# LESSONS IN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT FROM SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

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In the current international policy environment, teachers are viewed as learning-oriented adaptive experts. Required to be able to teach increasingly diverse sets of learners, teachers must be competent in complex academic content, skilful in the craft of teaching and able to respond to fast changing economic and policy imperatives. The knowledge, skills and attitudes needed for this complex profession requires teachers to engage in collaborative and networked career-long learning. The types of learning networks emerging to meet this need comprise a variety of collaborative arrangements including inter-school engagement, as well as collaborations with learning partners, such as universities or policy-makers. More understanding is required, however, on how learning networks can deliver maximum benefit for both teachers and students.

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# LESSONS IN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT FROM SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

## Developing Professional Learning Networks and School Communities

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*Dedicated to the teachers and children of EducAid, and to their ongoing commitment to the transformation of education in Sierra Leone and beyond: one teacher at a time, one child at a time.*

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# ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---|---|
| BECE | Basic Education Certificate Examination |
| CPDL | Continuing Professional Development and Learning |
| DfID | Department of International Development |
| DSTI | Directorate for Science, Technology and Innovation |
| EFA | Education for All |
| GPI | Gender Parity Index |
| INGO | International Non-governmental Organisation |
| MBSSE | Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education |
| MEST | Ministry of Education, Science and Technology |
| NGO | Non-governmental Organisation |
| NPSE | National Primary School Examination |
| PLC | Professional Learning Community |
| PLN | Professional Learning Network(s) |
| PTSD. | Post-traumatic Stress Disorder. |
| RATL | Raising Achievement/Transforming Learning |
| RCT | Randomised Controlled Trial |
| SMC | School Management Committee |
| STEM | Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (subjects) |
| UNDP | United Nations Development Programme |
| WAEC | West Africa Examinations Council |
| WASSCE | West Africa Secondary School Certificate Examination |

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# AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

***Miriam Mason*** was educated in the UK and trained as a teacher before moving to Sierra Leone in 2000 to run EducAid. Her brother and a friend had started EducAid Sierra Leone as a sponsorship programme but finding the available quality of schooling insufficient to change children's lives they decided to start their own school. The first EducAid school started with 20 children on the veranda of a rented house but was the forerunner to a network of schools which now runs at the heart of a school improvement programme working to support change across the education ecosystem in Sierra Leone.

***David Galloway*** developed his lifelong interest in the effect of schools on their pupils' behaviour and psychosocial development while working as an educational psychologist in Sheffield, UK. After appointments in Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand and Cardiff and Lancaster Universities, UK, he joined Durham University where he was Professor of Primary Education, and Head of the School of Education. Since retirement from his full time post, he has run workshops on school improvement in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Tanzania, Sri Lanka, Sierra Leone, China and Hong Kong.

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# FOREWORD

The delivery of free, quality education for all children and young people has been my priority as the Minister of Basic and Senior Secondary Education in Sierra Leone. Most recently, my team and I institutionalised an agenda for radical inclusion as part of the country's vision for human capital development. In doing so, I outlined a promise to provide equitable learning opportunities to the most marginalised and excluded in society. This book provides an important and timely message on the need to build learning communities to fulfil this promise.

In this book, Mason and Galloway provide grounded and critical insights on the challenges that the education sector currently faces. In particular, the book disentangles the historic roots of systemic barriers to school improvement, elaborates the impact of successive national crises on teachers and unpacks the limited success of previous education interventions. This analysis sets up a platform for a research-based approach to address these issues.

Drawing on EducAid's decades of experience of providing quality education to the most vulnerable in Sierra Leone, Mason and Galloway highlight the importance of using evidence to promote school improvement centred around pedagogy and teaching. The book draws attention to the critical role of professional learning networks in fostering a dialogic and respectful climate in which principals and teachers share

and reflect on their experiences to 'lever up' learning. This close-up analysis shows the significant, positive impact of professional learning networks on the attendance and learning of students.

The accompanying practitioner's manual provides a step-by-step guide for those looking to build the capacity of teachers and school leaders to lead school-level change. The guide can help education leaders to implement and adapt lessons from this research to deliver continuing professional development and learning to support children to succeed academically and socially.

These comprehensive resources present a pathway for promoting sustainable school improvement to enable the next generation of Sierra Leoneans — as well as subsequent generations — to live up to their potential. The core themes of community, equity and impact will continue to echo as we strive towards radical inclusion and free, quality education.

**Dr David Moinina Sengeh**
Honourable Minister of Basic and Senior Secondary Education and Chief Innovation Officer for the Directorate of Science, Technology and Innovation for the Government of Sierra Leone.
July 2021.

# NOTE ON PRACTITIONERS' MANUAL

This book describes a structured approach to school improvement through continuing professional development and learning (CPDL) for teachers. The focus is on the context, (a low income country in Africa,) the reasons for selecting a structured and potentially replicable approach to CPDL, the methodology and the results. The book does not describe the programme itself in detail. To do so it would have been necessary to describe each of the literacy and numeracy activities that the CPDL team used with primary teachers in the course of ten days intensive work and follow-up over the subsequent year. That would have seriously interrupted the flow of the book. Yet knowing that a project is successful – or encountered problems – is of little or no practical use without knowing details of the project itself. For this reason, Emerald agreed to make the Practitioners Manual available online with purchase of the book, without further cost. This can be accessed on Emerald's Bookstore (books.emeraldinsight.com).

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The EducAid team who delivered the CPDL and collected data for the evaluation deserve credit for their enthusiasm and relentless determination to improve their own practice. They were:

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# 1

# INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

## INTRODUCTION

The school improvement initiative described in this book took place in Sierra Leone. Sierra Leone is a small, engaging yet impoverished country in West Africa, still emerging from the legacy of its colonial past and the shadow of the brutal 11-year war that ended in 2002. The initiative originated in a request to EducAid, a small non-governmental organisation (NGO) with one primary school, two junior secondary schools and two senior secondary schools. The request came from another NGO to EducAid's Country Director (Miriam Mason), and asked EducAid's teachers to provide a workshop-based programme of continuing professional development and learning (CPDL), leading to improvement in a group of five schools in the town where the second NGO was based. The request was unusual in three ways: first, delivering CPDL is normally regarded as a high level skill provided by experienced and well qualified practitioners, but in this case it would be provided by EducAid's Sierra

Leonean teachers, most of whom had received no formal teacher training, let alone training in collecting data for an evaluation of the programme. Second, the admission policy for EducAid's schools gives priority to the most vulnerable children and young people in a country which is still recognised as one of the poorest in the world (UNDP, 2019). It is unusual for teachers in schools with a severely disadvantaged student intake to provide a school improvement programme in other schools. Third, although the principle of apparently effective schools supporting other schools is well established (Chapman & Muijs, 2013) this is not usually attempted through a structured and therefore potentially replicable programme of CPDL.

A combination of circumstances facing teachers in Sierra Leone made the request seem less surprising. The country's chronic economic problems are reflected in historically low levels of funding for schools (Mambo, 2019) and a heavy reliance on international aid for any school improvement initiatives. Funding levels improved following election of a new government in 2018 (Bio, 2018), but reliance on international aid continues. It has had three unfortunate consequences: first, senior staff in international NGOs (INGOs) are paid on Western salary scales which far outstrip salaries for local teachers. This makes their courses expensive and resources seldom stretch to the follow-up that is essential in implementing ideas for change in current methods and practices. Second, INGOs rely on their donors and donors are impressed by the number of schools, teachers and children reached. This has had the unintended consequence of directing attention and resources away from the impact on children's learning. For example, a one-day course offered to every school in one region may legitimately claim to have 'reached' several hundred teachers and several thousand children. That could be useful information in fund raising but there might be little

or no evidence about the impact of the course on children's progress. Third, and perhaps most important, reliance on external aid can create a dependency culture in those receiving it (Welch, 2012). In Sierra Leone and other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, teachers welcome courses provided by NGOs as much for the free meals while the course is taking place and payment of their travel expenses as for the actual content. There is seldom any expectation of follow-up, nor of sustained change in existing classroom practices (Robinson, Hohepa, & Lloyd, 2009).

More seriously, teachers claim, with some justification, that they are working in a resource-limited environment. This increases their reliance on international aid for CPDL. Together, lack of resources and reliance on aid provide apparently solid reasons for teachers to attribute children's lack of progress to factors over which they themselves have no control. When people feel that they have no control over their current circumstances, change is unlikely, as predicted by attributional theories of motivation (Weiner, 1986). Motivation is widely thought of as necessary for learning, but a feeling of loss of control can lead to maladaptive motivational strategies, both in teachers and in children. A 'learned helplessness' strategy can develop, in which teachers believe that nothing can enable them to achieve better standards and, consequently, there is no point in trying. This is seen in the widespread tolerance of teachers arriving late for classes (DFID, 2018). Similarly, little teaching takes place in the first fortnight of each new term due to late arrivals (DFID, 2018). It can also lead to self-protective strategies (Covington, 1992) in which teachers convince themselves that their students could achieve higher standards, but find reasons for not helping them to do so, for example, lack of opportunities locally for employment that requires more than the most basic education.

## THE COLONIAL LEGACY (OR THE CHALLENGE OF HISTORY)

To understand the challenges facing teachers in Sierra Leone's schools today, it is important to understand the legacy of colonial rule and the enduring consequences of the civil war. The latter should more properly be described as internal fighting as there was no clear demarcation between two modes of government as in the English civil war, nor between ethnic groups as in Sri Lanka, or cultural groups as in Bosnia and Herzegovina and, arguably, in Northern Ireland. Rather, the internal fighting may be seen as a predictable consequence of events since independence in 1961, which in turn may be seen as a predictable consequence of events leading up to independence. Education in Sierra Leone today cannot be seen in isolation from the country's history.

Freetown, the capital, was founded in 1787 (Negassa, 2011) with a disastrous attempt to give 380 slaves freed in Britain by a famous court case (*Somerset* v *Stewart*, 1772) a new home with opportunities for eventual self-government. Unfortunately, no one had given much thought to the fact that Freetown was already an active centre of the West African slave trade and had been since the 1560s when Queen Elizabeth gave funds for John Hawkins' second expedition as his first had been so profitable. Nor was much thought given to agreements with local rulers. A further 1,190 former slaves arrived in 1792, freed after settling in Canada having fought for the British in the American War of Independence. These formed the nucleus of the Krios who became influential in the new colony of Freetown and the immediate surrounding area. The slave trade, however, continued unabated, with more trading in 1821 than in any previous year. White slave traders grew rich on the profits. So did local chiefs in the hinterland beyond Freetown. This increased economic tensions

between Freetown and the surrounding regions which led to inclusion within Sierra Leone of the 'Protectorate' in 1896. Broadly, British law applied in the colony; in the Protectorate Britain was responsible for defence and foreign policy, but local customs had precedence over British law. The post-war Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) commented that 'The colonial government effectively created two nations in the same land' (Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2004). Fyfe (1962) described an 'inglorious' union based on 'irresponsible exploitation'. This is important because, although Freetown's harbour was strategically and commercially important, much of Sierra Leone's wealth came from the Protectorate, where local chiefs retained a high level of control.

The colonial government tried to resolve the resulting tensions between the Krios in Freetown and the Protectorate by making the chiefdoms smaller, and thus easier to control. According to Manson, Knight, and McClanahan (2012) the colonial government:

> *sated the chiefs by offering them 5% of the hut tax takings (a deeply resented property tax that led to an uprising) – making civil servants of them – and honouring them with sweeteners, thus ingraining and nurturing corruption in a system they willingly created. (p. 9)*

The power of chiefs in the Protectorate is illustrated in the continuing acceptance of enforced servitude. Although the slave trade was abolished in all British colonies in 1833 the autonomy of local chiefs allowed it to continue in the Protectorate and it was still said to be increasing as late as 1842 (Arkley, 2012). In the 1921 census, there were six tribes with 20 or more per cent of 'persons in servitude'. In total 15% of people

in 16 tribes were recorded as being in servitude. The chiefs' power was supported by secret societies that wreaked violent revenge on opposition. A new governor in 1922 found no local support from the churches, the chiefs or the white community, for abolishing enforced servitude or, more bluntly, slavery in the Protectorate. He made some progress but a 1927 Supreme Court case in Freetown ruled, somewhat reluctantly, that the right to 'property' included slave owners regaining their runaway slaves. The controversy this provoked led to the eventual abolition of slavery in the Protectorate in 1928 (Simon, 1929).

The distinction between the colony and the Protectorate also had long-lasting educational consequences. The Krios in the colony had a strong commitment to education. The 1860 census showed 22% of the colony of Freetown as educated, higher than England at the time (13%). This was due to missionary enthusiasm and Krio families' determination to take advantage of new opportunities for their children. In 1876, Fourah Bay College in Freetown was recognised as a constituent college of Durham University in the UK. The first African graduates of a Western university were Durham graduates from Fourah Bay and the College became known as the 'Athens of West Africa'. During the war, senior Ghanaian and Nigerian officers in the UN peace-keeping force are said to have insisted on visiting the site of their *alma mater.* (The relationship with Durham continued until 1967, six years after independence. Later, Fourah Bay College became incorporated into the University of Sierra Leone.) This initial success could not withstand growing numbers of children when the Protectorate became part of Sierra Leone in 1896. Sierra Leone retained a reputation for a commitment to education, but it was based largely on Fourah Bay College and elite secondary schools in Freetown. While the urban–rural divide certainly played a part, the cultural differences between the colony and the Protectorate were, and remain, influential.

*The long road to independence.* In 1865, the colonial power made a commitment to prepare African countries for self-government. By 1892, half of senior government posts were held by Africans and Sierra Leone had had black governors. Yet this impetus was lost and by 1912 only 10% of senior posts were held by Africans. It was not until 1947, after 17,000 Sierra Leoneans had served in the British forces in the Second World War, that a new constitution began to prepare for self-government. However, the 60,000 Krios in the colony, who saw themselves as the ruling class, were heavily outnumbered by the two million tribal members in the Protectorate and in 1953 the colonial government excluded all Krios from the Executive Council in favour of the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) which had tribal and trade unionist support. An attempt by the All People's Congress (APC) to secure free elections prior to independence in April 1961 was defeated when a state of emergency was declared and all 43 APC leaders were locked up for a month.

In 1966, an attempt by the SLPP to ban all other parties failed and the following year the APC came to power. The President survived at least four army coups between 1967 and 1974. Initial popular support evaporated in the face of corruption and dictatorial government and a referendum in 1978 made the APC the only legal political party in the country. The subsequent decade was marked by chronic corruption and in 1989 six men were hanged for their part in a plot to overthrow the government. A proposal to re-establish a multi-party system in 1991 failed to get off the ground. The President ran down the army to reduce the risk of a military coup. Consequently, when 2,000 men invaded Sierra Leone from Liberia in 1991, thus starting the war, there were only 1,000 soldiers to stand against them.

The war was not caused simply by corruption and incompetence in government or an under-resourced military. Many

other factors contributed to it. Chronic poverty, tensions with a neighbouring state, a demand for diamonds from unscrupulous Western interests, a resentful rump of young adults and teenagers in the city, inter-tribal tensions, the effect of drugs in exacerbating cruelty among poorly led fighters, international terrorism and the use of mercenaries all played a part.

The causes of the war, with its roots deeply embedded in colonial history, and its course and the atrocities carried out, are beyond the scope of this book. They are well described in a report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2004). But emerging from a national trauma of this kind takes time, and that is relevant. While there has undoubtedly been progress, Sierra Leone remains one of the ten poorest countries in the world (UNDP, 2019) and, as in many very poor countries, corruption remains endemic at all levels of society (Katta, 2016). Reliance on Western aid and a sharp inflow of foreign currency from Western investment, for example, in oil reserves, has led to currency appreciation, making the country's other products less competitive on the export market. Whereas Sierra Leone used to export over half its rice crop, a large majority now has to be imported: 1.6 million tonnes in 2018, in contrast to 700,000 tonnes produced domestically (Demaree-Saddler, 2020). In turn, this leads to higher levels of cheap imports and can trigger deindustrialisation as industries, apart from those involved in exploiting local resources, move to cheaper locations. There is still huge disparity in wealth between the elite in Freetown and a majority of the people, with entrenched mistrust between the government and the governed.

The 2014–2015 Ebola epidemic can be seen as a consequence of deeply ingrained problems. Widespread resistance to official advice about preventing its spread, combined with suspicion of the motives of Western aid agencies that were