

Closing the attainment gap: Collaboration between schools in Sierra Leone.

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Background: *UK government policy views collaboration with outstanding schools as a way of helping apparently less successful schools to close the attainment gap. However, there has been little debate about criteria for defining a school's success or failure. Moreover it is unclear which aspects of outstanding schools could readily transfer to other schools. These questions applied when EducAid, an NGO with schools for disadvantaged children in Sierra Leone, was asked to provide a programme of workshops for teachers in neighbouring schools.*

Aims: *(i) To establish whether EducAid's results justified agreeing to the request; (ii) To identify key features of EducAid schools that could be transferable to neighbouring schools; (iii) To propose key features of an evaluation.*

Methods: *Collection of national and local data and analysis of key features of EducAid schools that could, and could not, transfer to other schools.*

Findings: *The limited available data supported a decision that EducAid schools should offer workshops for other schools. Key components of the programme are identified, with a design including an ambitious evaluation framework.*

Conclusions: *To our knowledge, this is the first time that teachers in successful schools have been asked to provide a structured programme of workshops for teachers in neighbouring schools. Discussion focusses on the challenge of inter-school collaboration in a low-income country. This includes the tension between the models of pedagogy and interpersonal relations promoted in the CPD and the constraints imposed by the public examination system.*

Keywords: *Educational outcomes; school collaboration; continuing professional development; Sierra Leone.*

Introduction

THIS PAPER REPORTS ON-GOING RESEARCH into the design, delivery and evaluation of a programme of workshop-based continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers in primary schools in Sierra Leone. We believe the programme to be original for two reasons. First, the Ministry of Education in a northern province and the local Roman Catholic mission asked teachers in an apparently successful group of schools run by EducAid (www.educaid.org.uk) a small non-governmental organization (NGO,) to provide a structured programme of workshops for teachers in the schools they administered. While there is a growing literature on collaboration between schools we have not traced examples of teachers in apparently successful schools providing a structured and potentially replicable CPD programme for teachers in apparently less successful schools. Second, EducAid's admission criteria prioritised children affected by the continuing extensive poverty and social breakdown that followed the end of eleven years of war in 2002. It is unusual for teachers in schools with the most disadvantaged student intake to be asked to help teachers in other schools to raise standards of student attainment and behaviour.

While education is a stated government priority in Sierra Leone, education improvement activities have largely focused on reconstruction and rehabilitation of school infrastructure, particularly in the SABABU project during the significant post war rehabilitation of basic education (World Bank 2001, 2010). Only 13.4% of the overall project costs were spent on any form of teacher training. Of the small teacher training component the majority of funds

went on training in the delivery of peace education and HIV/AIDS prevention rather than on the foundational skills of literacy and numeracy (Bu-Buakei Jabbi, 2007).

Although the SABABU project had significant limitations (Ngegba, et al., 2016), the most encouraging aspect of the teacher training component was that, despite research showing problems with the quality of training, it had a relatively high impact on the teachers' classroom performance, with evidence of improvement in pupils' public examination performance. That may have been due in part to the very low starting base. It nevertheless supported the view that taking part in CPD can help teachers to improve their students' performance.

The request to provide workshops had implications for EducAid's future. Before agreeing, the management team and staff needed to consider other models of inter-school collaboration. Funding had to be secured and the Ebola crisis in 2014/15 created further delays. As important, staff saw their expertise as running schools for the most disadvantaged children in one of the world's poorest countries, not in teacher education and training. They believed that within Sierra Leone their students were unusually successful educationally and socially, but they had no independent evidence. They recognised major differences in structure and in educational philosophy between EducAid schools and the day schools they were being asked to help. As well as being, in part, residential, the differences included curriculum organisation, pedagogy and staff recruitment. In short, they were unsure whether they could design a programme that would benefit teachers in other schools, let alone deliver it and submit it to rigorous evaluation.

This paper therefore starts with a brief review of models of inter-school collaboration in the UK and their relevance to a low income country such as Sierra Leone. Next we discuss the challenge of obtaining performance data – and thus evidence of school effectiveness – in

the context of a low income country. We then identify some of the contextual and theoretical issues that EducAid faced in responding to the request from the district Ministry of Education. Finally we identify central features of the programme's design and evaluation, and content and delivery.

Models of collaboration

For several years, government policy in the UK has encouraged inter-school collaboration as a way of reducing the gap between high achieving and low achieving schools. The type of partnership, federation or collaboration can vary enormously from very formal, shared leadership and governance models across chains of 2 – 50 schools to informal partnerships focusing on only a few issues, with each partner school maintaining a large amount of autonomy (Chapman & Muijs, 2014). Armstrong (2015) cites evidence that 96% of Ofsted-rated “Outstanding” schools support other schools. Independent and grammar schools, too, have established formal partnerships with non-selective schools in the state sector (Leo et al., 2010). Department for Education (DfE) recognition as a “Teaching school” can involve a role in training new teachers as well as in professional development of staff (Chapman, 2013).

Models of collaboration have been well documented (Lindsay et al., 2007; Woods et al., 2013) as has the challenge of establishing cooperative partnerships (Ainscow, 2014; Coleman, 2012). Evidence of impact on students' attainments is more limited. Woods et al (2006) found no evidence of improvement in six of the eight local authorities in their sample, and Sammons et al. (2007) found no evidence of primary schools improving in relation to national data. More positively, evaluation of the City Challenge initiative showed significant improvement in examination results compared with the rest of the country, particularly for schools starting from a low baseline (Hutching et al., 2012). Chapman and Muijs (2014) also

found that partnership between a high achieving and a struggling school helped the latter to improve students' performance.

Details about how collaboration works in practice are sparse. The literature tends to focus on broad-brush issues such as leadership (Hopkins & Higham, 2007), governance and relations between partners (Chapman et al., 2009a) and pedagogy (Stoll, 2015). There are few reports of explicit programmes, and we traced no example of a successful school providing a structured and replicable programme of workshops for another school's staff.

The limited empirical evidence on collaboration raises five questions each of which is as pertinent in Sierra Leone as in the UK. First, how does the context affect both the providers and the teacher participants in a CPD programme? Second, how can a successful school demonstrate that it *is* in fact successful? At least in the UK, student intake predicts exam results, and some schools start with a huge advantage. GCSE results that would be spectacular in an inner city comprehensive could be seen as evidence of failure in a top selective public or grammar school. Third, even if it is possible to demonstrate that a school is successful on agreed criteria, is it possible to identify the aspects of policy and classroom practice that have contributed to its success? Stoll (2015) identified pedagogy, professional development and leadership as crucial, but operationalising these is not straightforward. Fourth, even when this is possible, are the key mediating variables *potentially* transferable to another, less successful, school? Some, clearly, are not. For example, some independent schools are boarding, have a wide range of extra-curricular activities and classes with fewer than 20 students. None of these features are transferable to an inner-city day school. Fifth, even if it is possible to identify potentially transferable features of a successful school, how could a programme of support best be designed and evaluated?

Obtaining performance data in a low-income country

Significance of the local context

Sierra Leone has a population of 6 million (Central Intelligence Agency, 2018). The UN Human Development Index ranks it as the world's ninth poorest country (United Nations Development Programme, 2016). Only 3.5% of GDP is spent on education compared to 8.2% in Ghana and 5.6% in the UK. Educational standards are extremely poor, schools are inadequately resourced, many teachers are under-qualified or unqualified and 60% of teachers in government schools are not on the government payroll (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2013). Thomas (2014) identified low levels of trust between government and people. Just as in the UK there is a tendency in failing or seriously underachieving schools to attribute responsibility for the school's problems to factors in the student intake, their families or local communities (Leo et al., 2010,). In Sierra Leone there is a tendency to attribute a school's low educational achievement to poverty, corruption and lack of human and material resources. This is an essentially self-protective motivational strategy (Covington, 1992; Galloway et al., 1998). It reduces teachers' sense of personal agency, with consequent low expectations of student achievement. The implication in planning CPD is that tasks and strategies that promote a sense of personal responsibility for students' behaviour and progress would be as important as subject content.

EducAid was a small NGO with little prior experience in teacher education and training. The request to provide workshops for teachers in other schools raised an ethical dilemma: there could be no guarantee that the programme would achieve any change in teaching practices or students' performance. If so, at best it would be a waste of the participants' time and at worst it might lead to deterioration by challenging existing methods without successfully suggesting alternatives. As Director, the first author felt strongly that she had to

find evidence that the achievements of students in EducAid schools were exceptional before agreeing to provide the CPD.

Comparing students' performance across schools in a low income country

In theory it should be possible to compare the performance of EducAid students with those in other schools on three public exams: the National Primary School Exam (NPSE) for entry to junior secondary school, the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) for entry to senior secondary school and the West African Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (WASSCE) for entry to universities and professions. In practice, data from the NPSE and BECE are not available at national or provincial levels and data at school level are widely regarded as unreliable due to widespread problems in administration and marking. WASSCE data is thought to be more reliable, but is not available in any detail. The only public statement about the 2016 results was given late at night on the radio. Of two EducAid senior secondary schools, one was identified as coming second in the country; the other came eleventh.

With assistance of the District Ministry of Education, it eventually became possible to start cooperative data collection with two of the three senior secondary schools in the capital of the northern province that had requested assistance. The third senior secondary school in the town was not prepared to make their data available. Nationally, WASSCE performance figures were available for 2009-2011 (Ministry of Education, Science & Technology, 2013). Data from an EducAid senior secondary school in the area and from the local schools was available for 2012-2015, excluding 2013 when all the public exams were cancelled in order to enforce a government decision that all students undergo four years of senior secondary schooling rather than three before sitting the WASSCE (Gbamanja, 2010). Whilst the data

sets do not match, they give an indication of the relative performance of EducAid and the two local schools over time in relation to the national average.

Table 1 shows the frequencies and mean scores for each group. Although 81% of EducAid students gained credits in five or more subjects, only 1% achieved this level nationally, and 7% in two local schools.

Insert Table 1 about here.

Table 2 shows WASSCE results for EducAid and the two local schools for 2012, 2014 and 2015. Data for school 2 was not available for 2014 and, as explained above, the exams were cancelled in 2013. In addition, EducAid had remained open to homeless students during the Ebola epidemic but the closure of state-funded schools affected the number of entrants for the 2015 exams from schools 1 and 2 when the country was recovering. With that *caveat* the data show between 70% and 100% of EducAid entrants gaining at least five credits compared with 0% and 11% in the two local schools.

Insert Table 2 about here.

Tables 1 and 2 both show the number of entrants, with schools 1 and 2 having much larger entries than EducAid. From 2014 all students who had satisfactorily completed four years of senior secondary schooling were eligible for entry and in the two local schools it is believed that all eligible students were entered. However, completion of four years senior secondary schooling did not mean that the students were ready to sit – and pass – the WASSCE. In contrast, EducAid’s policy was not to enter students until they were considered ready to sit the exam. Some students were entered after five or more years of senior secondary schooling. A separate analysis showed no relationship between pass rates of EducAid students and number of years they had been in senior secondary school.

While Tables 1 and 2 suggest that EducAid's WASSCE results were better than schools nationally and in the nearest town, they do not show whether EducAid was closing the gap between its most disadvantaged students and their less disadvantaged peers at the same school. There is no proxy for disadvantage in Sierra Leone such as free school meals in the UK and school records did not enable us to test whether disadvantaged students, for example having no parents or guardian, were as likely to be entered as their peers with parents or guardians.

A separate question is whether the EducAid school had a higher proportion of students with no parents or guardians than other schools, indicating a greater number of vulnerable young people. Of a sample year group of senior secondary students in the three schools 17.6% of 85 EducAid students had no parents alive and a further 16.5% had no guardian. The comparable figures for school 2 were 11.1% and 5.2%, and for school 3, 3.9% and 2.9%. These figures suggest that EducAid had a substantially higher proportion of disadvantaged students.

Theoretical and ethical issues

An important aspect of the local context is the role of the three authors. As a founder and Sierra Leone-based Director of EducAid M M-S was responsible for standards in the NGO's schools. While this gave her unique knowledge of the schools and their histories it also meant that she would play a leading part in planning the CPD. As there were no funds for an independent evaluation it also meant she would be evaluating her own project, and a suspicion of bias is inherent in self-evaluations. DG and A J-G had experience of work in low income countries in Africa and DG had visited two EducAid schools in Sierra Leone. Their role was solely advisory. The potential conflict of interest in M M-S' role was resolved in two ways. First, although she played the leading part in designing and planning the CPD,

it was delivered by local EducAid teachers. Second, data collection for the evaluation was designed to minimise her potentially subjective influence on data analysis (see *Project design and evaluation* below).

Potential impact on teachers of labelling schools as successful – or not successful

A long standing critique of labelling in education, for example of students as disruptive, has documented its potentially negative impact on teacher –student interaction, for example Hargreaves's (1967) and Willis's (1977) seminal ethnographic studies. More recently Algraigray and Boyle (2017, p.75) have argued that the label special educational needs (SEN) had come 'to include and construct exclusionary practices within education'. The impact on teachers of labelling a school, in Ofsted's terms, as 'outstanding' or as 'in need of improvement' or, worse, 'failing' has not been explored in such detail in the academic literature but is likely to be just as pronounced. Both in the UK and in Sierra Leone teachers in schools labelled outstanding could assume that their own practices and ideas would work for teachers in less successful schools, irrespective of the context. Conversely, teachers in less successful schools could come to believe that no new ideas and no amount of effort would enable them to improve. Dweck (2000) describes the belief that no amount of support or effort will bring success – and the consequent reluctance to try – as 'learned helplessness'. The success of any workshops would depend on overcoming the possible consequences of labelling; and that would be achieved only if teachers participating in the CPD could start to see their own classroom performance in a different light.

Domains of quality

Pianta et al. (2008) identify three domains of quality in their instrument for assessing the quality of classrooms: emotional supports, classroom organisation and instructional supports.

Although the instrument was designed for classrooms from pre-school to 12th grade these domains apply equally to teachers participating in a CPD programme aiming at teacher development and school improvement. Without emotional support, both from the programme tutors and within the participants' own school, motivation for change is likely to be low. But emotional support is of limited use unless targeted at day-to-day classroom organisation, including disciplinary practices, and support in teaching the core curriculum. In most Sierra Leone schools, corporal punishment is a frequent occurrence and many teachers have low literacy levels. In the Netherlands, Mainhard et al. (2011) showed that coercive teacher behaviour towards individual students disrupted the relationship between the teacher and the whole class, and Lewis et al. (2005) observed that coercive strategies were linked to greater misbehaviour by students in Australia, China and Israel. In Sierra Leone coercive strategies of behaviour management are widespread. It was clear that workshops would have to integrate more cooperative approaches to behaviour management with emotional support and support in teaching the curriculum.

Pedagogy

Pedagogy in Sierra Leone schools tends to be formal, with heavy reliance on rules enforced by punishment (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2013). For the CPD programme to have any lasting influence it would have to change what Ball and Forzani (2007) called the 'instructional dynamic' in the classroom. The aim in EducAid schools is to ground pedagogy in values rather than rules. This is reflected in Jah's (2008) study of participatory learning in Sierra Leone schools. She cited six elements of classroom practice that differentiated EducAid schools from other schools she had visited:

- Meaningful participation in classroom learning
- Open flow of communication between teacher and students

- Critical thinking encouraged in students
- Participation in a variety of ways
- Shared ownership of the learning process through participation
- Moving at the student's own pace with a personalised approach to learning.

If workshop participants were to change the instructional dynamic in their own classrooms the pedagogy would have to model the teaching approaches and relationships that EducAid facilitators sought to develop in their own schools.

Design and evaluation

Theoretical and practical perspectives

Hargreaves (2001) argued that a high profile (in his terms 'high energy input') approach to any new initiative is doomed to failure. If pressed, teachers will try something new. There may be temporary improvement but teachers will not be able to maintain an addition to their workload. Moreover, when another new initiative is introduced the first will quickly be forgotten. In contrast, with a low-profile approach teachers are more likely to incorporate new ideas into their day-to-day work. If they find that the new ideas help with teaching and learning there is the potential to 'lever up' standards. The implication is that CPD should be seen as a cooperative venture between trainers and participants: 'Try these ideas. Let us know if they help you in your work and if they don't. Unless we know what you don't find helpful we can't learn!'

Schools are social organisations and their social cohesion can be threatened by new ideas, particularly when teachers are struggling and anticipate criticism. This partially explains the failure of many CPD initiatives, both in the UK and other countries, to achieve lasting improvement (Coe, 2013). Failure to recognise the complexity of change is a frequent

obstacle in implementing new ideas from CPD. Armstrong (2015) notes the gap in knowledge about the process of change and the maintenance of relationships when schools collaborate. When only one or two teachers from a school attend a CPD or workshop programme other teachers can see them as a threat on their return. A typical comment reported back to us is: ‘Did you enjoy your time out?’ Similarly, programmes that involve all classroom teachers but do not include the head teacher can run into the sand (Galloway & Roland, 2004). As part of behaviour management we have asked teachers to ask children what they think their teacher should expect from them, *and* what they think they should expect from their teacher. These superficially simple questions can arouse anxiety and resistance unless actively supported by senior staff within the school. The ‘one-off’ workshop with little or no follow-up is another example of failure to understand the complexity of change. Putting these points together it was clear that the workshops must include follow-up visits to each school from EducAid staff during the programme and follow-up phone calls about successes and difficulties in implementing new ideas. In addition, criteria for accepting a school on a workshop included:

- All teachers taking part, including the head teacher;
- An active commitment from the head teacher, starting with a personal request for the programme;
- Nomination by the school of a senior teacher to act as “school-based project coordinator” who would support and encourage follow-up in the classroom after each session of the programme. Initially it was proposed that this might or might not be the head-teacher. Subsequently it was recognised that, in view of the importance of hierarchy in the local context, this role should normally be filled by the head teacher.

Outcome and process data

Both the design of the programme and the evaluation were informed by the need to collect data that would: (i) show whether or not the workshops led to sustained improvements in students' performance; (ii) identify the features of the workshops that helped teachers to achieve sustainable change in their own practice or, conversely, which did not help them. These considerations dictated its design in three crucial ways. First, baseline data would need to be collected before the workshops started; this would have to be repeated on completion of the programme and again at follow-up. The data would be largely quantitative, and consist of literacy assessments and simple surveys of teacher and student behaviour. Second, a comparison group of schools with similar student intakes and teachers would be needed who were not taking part in the CPD, with the same data collection. Third, the distinction between outcome data and process data would have to be explicit. Outcome data would be provided by the assessments at baseline, completion and follow-up. With this data it would be possible to compare the performance of students at participating schools with non-participating schools. In addition, this quantitative data would help to reduce any unconscious bias during data analysis by EducAid's Director. Equally important, process data would be collected in the follow-up to the workshops. This would consist of workshop facilitators visiting the teachers' classrooms to look for evidence that ideas from the workshops were being implemented, interviews with teachers and head teachers, and diaries completed by participants focussing on features of the programme they had found useful and those they had found impractical or unrealistic.

The underlying rationale for this approach was that in spite of the enormous sums spent worldwide each year on CPD for teachers, very few studies have found evidence of sustained improvement in students' performance (Coe, 2013). In low income countries the problem is aggravated when educational aid agencies are more concerned with their own philosophical

or ideological agendas than in finding a common approach that teachers can use to raise standards (Galloway, 2006).

Content

In requesting assistance, the District Ministry of Education expected EducAid to draw on experience in the NGO's own schools. As in the UK, where independent and grammar schools collaborate with state funded and non-selective schools, key features of EducAid schools were simply not transferable to government funded schools. For example, year-round accommodation was available for homeless students. There were no monetary fees and no other charges involved in attendance, such as for uniform, books or equipment. EducAid did not operate the national system of six years of primary, three of junior secondary, four of senior secondary and four of tertiary (the 6:3:4:4 system). Both in primary and in secondary schools EducAid had strict criteria for progression to the next class, enabling students to move through the classes more quickly, or slowly, than in government schools. Finally, out of 159 staff, 119 (75%) were former EducAid students. These staff had a smooth transition to work and an opportunity, while teaching full time, to acquire a higher qualification (currently a degree in Business Administration and Management from a local university). For EducAid the advantage was a stream of enthusiastic and committed young people. Experience over the last few years had shown that, with some notable exceptions, staff appointed from government schools tended to have difficulty adjusting to EducAid's values, learning model and zero-tolerance of corruption.

Given the centrality of the non-transferable features outlined above, what aspects of EducAid could form the basis of a workshop programme that might help teachers in other schools? Extensive discussion suggested five separate but complementary features:

- (a) *Literacy and numeracy.* Inadequate grounding in basic literacy and numeracy skills is often cited as an explanation for poor performance in the public examinations (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2013). Little can be achieved without a sharp focus on the teacher's role in developing these basic skills.
- (b) *Mutual respect.* In EducAid, there is zero tolerance of humiliating or physical punishments. The emphasis is on restoring respectful relationships. Didactic teaching methods are the norm in most government schools and corporal punishment is used frequently. Without an explicit attempt to establish a higher level of mutual respect between teacher and students it is hard to see any CPD having much effect.
- (c) *Every Voice Counts:* Each EducAid school is divided into vertical tutor groups led by two tutor/teachers which meet daily for registration and discussion of ways to improve behaviour and performance, and any issues that students or staff want to raise. Each tutor group is divided into vertical families of 8-10 students led by a student family leader. These continue the discussions started in the tutor groups and feed back to the tutor group and senior staff. In addition to meetings at the beginning and end of each day families eat and do chores such as laundry together. The family group is an operating unit for many activities and family leaders are held responsible for their families under supervision of tutors and senior staff. In government schools horizontal registration groups serve as the organisational unit for maintaining attendance records, disseminating information and arranging the timetable.
- Adopting the full EducAid approach would be difficult but it might be possible to sub-divide the horizontal tutor groups into families and use them for greater involvement of the students in decision-making and the organisation and running of the school.

- (d) *Community service.* In EducAid secondary schools all students undertake two to three weeks of community service each year. The service may be helping in other schools in the area, including the EducAid primary school, helping in a hospital or wherever else a need is identified. While the process would probably be different in government schools, the principle of community service is one they could introduce. One way this might be done, in part, is through a programme of peer tutoring which has been shown to benefit both tutees and tutors (Mynard & Almarzouqi, 2006).
- (e) *Self help.* Through the family structure EducAid students are expected to take responsibility for looking after themselves and each other. Laundry, cooking and cleaning the school building and compound are all student responsibilities. In government schools, too, students are responsible for cleaning the classrooms and compounds, but more could be done to emphasise the students' role in making their surroundings more attractive. For example, they might be responsible for classroom displays and for creating opportunities for play or extracurricular activities in the compound.

If the twin aims of all education are to develop cognitive competence and social competence (Hargreaves, 2001), it is striking that only one of these, *Literacy and numeracy*, addresses the former. Moreover, only one of the other four, *Mutual respect*, is directly relevant in every teaching session. In practice, though, it was not difficult to design workshops that integrated these by linking acquisition of skills in teaching literacy and numeracy with student-focused pedagogy. Nor was it difficult to design workshop tasks to illustrate how the remaining three features could influence teacher – student interactions in ways that transferred to interactions within the classroom. The workshops were delivered in two programmes, each of five days. One focused mainly on literacy and the other on numeracy, but both incorporated the other features outlined above.

Discussion and conclusions

The model of inter-school collaboration that best fits the programme we have outlined is the Teaching School (Chapman, 2013). A request to provide a structured programme of workshops would be unusual in collaboration between schools in the UK. In Sierra Leone it reflected the practical difficulties in more informal arrangements and a cultural expectation of participation in workshops. By including visits to participating schools in the design, we hoped that more informal forms of collaboration would emerge from the structured programme.

We acknowledge three problems with the data on EducAid's achievements in the WASSCE. First, we were only able to obtain limited data on two other schools, in order to compare them with one EducAid school. Second the demographic data is limited. Third, and potentially most serious, the data are based on the WASSCE, the senior secondary school leaving exam, but the question under discussion in this paper is whether there is adequate evidence of EducAid's effectiveness to justify providing a course for teachers in primary schools. These problems illustrate the difficulty in data collection in a low-income country, compounded in Sierra Leone by the closure of schools due to the 2014/5 Ebola outbreak. Recent national data is not available. At district and school level there is no tradition of systematic monitoring of standards. Nevertheless, the core values and approaches to pedagogy in EducAid's senior secondary school are the same as in the NGO's junior secondary and primary schools. The very limited data provided here suggest that EducAid students perform at a higher level than those in neighbouring schools even though EducAid probably admits a higher proportion of socially disadvantaged students.

There is tension between the principles of pedagogy and interpersonal relationships that the workshops sought to develop and the reality that public exams in Sierra Leone, as in

many other countries, mainly test ability to reproduce subject content. New subjects such as computing are added to an existing syllabus without removing outdated topics such as typewriting. There is no sustained focus on critical thinking, or on application of subject knowledge in every day contexts.

While Sierra Leone is a challenging context, there is common ground with school improvement programmes in schools designated by Ofsted as failing or in need of improvement in the UK, particularly when they involve receiving support from an apparently more successful school. There is common ground, too, in the work of educational psychologists (EPs) in the UK. The profession is well placed to explore how schools can help and support each other. They serve high- and low-achieving schools. Their work provides important insights into school influences – for better or worse – on students’ attainments and behaviour, and their training gives them experience both in planning intervention and in evaluation. At least since the 1970s, EPs in some services have been involved in workshops and in-service education for teachers (Desforges & Lindsay, in press).

This paper started by tracking some of the problems that EducAid faced in showing that the charity’s schools were indeed successful. The lack of any readily available statistics at school, district or national level is not a problem in the UK. On the other hand, the interpretation of data, taking account of social and other demographic variables is a problem everywhere. In one sense, EducAid teachers had an advantage over teachers in some schools rated as outstanding in the UK. Unlike the latter, any achievements in EducAid schools could not be dismissed as the predictable product of a privileged student intake.

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Table 1: Candidate success in WASSCE Nationally (2009-2011), EducAid and 2 local schools (2011-2015)

	Achieved ≥ 5 credits	Achieved ≤ 4 credits	0 credits, all subjects	Total
National ¹	1239 (1%)	108246 (81%)	24370 (18%)	133855
2 local schools	83 (7%)	1131 (90%)	33 (3%)	1247
EducAid	124 (81%)	32(19%)	0	156

¹ Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (2013)

Table 2: Frequency table showing the number of candidates

Year	School	Achieved ≥ 5 credits	Achieved ≤ 4 credits	0 credits, all subjects	Total
2012	EducAid	32 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	32
	School 2	16 (6%)	226 (89%)	13 (5%)	255
	School 3	60 (11%)	492 (88%)	6 (1%)	558
2014	EducAid	47(80%)	12(20%)??	0 (0%)	59
	School 2	5 (3%)	140 (89%)	12 (8%)	157
	School 3	-	-	-	-
2015	EducAid	45 (73%)	17 (27%)	0 (0%)	62
	School 2	0 (0%)	112 (99%)	1 (1%)	113
	School 3	2 (1%)	161 (98%)	1 (1%)	164

