional 680,000 children entered or came back to school) after a decline of 4% was recorded between 2017 to 2018. (MBSSE, 2019). Whilst this was attributed to the free education policy, it is nevertheless worth noting that this policy does not address indirect school costs. Indirect costs associated with schooling include school uniforms, basic school materials (bags, exercise books, writing materials, etc.), transportation, school meals, ceremonials (such as Thanksgiving, Speech Days, etc.), and sundry contributions (e.g. support for voluntary teachers, etc.), among others. For many families, these constitute a major challenge which tends to hinder retention through the various levels of schooling.

Table 4: Retention Rates by School Level and Gender

| | Male | Female | Total |
|------------------------------------|------|--------|------------|
| In Primary from Class 1 to Class 6 | 38% | 37% | 38% |
| In Secondary from JSS 1 to JSS 3 | 87% | 86% | 87% |
| In Secondary from SSS 1 to SSS 3 | 59% | 61% | 60% |

Source: Annual School Census Report, 2020

The Table above shows that 38% of children entering primary school are likely to reach the final grade, whilst 87% of those entering the JSS level are likely to reach the final grade. At the senior secondary level, however, only 60% of those who entered SSS 1 are likely to reach SSS 3.

The School Feeding Programme is another government innovation in the education system, with the aim of increasing student retention and learning. Efforts are being made to recruit more teachers and construct more schools across the country, to improve the access to quality education.

There is evidence to show, nevertheless, that there is the need for alternative education systems to complement ongoing Government efforts, and greatly enhance access to quality education. For example, there is a place for more special education needs schools, and for teachers specially trained in Inclusive Education Pedagogies who can help nurture students (including those with different kinds of challenges) who have been out of school for a while to eventually integrate them into mainstream at secondary level.

In this regard, Accelerated Education Programmes and other 'Girls Focused' initiatives could help complement government's effort to increase enrolment and reduce the rate of OOSC, especially among girls. Save the Children is one of the NGOs that have implemented an AEP in the Southern Region of the country with significant success. The programme included 720 participants (385 boys and 335 girls) and in 2018, 82% of those attending this AEP transitioned to formal schooling at the JSS level. In 2019, on average 93% of children in the AEP transitioned to the formal junior secondary school level. This could be assessed to be not only an integral contribution to the growth in enrolment rate in the country, but also as an important alternative mechanism for addressing in particular the OOSC phenomenon in the country.

Conclusion

Whilst enrolment into the various levels of schooling has increased since the implementation of the FQSE, there is still a significant number of children who are not in school.

The share of out-of-school children is found to increase, the higher the level of schooling.

It was also found that educational progression was low, with 45% of JSS-age children attending primary school instead of JSS in 2017.

Whilst the proportion of out-of-school children who are females is lower than that for males at the primary and junior secondary school levels, it becomes higher at the senior secondary level, with 39.7% females out-of-school, compared to 31.4% males.

There is a relatively low level of school retention amongst girls, and this is largely attributed to the high rates of early marriage and early childbearing.

Though there have been relatively high gross enrolment rates at the primary level, there is still significant repetition and drop-out rates at the upper primary and secondary levels. This is found to be higher among girls and students from low-income households.

Whilst the FQSE programme encourages those who are not in school to enroll, it is a challenge for children who have been out of school for two years or more to catch-up and re-enter the formal school system. To start with, they are likely to be over aged to continue from where they dropped off, with all the psychological stress this involves. Furthermore, having been out of school for some time may limit their ability to keep

abreast of the pace of others in class work. They would, therefore, require a different pedagogical approach from what obtains in the regular classroom at least until they are able to catch up.

Indirect costs associated with schooling remain a major challenge which tends to hinder retention, despite the FQSE programme; as exemplified by the fact that at the senior secondary level, only 60% of those who entered SSS 1 are likely to reach SSS 3.

Furthermore, despite the increase in enrolment, there are still children enrolled in school who are at risk of dropping out and not having an opportunity to complete their education.

It is encouraging to note that notwithstanding these disturbance trends in girls' retention, more girls transition from the primary to the junior secondary school level; although more boys than girls transited from the junior secondary to the senior secondary level.

Recommendations

There is the need for more alternative education systems to assist children who have been out of school for two years or more to allow them to catch-up and re-enter the school system.

The country needs to have in place more special education needs schools and teachers trained in Inclusive Education pedagogies who can help nurture students to eventually integrate them into mainstream at secondary level.

The Government needs to continue working in close collaboration with NGOs and other international and national partners to

implement alternative education programmes.

While there is ample evidence of the positive impact of the FQSE on enrolment rates across all school levels, Government should, however, also focus on addressing those other underlying factors of school dropout rates and low levels of retention among girls especially at the higher levels.

Related to the above, more vigorous efforts to popularize and enforce the Policy on Inclusive Education should be made, as well as the intensification of ongoing campaigns against early marriage in collaboration with other government ministries, agencies and civil society organisations.

The evaluation of BRAC's ELA programme by Bandiera et al. (2018), and the study of out-of-school children in Sierra Leone by Graham, et al. (2021) provide strong evidence of the potential of AEPs and girls focused innovations to robustly address the OOSC phenomenon in the country; and to enable social change, protection from violence and socio-cultural transformation. These innovations have been shown to be well suited for remote areas that are characterized by high poverty levels, lack of schools and teachers (as qualified teachers are generally reluctant to work in such areas). Cost analyses (e.g., DeStefano et al. 2007; Thomas & Burnett, 2015; and Montenegro & Patrinos, 2017) have also shown that overall, such innovations afford a cheaper option to addressing the out-of-school children's phenomenon especially in the light of Government's overstretched resources.

This notwithstanding, consistent attempts should be made to document and record adequate data on existing AEPs, to be able

to assess their effects and contribution to mitigating the OOSC phenomenon.

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