

Certifying teachers through distance education

Improving quality education in junior secondary schools in Sierra Leone

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Since the end of the decade-long civil war in 2002, Sierra Leone has made significant efforts towards rebuilding the infrastructure and social cohesion needed to provide access to essential quality services that had been destroyed in the conflict. One such focus has been on investing in education. The Government of Sierra Leone recognises that education is crucial for the rehabilitation and development of the country, and ensuring the right of all children to a quality education is one of the ways to achieve this recovery.

Recent literature has shown that it is quality secondary education in particular that contributes positively to economic growth, equity, social cohesion, democracy and improved health outcomes¹. In the Education Sector Plan 2007–2015, Sierra Leone's Ministry of Education, Science and Technology highlighted the need for all children to complete basic, compulsory education, which includes both primary and junior secondary levels.

Since the end of the conflict, donor and implementing partners' attention has led to significant gains in enrolment at junior secondary school (JSS). The number of students enrolled in JSSs

doubled between 2000 and 2007 – from 89,000 to 178,000 – and is expected to double again by 2015². There is a clear need to ensure the sound quality of education at this level. A key element of quality education is quality teaching; therefore, a focus on building the capacity of teachers is a priority.

Why distance education works in Sierra Leone

The conventional teacher training model is no longer an adequate means of training the number of JSS teachers required in Sierra Leone, given the increasing number of students in a context already experiencing a severe teacher shortage. Nor is this model bringing teachers' professional skills to the level required. Various studies have shown that distance education (DE) might be the way forward. It is an effective mode of teacher training that is able to meet the increasing demand for qualified, certified teachers and the implementation of nation-wide curriculum initiatives³. Several findings support this mode of teacher training:



- First, obtaining certification will make teachers eligible for government payroll and thus increase their motivation to choose this mode of study.
- Second, DE ensures that already resource-poor schools will not be left understaffed while teachers leave to pursue their studies.
- Third, DE can produce teachers who are equivalently qualified to their traditionally trained counterparts.
- Finally, because DE does not require long periods of time away from family and domestic commitments, it has the potential to increase access to training for marginalised and disadvantaged groups, such as women and people living in rural areas⁴. (Currently, fewer than 10 per cent of JSS teachers are female.)

The IRC and the LEGACY initiative

The LEGACY initiative is a regional education programme designed to develop and sustain education interventions that will provide marginalised children and youth in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea and Côte D'Ivoire with access to quality learning opportunities. Through the LEGACY initiative, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) has responded to the need to increase efforts at the JSS level by collaborating with Sierra Leone's Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, teacher training colleges, junior secondary schools, teaching unions and local communities to improve the quality of teaching at junior secondary level. In 2008, the IRC supported the revision of the Higher Teachers' Certificate-Secondary (HTC-S) pre-service curriculum. It formed the Central Team, comprising representatives from each of the aforementioned institutions and departments, to formalise partnerships and to ensure that efforts were aligned with the education goals of the ministry. Members of the Central Team not only advise and oversee curriculum development, but also drive the curriculum design process by serving as technical advisors to the writing teams, training the mentors and tutors, and advocating for the programme.

In addition to building core subject knowledge, the programme focuses on developing the student teachers' attitudes and pedagogy as a means of promoting positive relationships between teachers and students. The student teachers are taught practical and relevant methods to create an inclusive, child-friendly learning environment regardless of their students' gender, learning style, disability, economic status and ethnic background. Furthermore, through required learning activities, teacher trainees create a network of school/community-based support among community members, mentors and colleagues to encourage the student teachers' development of core professional attitudes to build and sustain the aforementioned skills. The curriculum also introduces new topics such as gender equity, democracy, human rights, hygiene, environmental health and entrepreneurship.

Building on the pre-service curriculum project, the IRC is currently working with the Central Team to develop the HTC-S distance education programme for unqualified junior secondary level teachers working in schools.

A closer look at the IRC's distance education pilot course

The HTC-S distance education programme is designed to be completed in three years, with student teachers completing two

modules per year (a total of six modules). Student teachers must study six core subjects and can choose one of 15 electives in which to specialise. Using the curriculum map developed by the Central Team, 76 lecturers from all six teacher training colleges come together on a periodic basis for a writers' workshop to collaboratively write the DE learning materials. At these two-week workshops, the writers break into 20 groups of four to five to compose the content of the module for their specific subject area. Additionally, each module has a theme – for example, classroom management or inclusive education – and each subject area integrates the theme of the module throughout their materials as they write. During the two-week writers' workshop, the IRC Distance Education (DE) Specialist and the Central Team work with the writing teams to provide support and feedback.

As each module is completed, the IRC and the Central Team work with the Eastern Polytechnic teacher training college (in Kenema, Sierra Leone's third largest city) and the JSSs in the nearby area to pilot the modules with the student teachers. Each module has a residential session at the teacher training college, followed by independent study by the student teachers with the support of a school-based mentor during the teaching semester. The learning materials of the module guide student teachers and their mentors through the learning objectives of the semester, with practical and reflective activities based on the student teachers' classroom practice and experience. The IRC and the Central Team seek feedback from the teacher training college, the JSSs, the tutors, the mentors and the student teachers themselves. With that feedback, all 20 subject areas of the module are revised and finalised. Additionally, the IRC conducts regular monitoring, focus groups and interviews with the trainee teachers to inform both the process of module development and the content of the modules.

In order to introduce progressive educational practices to the lecturers from the teacher training colleges who will be writing the modules, the IRC DE Specialist conducts mini-workshops, using experiential and reflective activities. In these sessions, the DE Specialist demonstrates techniques to involve all learners in a student-centred environment. Critical thinking, problem-solving and other participative techniques are modelled. The lecturers' self-reports have suggested that these sessions have gone far beyond their intended objective of preparing the lecturers to write up-to-date, pedagogically sound modules – they have also begun to influence the lecturers' teaching styles when they return to their teacher training college to teach their usual pre-service courses. Thus, this participatory model of curriculum development is demonstrating both a broad and a deep reach in the Sierra Leonean education system and has the potential to transform teaching from the inside.

A major stride for the programme occurred in April 2011, when the Chief Education Officer of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology officially accepted this DE course as the equivalent of the on-campus pre-service JSS Certification course. This means that all students, including the pilot students, who complete the course and pass the written and practical teaching exams will receive official teaching certification from the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. Already four other teacher training colleges are beginning to or preparing to offer this DE option. Work is also under way to secure stipends for students who choose to follow this course of study. As a further sign of the success of



this approach to revise the pre-service curriculum and develop the distance education modules, the ministry would now like to revise the pupils' curriculum using this same participatory and collaborative process.

Benefits of the IRC initiative

The IRC has found that the participatory process for curriculum development and materials writing offers many benefits, both direct and indirect. Directly, it is efficient (each module is drafted in two weeks for all 22 subject areas); it is contextually relevant; it is effective in upgrading and updating the JSS teacher preparation; and it addresses Sierra Leone's teacher shortage with a practical and immediate solution. Indirectly, it is transforming the culture of teacher education across the country; it is reinforcing the capacity of education leaders from all branches of the education community; and it is allowing more women the opportunity to pursue teaching certification. In the current HTC-S distance education programme, one female teacher trainee is on the way to becoming the first-ever certified female teacher at the JSS level in her chiefdom⁵. It is hoped that as the programme expands, many more women will be able to take advantage of this opportunity to get teaching certification through this DE option. And, as JSSs gradually hire more qualified women teachers, girls will have more role models in schools, which could mean that more girls will stay on at school to complete the full basic education and have the broader range of options that come with that level of education.

Endnotes

- 1 *Expanding opportunities and building competencies for young people: a new agenda for secondary education*. Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2005.
- 2 MEST data and projections based on the Global Monitoring Report 2010 from UNESCO.
- 3 *See Open and Distance Learning: Trends, Policy, and Strategy Considerations*, UNESCO, 2002.
- 4 *See Teacher Education at a Distance: Impact on Development in the Community*, DFID, 2006.
- 5 Chiefdoms are the third administrative level of governance in Sierra Leone, of which there are 149.

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