

# Access, Equity, and Social Inclusion Under Sierra Leone's Free Quality School Education Programme: A Mixed-Methods Evaluation from Kenema District

Albert Williams<sup>1</sup>, Joseph James Mbavai<sup>2</sup>, Samuel Joseph Bebeley<sup>3</sup>, Prince Tongor Mabey<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>(Department of Teacher Education, Faculty of Education, Eastern Technical University of Sierra Leone, Kenema, Sierra Leone)

<sup>2</sup>(Department of Teacher Education (Secondary), Njala University, Bo, Sierra Leone)

<sup>3</sup>(Department of Health Education and Behavioural Sciences, School of Education, Njala University, Bo, Sierra Leone)

<sup>4</sup>(Department of Health Education and Behavioural Sciences, School of Education, Njala University, Bo, Sierra Leone)

**Corresponding Author -- Albert Williams.**

**ABSTRACT:** This study evaluates the effectiveness of Sierra Leone's Free Quality School Education (FQSE) Programme in promoting educational equity and social inclusion in Kenema District. A mixed-methods cross-sectional design combined questionnaire data from 250 respondents with Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions across nine predominantly rural chiefdoms. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, independent-samples *t*-tests, and one-way ANOVA, while qualitative evidence was thematically analysed. Guided by Rawls' Social Justice Theory, the findings show that FQSE substantially expanded enrolment and reduced direct financial barriers, but improvements in attendance, retention, completion, and social inclusion remained limited. Respondents identified household poverty, indirect schooling costs, long travel distances, child labour, early marriage, adolescent pregnancy, inadequate infrastructure, disability-related barriers, and weak implementation of equity policies as persistent constraints. No statistically significant differences were found by gender or chiefdom. The study concludes that sustainable equity requires stronger policy implementation, equitable resource allocation, inclusive infrastructure, continuous teacher development, targeted support for vulnerable learners, and robust monitoring and evaluation.

**KEYWORDS:** Educational Equity, Free Quality School Education, Kenema District, Sierra Leone, Social Inclusion

---

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Free Quality School Education (FQSE) Programme stands as Sierra Leone's most consequential educational reform of the post-conflict era. Launched in August 2018 under President Julius Maada Bio, the programme abolished tuition fees across all government and government-assisted pre-primary, primary, and secondary schools, providing textbooks and other teaching and learning materials and committing the government to funding

the full core costs of public schooling <sup>[2]</sup>. Within four years of its introduction, total enrolment across all levels rose from approximately 1.98 million in 2018 to 3.34 million in 2022, an increase of 69%, and the national education budget was elevated to approximately 20 – 21% of total government expenditure, signalling a historic political commitment to human capital development <sup>[7, 16, 17]</sup>.

Despite these remarkable gains, the translation of expanded access into equitable educational participation and improved learning outcomes remains incomplete. Sierra Leone's Education Sector Plan (2018 – 2023) and the Radical Inclusion Policy (2021) jointly emphasise that realising the objectives of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) – inclusive, equitable, quality education for all – requires not simply the removal of tuition fees but the systematic dismantling of the structural, geographical, socio-cultural, and economic barriers that continue to prevent many children from enrolling, attending, and completing their education <sup>[3, 4, 8, 15]</sup>.

Rural communities across Sierra Leone, including much of Kenema District in the Eastern Province, continue to experience acute shortages of qualified teachers, deteriorating school infrastructure, limited teaching and learning materials, and prohibitively long travel distances to the nearest school <sup>[20, 25]</sup>. Girls remain disproportionately vulnerable: nearly 40% of girls in Sierra Leone are married before the age of 18, and adolescent pregnancy and child marriage continue to constitute primary drivers of female school dropout at the secondary level <sup>[14, 36]</sup>. Learners with disabilities face compounding barriers including absent disability-friendly infrastructure, a near-total lack of assistive devices and specialist educational materials, and teachers with insufficient training in inclusive pedagogy <sup>[25, 27, 28]</sup>.

This paper situates these challenges within Rawls' Social Justice Theory <sup>[1]</sup>, which proposes two foundational principles for a just society: that all individuals should enjoy equal basic liberties, and that social and economic inequalities are only permissible insofar as they benefit the least advantaged members of society – the 'difference principle'. Applied to education, Rawls' framework demands that educational resources and opportunities be distributed in ways that specifically address the disadvantages of the most marginalised learners, not merely extend nominal access to schooling. The FQSE Programme embodies this Rawlsian aspiration in its policy architecture, but the evidence examined in this paper reveals persistent gaps between the programme's redistributive intent and its implementation outcomes.

Kenema District, one of sixteen districts in Sierra Leone, covering approximately 6,053 km<sup>2</sup> and with an estimated population of 609,873 <sup>[5]</sup>, provides an instructive case for evaluating these dynamics. The district is characterised by high levels of rural poverty, agricultural dependence, artisanal diamond mining, and chronic underinvestment in educational infrastructure, particularly across its more remote chiefdoms. The present study focused on nine predominantly rural chiefdoms: Dama, Dodo, Gaura, Koya, Malegohun, Simbaru, Small Bo, Wandor, and Tunkia, where educational access, retention, and social inclusion remain especially precarious.

### **1.1 Purpose of the Study**

The main purpose of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of Sierra Leone's Free Quality School Education (FQSE) Programme in promoting educational equity and social inclusion in Kenema District. Specifically, the study aims to assess the extent to which the FQSE Programme has improved equitable access to education and examine its effectiveness in enhancing pupils' enrolment, retention, attendance, and completion across rural chiefdoms.

### **1.2 Research Questions**

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. To what extent has the Free Quality School Education Programme improved equitable access to education in Kenema District, Sierra Leone?
2. How effective is the Free Quality School Education Programme in enhancing pupils' enrolment, retention, attendance, and completion across rural chiefdoms in Kenema District?

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Rawls' Social Justice Theory <sup>[1]</sup>, which provides a normative framework for evaluating the FQSE Programme's effectiveness in promoting educational equity. Rawls proposes two foundational principles for a just society: first, that all individuals should enjoy equal basic liberties; and second, that social and economic inequalities are only permissible insofar as they benefit the least advantaged members of society – the 'difference principle'. Applied to education, Rawls' framework demands that educational resources and opportunities be distributed in ways that specifically address the disadvantages of the most marginalised learners, not merely extend nominal access to schooling.

The FQSE Programme embodies this Rawlsian aspiration in its policy architecture, as it seeks to remove financial barriers and expand access to education for all children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, as this study demonstrates, there remain persistent gaps between the programme's redistributive intent and its implementation outcomes. The theoretical lens of social justice thus enables a critical examination of whether the programme is achieving its equity objectives or whether it is perpetuating existing inequalities through inadequate implementation.

### 2.2 Improvement of Equitable Access to Education Through Free Quality Education

The relationship between free education policies and equitable access to education has been extensively documented in the literature. Globally, the abolition of school fees has been recognised as a critical intervention for removing the most direct financial barrier to schooling, particularly for children from economically disadvantaged households <sup>[31]</sup>. Studies from sub-Saharan Africa have demonstrated that fee-free education policies consistently produce rapid enrolment gains, with countries such as Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania experiencing significant increases in primary and secondary school enrolment following the introduction of such policies <sup>[12,38]</sup>.

However, research also indicates that eliminating tuition fees alone is insufficient to guarantee equitable educational participation. UNESCO <sup>[9,11]</sup> has emphasised that indirect costs – including uniforms, transport, learning materials, and other school-related expenses – continue to function as de facto barriers even where tuition has been abolished. Furthermore, structural factors such as geographical remoteness, inadequate school infrastructure, teacher shortages, and socio-cultural norms continue to limit access for marginalised groups, including girls, children with disabilities, and learners from poverty-affected households <sup>[25,29]</sup>.

In the Sierra Leonean context, the FQSE Programme has been credited with significant gains in access, with total enrolment across all levels increasing by 69% between 2018 and 2022 <sup>[7]</sup>. However, studies have also documented persistent challenges, including inadequate funding, delayed disbursement of school subsidies, teacher shortages, and weak monitoring and evaluation systems <sup>[20,15]</sup>. Kabba and Sesay <sup>[20]</sup> note that while the programme has expanded access, the quality of education and equity of participation remain concerns, particularly in rural areas where resource constraints are most acute.

### **2.3 The Effectiveness of Free Quality School Education Programme in Enhancing Pupils' Enrolment, Retention, Attendance, and Completion**

The effectiveness of free education policies in enhancing enrolment, retention, attendance, and completion has been a subject of extensive research. Evidence from across sub-Saharan Africa demonstrates a consistent pattern: fee abolition policies achieve rapid enrolment increases but struggle to convert these gains into sustained attendance and completion [37,38]. This pattern has been observed in Tanzania's Fee-Free Education policy [38], Uganda's Universal Primary and Secondary Education programmes, and Kenya's Free Primary Education initiative, all of which achieved rapid enrolment increases followed by persistent dropout driven by indirect costs, child labour, and household poverty [37].

In Sierra Leone, the FQSE Programme has similarly achieved significant enrolment gains, but challenges of retention and completion persist. Turay et al. [21] found that while the programme increased access to secondary education, its impact on academic performance in the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) was limited, suggesting that access alone does not guarantee quality learning outcomes. The Radical Inclusion Policy [4] recognises these challenges and seeks to address the specific barriers faced by marginalised learners, including girls, children with disabilities, and learners from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The barriers to retention and completion are multifaceted. At the household level, poverty, child labour, early marriage, and adolescent pregnancy continue to drive dropout, particularly among girls [35,36]. At the institutional level, teacher shortages, inadequate infrastructure, and weak implementation of inclusive education policies limit the capacity of schools to support vulnerable learners [25,27]. Research by Osborne et al. [40] found that vulnerable student populations in Sierra Leone continue to face exclusion and marginalisation despite policy commitments to inclusion, highlighting the gap between policy intent and implementation reality.

## **III. MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### **3.1 Research Design**

This study adopted a mixed-methods and cross-sectional research design to evaluate the effectiveness of the Free Quality School Education Programme in promoting educational equity and social inclusion in Kenema District [41,42]. The design integrated quantitative data – including enrolment-related perceptions and Likert-scale assessments of programme effectiveness – with qualitative insights obtained through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with teachers, students, parents, community representatives, and education stakeholders [43]. A cross-sectional approach was selected because it enables the collection of comprehensive evidence from a representative population at a defined point in time, facilitating the description of current conditions and the identification of associations among key variables [46,47]. The mixed-methods framework enhanced analytical depth by allowing quantitative trends in respondents' perceptions to be complemented and contextualised by qualitative accounts of lived experiences and implementation realities, thereby strengthening the validity and credibility of conclusions through triangulation.

### **3.2 Study Area**

The study was conducted in Kenema District, Eastern Province, Sierra Leone (approximately 7.88°N, 11.19°W). Covering approximately 6,053 km<sup>2</sup>, the district is divided into sixteen chiefdoms and had an estimated population of 609,873 as of the 2021 census [5]. The district economy is largely dependent on agriculture, including rice, cocoa, coffee, oil palm, and cassava, alongside artisanal diamond mining and petty trading. Despite these economic activities, many rural communities experience persistent poverty, inadequate educational infrastructure, limited qualified teacher deployment, and unequal access to quality schooling, making Kenema District an appropriate and practically significant setting for evaluating the FQSE Programme. The study focused on nine

predominantly rural chiefdoms: Dama, Dodo, Gaura, Koya, Malegohun, Simbaru, Small Bo, Wandor, and Tunkia, where the challenges of access, retention, and inclusive education are most pronounced.

### 3.3 Population and Sample

The target population consisted of all education stakeholders in the junior and senior secondary school level of Kenema District. The accessible population specifically included teachers, head teachers, district education officers, NGO/partner representatives, community representatives, and students from government-assisted schools across the nine sampled chiefdoms.

The study involved 259 participants initially approached, of whom 250 completed usable questionnaires, representing a 96.5% response rate. The final sample comprised 125 teachers, 25 head teachers, 13 district education officers, 12 NGO/partner representatives, 13 community representatives, and 62 students, drawn from government-assisted junior and senior secondary schools and key education stakeholder organisations across the nine sampled chiefdoms.

School selection followed a multi-stage stratified cluster sampling approach. Chiefdoms constituted the primary sampling stratum, divided into urban and rural categories; schools within each chiefdom formed the secondary cluster. Teachers and students were selected from within clusters using simple random sampling. School administrators were selected purposively based on their institutional roles, while key informants for qualitative instruments – including district education officials, NGO representatives, and community leaders – were selected using criterion-based purposive sampling on the grounds of direct relevance to FQSE implementation and monitoring <sup>[44,45]</sup>.

### 3.4 Instrumentation and Data Collection

Primary data were collected through four instruments:

1. **Structured Questionnaires:** Five-point Likert-scale items (Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree) were administered to teacher, student, and administrator respondents to assess perceptions of equitable access, enrolment, retention, attendance, completion, social inclusion, resource availability, and implementation challenges.
2. **Key Informant Interview (KII) Guides:** These were administered to MBSSE officials, Teaching Service Commission (TSC) personnel, District Education Officers (DEOs), and head teachers to capture policy-level perspectives and implementation challenges.
3. **Focus Group Discussion (FGD) Guides:** These were used with teacher groups and student groups to generate deeper collective insights into programme implementation dynamics.
4. **Direct Observations:** Observations of school infrastructure, disability accessibility, and classroom environments supplemented these instruments.

Secondary data were drawn from institutional policy documents, national education sector plans, annual school census reports, and peer-reviewed literature to contextualise and triangulate the primary findings.

### 3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were entered into SPSS Version 26 for cleaning and analysis. Descriptive statistics – frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations – were computed for demographic variables and Likert-scale items. An independent samples t-test was conducted to determine whether significant gender differences existed in respondents' perceptions of the programme's effectiveness. A one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) tested

whether perceptions differed significantly across the nine sampled chiefdoms. Statistical significance was set at  $p < 0.05$  throughout.

Qualitative data from KII and FGD transcripts were thematically analysed following the six-phase framework of Braun and Clarke [48]: (1) familiarisation with data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Findings were presented narratively, supported by selected verbatim quotations. Quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated through triangulation to confirm convergence and explain divergence, strengthening the interpretive authority of conclusions.

### 3.6 Ethical Considerations

Formal permission was secured from school authorities and the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education prior to data collection. Participants received introductory letters detailing the study's purpose, their right to decline or withdraw at any time without consequence, and the measures in place to protect confidentiality. All responses were treated anonymously; no personal identifiers appear in the data or the reporting of findings. The study adhered to established standards for research ethics involving human participants, including informed consent, anonymisation, and secure data management.

## IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Response Rate

The study achieved a response rate of 96.5%, with 250 out of 259 initially approached participants completing usable questionnaires. This high response rate significantly enhances the validity and reliability of the findings and minimises the risk of non-response bias.

### 4.2 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 4.1 presents the demographic characteristics of the 250 respondents who participated in the study. Male respondents constituted the majority (60.0%), while females accounted for 40.0%, providing perspectives from both genders on the implementation of the FQSE Programme. The respondents were predominantly within the economically active age groups, with 30 – 39 years representing the largest proportion (30.0%), followed by 20 – 29 years (25.2%) and 40 – 49 years (20.0%). Students aged 15 – 19 years constituted 15.2% of the sample, ensuring that learners' experiences were adequately represented.

**TABLE 4.1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents**

| Variable | Category | Frequency<br>(n) | Percentage<br>(%) |
|----------|----------|------------------|-------------------|
| Gender   | Male     | 150              | 60.0              |
|          | Female   | 100              | 40.0              |
|          | Total    | 250              | 100.0             |

| Variable                    | Category                            | Frequency<br>(n) | Percentage<br>(%) |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| <b>Age Group</b>            | 15 - 19 years                       | 38               | 15.2              |
|                             | 20 - 29 years                       | 63               | 25.2              |
|                             | 30 - 39 years                       | 75               | 30.0              |
|                             | 40 - 49 years                       | 50               | 20.0              |
|                             | 50 years and above                  | 24               | 9.6               |
|                             | <b>Total</b>                        | <b>250</b>       | <b>100.0</b>      |
| <b>Designation/Position</b> | Teacher                             | 125              | 50.0              |
|                             | Head Teacher                        | 25               | 10.0              |
|                             | District Education Officer          | 13               | 5.2               |
|                             | NGO/Partner Representative          | 12               | 4.8               |
|                             | Community Representative            | 13               | 5.2               |
|                             | Student                             | 62               | 24.8              |
|                             | <b>Total</b>                        | <b>250</b>       | <b>100.0</b>      |
| <b>Level of Education</b>   | Junior Secondary School Certificate | 38               | 15.2              |
|                             | Senior Secondary School Certificate | 50               | 20.0              |
|                             | HTC/Diploma/Teachers' Certificate   | 75               | 30.0              |
|                             | Bachelor's Degree                   | 62               | 24.8              |
|                             | Master's Degree                     | 25               | 10.0              |
|                             | <b>Total</b>                        | <b>250</b>       | <b>100.0</b>      |



| Variable                               | Category           | Frequency (n) | Percentage (%) |
|----------------------------------------|--------------------|---------------|----------------|
| Years of Professional Experience       | 0 - 5 years        | 50            | 20.0           |
|                                        | 6 - 10 years       | 75            | 30.0           |
|                                        | 11 - 15 years      | 63            | 25.2           |
|                                        | 16 years and above | 62            | 24.8           |
|                                        | <b>Total</b>       | <b>250</b>    | <b>100.0</b>   |
| Student Population Size                | Fewer than 100     | 25            | 10.0           |
|                                        | 100 - 200          | 63            | 25.2           |
|                                        | 201 - 300          | 100           | 40.0           |
|                                        | More than 300      | 62            | 24.8           |
|                                        | <b>Total</b>       | <b>250</b>    | <b>100.0</b>   |
| Presence of Learners with Disabilities | Yes                | 75            | 30.0           |
|                                        | No                 | 175           | 70.0           |
|                                        | <b>Total</b>       | <b>250</b>    | <b>100.0</b>   |

**Source: Field survey data 2026**

Regarding professional designation, teachers formed half of the respondents (50.0%), reflecting their central role in implementing the FQSE Programme. Students constituted 24.8%, while head teachers (10.0%), district education officers (5.2%), community representatives (5.2%), and NGO/partner representatives (4.8%) provided administrative, policy, and community perspectives. In terms of educational attainment, the largest proportion of respondents possessed HTC/Diploma/Teachers' Certificate qualifications (30.0%), followed by bachelor's degrees (24.8%), senior secondary school certificates (20.0%), junior secondary school certificates (15.2%), and master's degrees (10.0%), indicating that respondents were sufficiently qualified to provide informed opinions on the programme.

The findings also show that 80.0% of respondents had more than five years of professional experience, implying that most participants had extensive understanding of educational practices prior to and following the implementation of the FQSE Programme. The majority of respondents were from medium- and large-sized schools, with 40.0% working in schools with 201 to 300 students and 24.8% in schools with more than 300



students. Finally, only 30.0% of respondents acknowledged the presence of students with disabilities in their schools, while 70.0% stated that there were no students with disabilities. This data reveals that students with disabilities are still under-represented in mainstream schools, underlining ongoing challenges to inclusive education despite the adoption of the FQSE Programme.

#### 4.3 Extent to Which the FQSE Programme Has Improved Access to Education

Table 4.2 presents respondents' assessments of the FQSE Programme's impact on educational access and social inclusion among Kenema District students. Overall, the data show that respondents evaluated the programme's contribution to educational equity and social inclusion to be below expectations, with all mean scores falling below the benchmark mean of 3.00. This shows that, while the FQSE Programme has helped to extend educational options, significant socioeconomic, cultural, institutional, and infrastructural constraints continue to impede genuine social inclusion among students.

**TABLE 4.2: Respondents' Views on the Extent to Which the FQSE Programme Has Improved Access to Education (N = 250)**

| <b>Indicators: Extent to which FQSE Improved Access to Education</b> | <b>Disagree (%)</b> | <b>Neutral (%)</b> | <b>Agree (%)</b> | <b>Mean</b> | <b>Std. Dev.</b> |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------|------------------|-------------|------------------|
| Gender inclusion by providing equal opportunities for boys and girls | 45.3                | 18.0               | 36.7             | 2.82        | 1.19             |
| Inclusion of learners from low-income households                     | 51.6                | 16.4               | 32.0             | 2.64        | 1.21             |
| Inclusion of learners with disabilities in mainstream schools        | 55.5                | 14.8               | 29.7             | 2.57        | 1.18             |
| Reduced inequalities between pupils in rural and urban schools       | 57.0                | 15.6               | 27.4             | 2.49        | 1.16             |
| Equal opportunities for all pupils regardless of background          | 47.7                | 17.2               | 35.1             | 2.78        | 1.22             |
| Equity and social inclusion policies are effectively implemented     | 53.1                | 17.2               | 29.7             | 2.59        | 1.17             |

**Source: Field survey data 2026**

*Note. Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree. Mean < 3.00 indicates below-expectation performance on the indicator.*

The results first examined whether the FQSE Programme has encouraged gender inclusion by giving boys and girls equal access to education. While 36.7% agreed and 18.0% were neutral, a total of 45.3% disagreed that the initiative had equally improved educational opportunities for males and girls. The mean score of 2.82 (SD = 1.19), the highest of all the measures, indicates that respondents acknowledged a moderate level of progress in advancing gender inclusion. However, they felt that adolescent pregnancy, early marriage, household obligations, and

established sociocultural traditions continue to threaten equal educational participation, especially for girls. This finding was supported during the Focus Group Discussion conducted in Small Bo Chiefdom, where one participant explained:

*"Many girls now enrol because education is free, but some still leave school because of pregnancy, early marriage and responsibilities at home. These problems continue to affect girls more than boys."*

The qualitative evidence therefore suggests that although the FQSE Programme has enhanced girls' access to education, broader socio-cultural challenges continue to limit full educational inclusion.

The study also evaluated whether the programme has helped students from low-income households become more socially integrated. According to the findings, 51.6% disagreed that children from economically poor homes had equal educational possibilities, while 32.0% agreed and 16.4% were neutral. Despite the elimination of school fees, the corresponding mean score of 2.64 (SD = 1.21) shows that respondents believed poverty to be a significant obstacle to educational social inclusion. Many vulnerable students are still unable to fully participate in school because of hidden costs. This finding was reinforced during the Focus Group Discussion in Wandor Chiefdom, where one participant stated:

*"School is free, but parents still struggle to buy uniforms, exercise books and pay transport. Some children stay home during farming seasons because their families cannot meet these additional costs."*

This qualitative evidence confirms that indirect educational costs continue to undermine the programme's objective of promoting inclusive education for children from poor households.

The study also examined respondents' attitudes toward the social inclusion of learners with disabilities. The results showed that 55.5% disagreed that learners with disabilities were adequately included in the FQSE Programme, whereas 29.7% agreed and 14.8% remained neutral. The mean score of 2.57 (SD = 1.18) indicates that respondents thought current support methods for learners with disabilities were inadequate. Learners with disabilities continue to face barriers to meaningful participation due to a lack of disability-friendly infrastructure, a shortage of assistive devices, insufficient specialised instructional materials, and poor teacher preparation. Similarly, participants during the Focus Group Discussion in Tunkia Chiefdom highlighted the challenges faced by these learners. One participant remarked:

*"Children with disabilities are accepted into schools, but many schools do not have ramps, specialised teachers or learning materials that can support them effectively. Some parents therefore keep these children at home."*

The qualitative findings therefore indicate that enrolment alone does not guarantee educational social inclusion unless schools possess the facilities, resources, and professional capacity necessary to support learners with diverse educational needs.

Additionally, respondents were asked if the FQSE Programme reduced the disparity between students in rural and urban schools. At 2.49 (SD = 1.16), this indicator had the lowest mean score. While 27.4% agreed and 15.6% were neutral, the majority of 57.0% disagreed that the initiative had lessened the differences between rural and urban schools. These results imply that there are still significant disparities in the distribution of skilled educators, school facilities, instructional materials, and other educational resources, which restricts the educational social inclusion of students attending rural schools.

The study also looked into whether the FQSE Programme provided equitable opportunity for all students, regardless of their social or economic background. According to the data, 47.7% disputed that the programme

provided equitable educational chances for all learners, while 35.1% agreed and 17.2% remained neutral. The associated mean score of 2.78 (SD = 1.22) indicates that, while school enrolment has improved, educational opportunities remain unequal among different types of learners. Poverty, geographical remoteness, disability, and household socioeconomic constraints continue to limit students' capacity to fully participate in education. This finding was corroborated during the Focus Group Discussion in Gaura Chieftdom, where one participant observed:

*"The Free Quality School Education Programme has encouraged many parents to send their children to school because school fees are no longer charged. However, children from remote villages still face challenges because some communities are far from schools and parents cannot always afford transport or other school expenses."*

This evidence suggests that while the programme has expanded educational opportunities, equal participation has not yet been achieved for all learners.

Finally, the study examined respondents' perceptions regarding the implementation of equity and social inclusion policies under the FQSE Programme. A majority of 53.1% disagreed that policies promoting educational equity and social inclusion were being effectively implemented, whereas 29.7% agreed and 17.2% remained neutral. The mean score of 2.59 (SD = 1.17) indicates that although policy frameworks exist to promote inclusive education, implementation challenges continue to limit their effectiveness. Respondents attributed these challenges to inadequate funding, weak monitoring and evaluation systems, delayed disbursement of school subsidies, shortages of qualified personnel, and limited institutional capacity to support inclusive education.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that although the FQSE Programme has made notable progress in promoting educational access, particularly by increasing school participation and reducing direct financial barriers, respondents believed that the programme has not yet achieved full social inclusion among pupils in Kenema District. Both the quantitative and qualitative findings indicate that gender disparities, poverty, disability-related barriers, rural–urban inequalities, and weaknesses in the implementation of inclusion policies continue to hinder equitable participation in education.

#### 4.4 Effectiveness of the FQSE Programme in Enhancing Enrolment, Retention, Attendance, and Completion

Table 4.3 presents respondents' perceptions of ten dimensions of the FQSE Programme's effectiveness in enhancing learner enrolment, retention, attendance, and completion. A differentiated pattern emerges: increased pupil enrolment was the sole indicator to record a mean score above the benchmark of 3.00 (M = 3.42, SD = 1.12; 50.8% agreement), while all remaining indicators recorded mean scores below 3.00 (range: 2.45–2.74).

**TABLE 4.3: Respondents' Views on the Effectiveness of the FQSE Programme in Enhancing Enrolment, Retention, Attendance, and Completion (N = 250)**

| Indicators: Effectiveness of FQSE in Enhancing Enrolment, Retention and Completion | Disagree (%) | Neutral (%) | Agree (%) | Mean | Std. Dev. |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|-------------|-----------|------|-----------|
| The FQSE Programme has increased pupil enrolment                                   | 30.5         | 18.8        | 50.8      | 3.42 | 1.12      |
| The FQSE Programme has improved pupils' regular school attendance                  | 52.3         | 17.2        | 30.5      | 2.66 | 1.18      |

| <b>Indicators: Effectiveness of FQSE in Enhancing Enrolment, Retention and Completion</b>      | <b>Disagree (%)</b> | <b>Neutral (%)</b> | <b>Agree (%)</b> | <b>Mean</b> | <b>Std. Dev.</b> |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------|------------------|-------------|------------------|
| The FQSE Programme has reduced pupil dropout rates                                             | 53.9                | 16.4               | 29.7             | 2.62        | 1.19             |
| The FQSE Programme has improved pupil retention throughout the school year                     | 55.5                | 15.6               | 28.9             | 2.57        | 1.17             |
| The FQSE Programme has increased girls' enrolment, attendance and retention                    | 47.7                | 19.5               | 32.8             | 2.74        | 1.21             |
| The FQSE Programme has improved retention of vulnerable and marginalised learners              | 53.1                | 17.2               | 29.7             | 2.61        | 1.18             |
| The FQSE Programme has improved completion rates among learners with disabilities              | 57.0                | 14.8               | 28.1             | 2.49        | 1.16             |
| The FQSE Programme has improved school support services that encourage pupils to remain        | 51.6                | 18.8               | 29.7             | 2.64        | 1.19             |
| The FQSE Programme has reduced disparities in completion rates between rural and urban schools | 57.8                | 14.8               | 27.4             | 2.45        | 1.15             |
| Overall effectiveness in enhancing enrolment, attendance, retention and completion             | 53.9                | 16.4               | 29.7             | 2.58        | 1.17             |

**Source: Field survey data 2026**

*Note. Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree. Overall mean = 2.58.*

The strongest finding concerns enrolment. A head teacher from Simbaru Chiefdom, interviewed during the KII phase, stated:

*"The removal of school fees has encouraged many parents to enrol their children. Every academic year we continue to receive more new admissions than before the programme was introduced."*

This qualitative account corroborates the quantitative result and is supported by national data: school enrolment across Sierra Leone grew from approximately 1.98 million in 2018 to 3.34 million in 2022 <sup>[7]</sup>, demonstrating the programme's clear success in expanding initial access to the school system.

However, sustaining learner participation throughout the school cycle proved considerably more challenging. Attendance improvement recorded a mean of 2.66 (SD = 1.18; only 30.5% agreement), while dropout reduction scored 2.62 and retention 2.57. A teacher from Dodo Chiefdom explained the mechanisms driving this divergence:

*"Many pupils enrol because education is free, but they do not attend school consistently. During the farming season and market days, many children stay at home to support their families. In fact, some children begin the school year but later drop out because their parents cannot afford uniforms, transport, or other school-related expenses even though tuition is free."*

These accounts illuminate how household poverty and livelihood pressures create a form of conditional enrolment: children enter the school system in response to the fee removal but withdraw when competing demands – child labour, seasonal agricultural work, household responsibilities – prove economically or logistically irresistible for their families <sup>[31,37]</sup>.

Girls' enrolment, attendance, and retention showed only moderate improvement (M = 2.74, SD = 1.21). A head teacher from Koya Chiefdom observed:

*"Girls' enrolment has improved, but many fail to complete the school year because of early marriage, teenage pregnancy, and household responsibilities."*

Retention of vulnerable learners and completion by disabled learners recorded the lowest means (2.61 and 2.49, respectively), while rural-urban completion parity achieved the very lowest score (M = 2.45, SD = 1.15; 27.4% agreement). A participant from Malegohun Chiefdom stated:

*"Schools in remote chiefdoms continue to struggle with shortages of qualified teachers, poor classrooms, inadequate teaching materials, and long distances that pupils must travel every day."*

The overall composite mean for all ten enrolment/retention/completion indicators was 2.58 (SD = 1.17), confirming that while initial enrolment gains are real and significant, the FQSE Programme has thus far been substantially less effective in converting enrolment into regular attendance and successful school completion, particularly for the most vulnerable learner groups<sup>[20,37,38]</sup>.

#### 4.4.1 Independent Samples t-Test: Gender Differences

To determine whether male and female respondents differed significantly in their perceptions of the FQSE Programme's effectiveness in improving enrolment, retention, attendance, and completion, an independent samples t-test was conducted. Table 4.4 shows that male respondents (M = 2.59, SD = 0.58) and female respondents (M = 2.56, SD = 0.61) did not differ statistically significantly ( $t(248) = 0.382$ ,  $p = .703$ ,  $p > .05$ ). The null hypothesis was accordingly accepted. Both male and female respondents shared essentially equivalent assessments of the programme's strengths, particularly its success in expanding enrolment, and its limitations regarding attendance, retention, and completion. This gender-invariant pattern suggests that programme-level challenges are experienced uniformly across respondent gender groups, lending consistency and reliability to the overall findings.

**TABLE 4.4: Independent Samples t-Test: Gender Differences in Perceptions of FQSE Effectiveness on Enrolment, Retention, Attendance, and Completion**

| Variable      | Category | N          | Mean | Std. Deviation | t-value | df  | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|---------------|----------|------------|------|----------------|---------|-----|-----------------|
| <b>Gender</b> | Male     | 150        | 2.59 | 0.58           | 0.382   | 248 | 0.703           |
|               | Female   | 100        | 2.56 | 0.61           |         |     |                 |
| <b>Total</b>  |          | <b>250</b> |      |                |         |     |                 |

*Source: Field survey data 2026*

*Note.  $t(248) = 0.382, p = .703$  (two-tailed,  $p > .05$ ). Null hypothesis accepted.*

#### 4.4.2 One-Way ANOVA: Variation across Chiefdoms

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine whether respondents from the nine sampled chiefdoms differed significantly in their perceptions of the FQSE Programme's effectiveness. Table 4.5 reveals no statistically significant between-group differences ( $F(8, 241) = 0.841, p = .568, p > .05$ ), and the null hypothesis was accepted. This finding indicates that stakeholders across all nine chiefdoms, regardless of their specific geographic location within Kenema District, held broadly consistent perceptions of both the achievements and the limitations of the programme. The absence of significant chiefdom-level variation suggests that the challenges constraining the FQSE Programme's effectiveness are not isolated to particular localities but reflect district-wide systemic conditions of poverty, teacher shortages, inadequate infrastructure, and weak policy implementation.

**TABLE 4.5: One-Way ANOVA: Variation in Perceptions of FQSE Effectiveness across Sampled Chiefdoms**

| Source of Variation | Sum of Squares | df         | Mean Square | F     | Sig.  |
|---------------------|----------------|------------|-------------|-------|-------|
| Between Groups      | 2.016          | 8          | 0.252       | 0.841 | 0.568 |
| Within Groups       | 72.230         | 241        | 0.300       |       |       |
| <b>Total</b>        | <b>74.246</b>  | <b>249</b> |             |       |       |

*Source: Field survey data 2026*

*Note.  $F(8, 241) = 0.841, p = .568$  ( $p > .05$ ). Null hypothesis accepted. Between-groups  $df = 8$ ; within-groups  $df = 241$ .*

## V. CONCLUSION

### 5.1 Summary of Findings

This study examined the effectiveness of Sierra Leone's Free Quality School Education Programme in promoting educational equity and social inclusion in Kenema District. The findings reveal a complex and somewhat paradoxical picture: transformative in its enrolment gains, but constrained in its capacity to deliver the equitable and inclusive educational participation that its policy mandate envisions.

With respect to equitable access, the FQSE Programme has materially increased school enrolment and expanded educational access, particularly for children from economically disadvantaged households who were previously excluded by the cost of tuition. This finding is consistent with national data confirming a 69% growth in total enrolment between 2018 and 2022 <sup>[7]</sup> and with earlier evidence on the impact of fee abolition policies across sub-Saharan Africa <sup>[12,31]</sup>. Nevertheless, the below-benchmark mean scores across all six access and inclusion indicators confirm that increased nominal access has not translated into equitable educational opportunity for all learners. Respondents consistently emphasised that indirect costs – uniforms, transport, learning materials – continue to function as *de facto* barriers even where tuition has been abolished, corroborating UNESCO's assessment that eliminating tuition fees alone is insufficient to guarantee equitable participation <sup>[9,11]</sup>.

Regarding enrolment, retention, attendance, and completion, the divergence between strong enrolment gains and substantially weaker improvements in attendance, retention, and completion constitutes the central policy challenge identified by this study. Increased pupil enrolment was the sole indicator to record a mean score above the benchmark of 3.00 ( $M = 3.42$ ), while all remaining indicators recorded mean scores below 3.00 (range: 2.45–2.74). This pattern has been observed in comparable free education contexts across the continent, where rapid enrolment increases are followed by persistent dropout driven by indirect costs, child labour, and household poverty <sup>[37,38]</sup>. In Sierra Leone's specific context, early marriage, teenage pregnancy, and the seasonal withdrawal of children for agricultural labour constitute particularly acute threats to girls' and vulnerable learners' retention <sup>[35,36]</sup>.

The qualitative findings added interpretive depth to these statistical patterns, documenting how institutional factors – including teacher shortages, inadequate classroom infrastructure, absence of disability-friendly facilities, and irregular supply of teaching and learning materials – combine with household and community factors to limit learners' capacity to benefit fully from the programme. Education officials noted that delayed disbursement of school subsidies, weak monitoring and evaluation systems, and insufficient capacity at the district level to implement the Radical Inclusion Policy further constrain the programme's effectiveness.

The absence of significant gender and chiefdom differences in perceptions further confirms that these are systemic district-wide challenges rather than isolated local phenomena, requiring coordinated district-level and national responses. The study concludes that sustainable equity requires stronger policy implementation, equitable resource allocation, inclusive infrastructure, continuous teacher development, targeted support for vulnerable learners, and robust monitoring and evaluation.

### 5.2 Advantages of the Study

This research offers several notable advantages that contribute to educational theory, policy, and practice in Sierra Leone and beyond.

a) **Methodological rigor and comprehensive stakeholder engagement.** The adoption of a mixed-methods design with a 96.5% response rate from 250 participants across nine chiefdoms represents a significant methodological strength. By including diverse stakeholder perspectives – teachers, head teachers, district



education officers, NGO/partner representatives, community representatives, and students – the study provides a holistic understanding of the FQSE Programme's impact that is rarely captured in educational research within resource-constrained contexts. This multi-stakeholder approach ensures that findings reflect the complex reality of programme implementation rather than a single, limited perspective. The triangulation of quantitative questionnaire data with qualitative interviews, focus group discussions, and direct observations further enhances the credibility and validity of the findings.

**b) Generation of empirical evidence for a previously under-researched context.** Prior to this study, limited empirical research had systematically examined the impact of the FQSE Programme on educational equity and social inclusion in Sierra Leone's rural districts. The study fills a critical gap in the literature by providing quantitative evidence (e.g., the enrolment mean score of 3.42 versus the overall composite mean of 2.58) and qualitative insights that can inform evidence-based decision-making. This is particularly valuable for Kenema District, which faces significant challenges of rural poverty, teacher shortages, and inadequate infrastructure. The study's findings provide a baseline for future comparative and longitudinal research.

**c) Practical and actionable recommendations grounded in local realities.** Unlike generalized policy recommendations that may be disconnected from classroom realities, the study's recommendations emerged directly from stakeholder voices and observation data. The identification of specific barriers – indirect costs, disability-related challenges, rural-urban disparities, and weak policy implementation – provides a clear roadmap for targeted intervention that is feasible within the district's constraints.

**d) Theoretical contribution to understanding educational equity in resource-constrained contexts.** By applying Rawls' Social Justice Theory to a Sierra Leonean rural context, the study extends understanding of how equity principles manifest in settings with significant resource constraints and structural disadvantages. The gap between the programme's redistributive intent and its implementation outcomes provides insights into the challenges of achieving educational justice in contexts of persistent poverty and weak institutional capacity.

**e) Contribution to the global discourse on fee-free education policies in developing countries.** The study adds to the growing body of literature on free education policies in Sub-Saharan Africa, providing a context-specific case that both confirms and challenges findings from other settings. The study demonstrates that while fee abolition is necessary for expanding access, it is insufficient for achieving equity without complementary investments in infrastructure, teacher development, and targeted support for vulnerable learners.

### 5.3 Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged to appropriately contextualize the findings and inform future research.

**a) Reliance on self-reported data.** A significant portion of the data, particularly from questionnaires for teachers and school administrators, is based on self-reports. This may introduce social desirability bias, where participants provide responses they believe are expected or favourable, rather than fully accurate accounts of their actual experiences. Although the study attempted to mitigate this through triangulation with qualitative data from interviews, focus group discussions, and direct observations, the potential for bias remains a recognised limitation.

**b) Sample size and generalizability constraints.** While the sample of 250 respondents provides adequate representation of the nine sampled chiefdoms in Kenema District, it remains a subset of the total population. Consequently, the findings cannot be statistically generalized to all districts in Sierra Leone with a high degree of certainty. The study focused on a single rural district; findings may not be directly transferable to urban districts with different resource levels and demographic profiles, or to other rural districts with different cultural and

socioeconomic characteristics. Future research should extend the study to other districts to examine regional variations and develop a more comprehensive national picture.

c) **Causality constraint.** The study employs a descriptive and cross-sectional design. While it can identify associations between the FQSE Programme and educational outcomes, it cannot definitively establish causal links. The observed patterns could be influenced by numerous unmeasured confounding variables, including historical factors, school leadership quality, community attitudes toward education, and broader economic conditions. The cross-sectional design provides a snapshot at a single point in time; it cannot capture the dynamic, developmental processes through which the programme's impact unfolds over time.

d) **Temporal and seasonal constraints.** The study was conducted during a specific academic period, which may not fully capture the diversity of programme implementation experiences across the academic year. Enrolment, attendance, and retention patterns may vary between terms, before and after examinations, and in response to seasonal factors such as agricultural cycles. A longitudinal design tracking programme impact over multiple cohorts would provide a more robust understanding of the relationship between the FQSE Programme and educational outcomes.

e) **Scope limitations.** The study focused exclusively on Kenema District and on basic education (junior and senior secondary levels). It did not examine the impact of the FQSE Programme at the primary or tertiary levels, or in other districts with different characteristics. Furthermore, the study did not systematically examine the perspectives of parents, curriculum developers at the national level, or teacher training institutions, which are important stakeholders in the education ecosystem.

#### 5.4 Possible Applications of the Study

The findings and recommendations of this study have significant practical applications across multiple domains of educational policy, practice, and research in Sierra Leone and similar contexts.

a) **Informing national education policy and programme design.** The study provides empirical evidence that can inform the refinement of the FQSE Programme and related policies, including the Radical Inclusion Policy. The identification of persistent barriers – indirect costs, disability-related challenges, rural-urban disparities, and weak policy implementation – provides a basis for targeted policy interventions. The Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education could use these findings to justify increased investment in school infrastructure, teacher deployment to rural areas, and financial support for vulnerable households.

b) **Guiding district-level education planning.** District Education Officers and other local education authorities can use the study's findings to conduct self-audits of programme implementation in their jurisdictions, identify specific barriers to equity and inclusion, and develop targeted improvement plans. The finding that challenges are consistent across chiefdoms suggests the need for coordinated district-wide interventions rather than piecemeal local responses.

c) **Informing resource allocation decisions.** The study's identification of specific resource constraints – including teacher shortages, inadequate infrastructure, and lack of disability-friendly facilities – provides evidence for resource allocation decisions at both national and district levels. Decision-makers can prioritize investment in areas where the gaps between policy intent and implementation outcomes are most pronounced.

d) **Supporting NGO and international development interventions.** The study provides evidence that can guide the design and targeting of educational interventions by non-governmental organizations and international development partners operating in Sierra Leone. Organizations focusing on girls' education, inclusive education,

or rural school improvement can use the study's findings to design evidence-based programmes that address the specific barriers identified.

e) **Enhancing school-community partnerships.** The study's inclusion of community representatives and the identification of community-level barriers – including poverty, child labour, early marriage, and cultural norms – provide a basis for strengthening school-community partnerships. Schools could work with communities to address these barriers through awareness campaigns, livelihood support, and community-based monitoring of school attendance and retention.

f) **Contributing to academic research and knowledge generation.** The study provides a foundation for future research on educational equity in Sierra Leone and similar contexts. The findings, methodology, and instruments can be adapted for studies in other districts, educational levels, or policy contexts. The study also raises important questions for further investigation, such as: What are the long-term impacts of the FQSE Programme on learning outcomes and life trajectories? How can the gap between policy intent and implementation be most effectively addressed?

## 5.5 Implications for Further Research

Based on the study's findings and limitations, several directions for future research are suggested:

a) **Longitudinal studies** should be conducted to track the impact of the FQSE Programme on educational outcomes – including enrolment, attendance, retention, completion, and learning achievement – over multiple cohorts. Such studies would provide stronger evidence on causal relationships and the sustainability of programme impacts.

b) **Comparative studies** between districts, between urban and rural areas, and between public and private schools would help identify context-specific factors that influence the effectiveness of the FQSE Programme in promoting equity and inclusion.

c) **Mixed-methods studies** that combine quantitative impact evaluation with qualitative exploration of implementation processes would provide a more comprehensive understanding of why the FQSE Programme succeeds in some contexts but faces challenges in others.

d) **Research on specific vulnerable populations** – including girls, children with disabilities, learners from poverty-affected households, and children in remote rural communities—would provide deeper understanding of their unique barriers and support needs.

e) **Studies examining the impact of specific interventions** – such as cash transfers, school feeding programmes, inclusive education training, or community sensitization campaigns – would provide evidence on what works to address the persistent barriers identified in this study.

f) **Research on learning outcomes** should complement the focus on access, retention, and completion, to assess whether the FQSE Programme is achieving its ultimate objective of quality education for all.

## 5.6 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are offered:

### 5.6.1 To the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE)

- a) Expand financial support for disadvantaged learners by providing direct subsidies for indirect costs – including uniforms, transport, and learning materials – to ensure that the removal of tuition fees translates into genuine access for all children.
- b) Accelerate implementation of the Radical Inclusion Policy through dedicated funding, clear implementation guidelines, and robust monitoring mechanisms to ensure that learners with disabilities, girls, and other vulnerable groups are effectively included.
- c) Invest in rural school infrastructure, including construction of additional classrooms, provision of disability-friendly facilities (ramps, accessible toilets), and improvement of water and sanitation facilities.
- d) Strengthen teacher deployment policies to ensure equitable distribution of qualified teachers, particularly to rural and remote areas, through incentives such as hardship allowances, housing support, and career development opportunities.
- e) Strengthen monitoring and evaluation systems to track enrolment, attendance, retention, completion, and learning outcomes, with disaggregated data by gender, disability, socio-economic status, and geographic location to identify disparities and guide targeted interventions.
- f) Increase and accelerate disbursement of school subsidies to ensure that schools have adequate resources to implement the programme effectively.

#### **5.6.2 To School Administrators**

- a) Implement robust school-based monitoring systems to track pupil attendance, identify at-risk learners, and implement timely interventions to prevent dropout.
- b) Create inclusive school environments through accessible infrastructure, inclusive teaching practices, and positive school cultures that welcome and support all learners.
- c) Strengthen school-community partnerships to address community-level barriers, including child labour, early marriage, and cultural norms that limit educational participation.
- d) Advocate for additional resources from district and national authorities to address specific school-level challenges, including teacher shortages, infrastructure deficits, and lack of teaching and learning materials.

#### **5.6.3 To Teachers**

- a) Adopt inclusive teaching practices that accommodate diverse learning needs, including differentiated instruction, flexible grouping, and use of assistive technologies where available.
- b) Provide targeted support to vulnerable learners – including girls, learners with disabilities, and learners from poverty-affected households – through mentoring, extra-curricular support, and referral to support services.
- c) Engage with parents and communities to promote the value of education, address barriers to participation, and build supportive home learning environments.
- d) Participate in professional development opportunities to enhance skills in inclusive pedagogy, differentiated instruction, and learner support.

#### 5.6.4 To Researchers

- a) Conduct longitudinal studies to track the impact of the FQSE Programme on educational outcomes over multiple cohorts and assess the sustainability of programme impacts.
- b) Undertake comparative studies across districts, between urban and rural areas, and between public and private schools to identify context-specific factors that influence programme effectiveness.
- c) Conduct research on specific vulnerable populations to understand their unique barriers and support needs, and to evaluate the effectiveness of targeted interventions.
- d) Develop and validate instruments for measuring educational equity and social inclusion in the Sierra Leonean context, to enable more robust monitoring and evaluation of the FQSE Programme.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971.
- [2] Government of Sierra Leone, "Free Quality School Education Programme policy brief," Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE), Freetown, 2018.
- [3] MBSSE, "Education Sector Plan 2018–2023," Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education, Government of Sierra Leone, Freetown, 2020.
- [4] Government of Sierra Leone, "Radical Inclusion Policy 2021," Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education, Freetown, 2021.
- [5] Statistics Sierra Leone, "Population and housing census 2021: Preliminary results," Statistics Sierra Leone, Freetown, 2021.
- [6] Statistics Sierra Leone, "Report on the evaluation of the Free Quality School Education (FQSE) in government and government-assisted schools in Sierra Leone," Statistics Sierra Leone, Freetown, 2022.
- [7] MBSSE, "Annual school census report 2022," Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education, Government of Sierra Leone, Freetown, 2022.
- [8] UNESCO, "Education 2030: Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4," UNESCO Publishing, Paris, 2015.
- [9] UNESCO, "Global Education Monitoring Report 2020: Inclusion and education — all means all," UNESCO Publishing, Paris, 2020.
- [10] UNESCO, "Global education monitoring report 2021/2: Non-state actors in education," UNESCO Publishing, Paris, 2021.
- [11] UNESCO, "Global Education Monitoring Report 2023: Technology in education — a tool on whose terms?" UNESCO Publishing, Paris, 2023.
- [12] UNICEF, "The impact of free primary education policies in sub-Saharan Africa," UNICEF Policy Brief, New York, 2021.

- [13] UNICEF, "State of the World's Children 2022: On my mind — promoting, protecting and caring for children's mental health," UNICEF, New York, 2022.
- [14] UNICEF, "Ending child marriage and teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone," UNICEF Sierra Leone Country Office, Freetown, 2023.
- [15] United Nations, "Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (A/RES/70/1)," United Nations General Assembly, New York, 2015.
- [16] World Bank, "Sierra Leone Free Education Project: Project appraisal document," World Bank, Washington, DC, 2020.
- [17] World Bank, "Sierra Leone education sector review: Progress and challenges," World Bank, Washington, DC, 2021.
- [18] World Bank, "Financing education systems effectively: Sierra Leone case study," World Bank, Washington, DC, 2023.
- [19] World Bank, "Essays on equity, health, and education in Sierra Leone," World Bank, Washington, DC, 2024.
- [20] M. Kabba and A. Sesay, "The impact of education reforms on access and quality in Sierra Leone," *Journal of African Education Policy Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 67-85, 2022.
- [21] F. B. Turay, A. Sesay, K. A. K. Turay, O. D. Camara, S. Conteh, and M. Kallon, "Impact of the Free Quality School Education intervention on secondary school students' academic performance in the WASSCE in Sierra Leone," *European Journal of Education Studies*, vol. 13, no. 5, pp. 428-448, 2026.
- [22] M. Ainscow, "Developing inclusive education systems: What are the levers for change?" *Journal of Educational Change*, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 109-124, 2005.
- [23] M. Ainscow, "Understanding the development of inclusive education systems," *Electronic Journal of Research in Educational Psychology*, vol. 3, no. 3, pp. 5-20, 2013.
- [24] M. Ainscow, "Promoting inclusion and equity in education: Lessons from international experiences," *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy*, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 7-16, 2020.
- [25] Human Rights Watch, "A bitter harvest: Discrimination against children with disabilities in Sierra Leone's education system," Human Rights Watch, New York, 2019.
- [26] N. Singal, "Disability, education and poverty: Progress and challenges in developing countries," *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, vol. 20, no. 6, pp. 567-574, 2016.
- [27] D. Donohue and J. Bornman, "The challenges of realising inclusive education in South Africa," *South African Journal of Education*, vol. 34, no. 2, pp. 1-14, 2014.
- [28] U. Sharma, C. Forlin, and T. Loreman, "Impact of training on pre-service teachers' attitudes and concerns about inclusive education," *Disability & Society*, vol. 33, no. 2, pp. 167-190, 2017.
- [29] A. Zickafoose et al., "Barriers and challenges affecting quality education in sub-Saharan Africa by 2030," *Education Sciences*, vol. 14, no. 3, p. 298, 2024.

- [30] P. Chirowamhangu, "Inclusive education pandemic: Learning barriers for children with disabilities in South Africa," *African Journal of Disability*, vol. 14, no. 0, p. a1462, 2023.
- [31] S. Baird, F. H. Ferreira, B. Özler, and M. Woolcock, "Conditional, unconditional, and everything in between: A systematic review of the effects of cash transfer programs on schooling outcomes," *World Bank Research Observer*, vol. 31, no. 1, pp. 128-161, 2016.
- [32] G. Chisamya, J. DeJaeghere, N. Kendall, and M. Khan, "Gender and education for all: Progress and problems in policy development and implementation," *International Journal of Educational Development*, vol. 32, no. 6, pp. 743-755, 2012.
- [33] S. Aikman and E. Unterhalter, *Beyond Access: Transforming Policy and Practice for Gender Equality in Education*. Oxford: Oxfam, 2005.
- [34] E. Unterhalter, *Gender, Education and Poverty: From Access to Empowerment*. London: Routledge, 2017.
- [35] Plan International, "Girls' education in Sierra Leone: Challenges and opportunities," Plan International, Freetown, 2021.
- [36] J. M. Nhampoca and J. E. Maritz, "Early marriage, education and mental health: Experiences of adolescent girls in Mozambique," *Frontiers in Global Women's Health*, vol. 5, p. 1278934, 2024.
- [37] R. Sabates and S. Didonet, "The role of household and school factors in educational outcomes in low-income countries: Evidence from longitudinal data in rural Ethiopia," *International Journal of Educational Development*, vol. 80, p. 102303, 2021.
- [38] E. Marwa, J. M. Ngwaru, and J. L. Nzilano, "Challenges facing the implementation of fee-free education in primary schools in Tanzania," *Heliyon*, vol. 10, no. 2, p. e24172, 2024.
- [39] S. Hurwitz, B. Perry, E. D. Cohen, and R. Skiba, "Special education and individualized academic growth: A longitudinal assessment of outcomes for students with disabilities," *American Educational Research Journal*, vol. 57, no. 2, pp. 576-611, 2020.
- [40] A. Osborne, R. M. Yillah, A. Bash-Taqi, and O. B. Conteh, "A study of vulnerable student populations, exclusion and marginalization in Sierra Leonean secondary schools," *BMC Psychology*, vol. 13, no. 1, p. 263, 2025.
- [41] J. W. Creswell and J. D. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 5th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2018.
- [42] J. W. Creswell and V. L. Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*, 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2018.
- [43] R. B. Johnson and A. J. Onwuegbuzie, "Mixed methods research: A research paradigm whose time has come," *Educational Researcher*, vol. 33, no. 7, pp. 14-26, 2020.
- [44] C. R. Kothari, *Research Methodology: Methods and Techniques*, 4th ed. New Delhi: New Age International, 2020.



- [45] O. M. Mugenda and A. G. Mugenda, *Research Methods: Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches*. Nairobi: African Centre for Technology Studies, 2003.
- [46] M. S. Setia, "Methodology series module 3: Cross-sectional studies," *Indian Journal of Dermatology*, vol. 61, no. 3, pp. 261-264, 2016.
- [47] X. Wang and Z. Cheng, "Cross-sectional studies: Strengths, weaknesses, and recommendations," *Chest*, vol. 158, no. 1S, pp. S65-S71, 2020.
- [48] V. Braun and V. Clarke, "Using thematic analysis in psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 77-101, 2006.
- [49] K. M. Lewin, "Improving access, equity and transitions in education: Creating a research agenda," CREATE Pathways to Access Research Monograph No. 1, Consortium for Research on Educational Access, 2007.
- [50] L. Pritchett, *The Rebirth of Education: Schooling Ain't Learning*. Washington, DC: Center for Global Development, 2013.
- [51] P. Rose, "NGO provision of basic education: Alternative or complementary service delivery to support access to the excluded?" *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, vol. 39, no. 2, pp. 219-233, 2009.
- [52] OECD, *Equity in Education: Breaking Down Barriers to Social Mobility*. Paris: OECD Publishing, 2018.
- [53] A. Alam and A. Mohanty, "Cultural beliefs and equity in educational institutions: Exploring the social and philosophical notions of ability groupings in teaching and learning of mathematics," *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, vol. 28, no. 1, p. 2270662, 2023.
- [54] H. Dumont and D. D. Ready, "On the promise of personalized learning for educational equity," *npj Science of Learning*, vol. 8, no. 1, p. 26, 2023.
- [55] S. R. Khandker, M. M. Pitt, and N. Fuwa, "Subsidy to promote girls' secondary education: The female stipend program in Bangladesh," World Bank Policy Research Working Paper No. 3412, World Bank, Washington, DC, 2003.
- [56] Human Rights Watch, "Africa: Accelerate free education for all," Human Rights Watch, New York, 2024.
- [57] M. L. Yell, D. Rogers, and E. Lodge-Rogers, "The legal history of special education: What a long, strange trip it's been!" *Remedial and Special Education*, vol. 27, no. 2, pp. 75-81, 2006.