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## Stakeholders' perception on implementing the Free Quality School Education initiative in Bombali District, Northern Sierra Leone.

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### Abstract

*The International Labour Organization (ILO) and multilateral agencies have long prioritized suitable education for children. The right to education applies to all people at all stages of life, as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and ILO conventions and recommendations, of which the Convention on the Child and the Right to Education is critical. The negative effects of lack of education can lead to poverty and deprivation in early childhood, with lifelong consequences. The primary objective of this study is to assess stakeholders' perception of implementing the Free Quality School Education initiative in Bombali District, Northern Sierra Leone. This study employed the descriptive survey research design because the researcher collected data and reported how things were without manipulating any variables. The study was conducted in government and government-assisted primary schools with subsidies in the Bombali District, Northern, Sierra Leone. The total population of teachers within Bombali district in government and government-assisted primary and secondary schools was approximately 3,200 (TSC figures 2015). The researcher used different sampling techniques that cut across from simple random sampling techniques to purposive sampling techniques. Here, the researchers used both primary and secondary sources of data for the study. The main instruments for data collection included structured questionnaire. Data was presented in various forms such as tables, and graphs. The Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS) was used to analyze the data. It was concluded that the FQSE has also been touted as a means to reduce dropout rates among students at the primary school level, increase primary school enrolment rates for girl, curb teenage pregnancy, and to significantly improve the working conditions of teachers.*

**Keywords:** Stakeholders, perception, school, education, free quality, initiative,.

## Introduction

The significance of suitable education for a child has long been high on the agenda of the International Labour Organization (ILO) and multilateral agencies. The right to education applies to all people at all stages of life as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and ILO conventions and recommendations, of which the Convention on the Child and the Right to Education is of particular importance, (Márquez, D. I. 2023). The negative effects of lack of education can lead to poverty and deprivation in early childhood, with lifelong consequences (Skopek, et al., 2017). In recent years, international organizations, researchers and activists, working with many UN member states, have contributed to making the expansion and universal coverage of education a global priority, with particular attention to disadvantaged and vulnerable children (UNESCO, 2003). "Including education in the poverty-focused Sustainable Development Goal 1 is an important milestone in enshrining education a universal human right. It is also critical to a universally recognized global interest: a world without poverty. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) also emphasize universality based on the understanding that excluding or leaving people behind means failing to meet the human rights standards set out more than 70 years ago. This is another reason to give prominence to children in our efforts to reduce poverty and expand social protection" (UNESCO, 2003). According to UNICEF Education is one of the most important drivers of development; a human right for all individuals; and one of the strongest instruments for reducing poverty, improving health, gender equality, peace, and stability. It also delivers consistent returns in terms of income for individuals, and nations and is the most important factor in ensuring equity, and inclusion for individuals. Education empowers female employment and reduces poverty globally. There is a 9% increase in hourly earnings for every extra year of schooling worldwide. It drives long-term economic growth, spurs innovation, strengthens institutions, and fosters social cohesion, (Ojo, 2006). Developing countries have made tremendous progress in getting children into the classroom, and more children worldwide are in school.

Jubril, A. (2022) states that basic education, which includes primary, and the first three years of secondary level education, is regarded as the foundation for sustainable lifelong learning. The United Nations in its Millennium Development Goals pledged in its second goal that by 2015, all 189 member states should have achieved universal primary education and member states resolved to ensure that all boys, and girls complete a full course of primary school, (Paho Nya, F. 2023). In Sierra Leone, the war contributed significantly to the status of having the second-worst human development and social indicators in the world, (Ravallion, M. 2016).). The report revealed that only three out of ten Sierra Leoneans could read and write, compared to a Sub-Saharan average of six out of ten people. Primary school enrollment, about 55% of children in the school-age bracket in 1990, declined to about 42% in 1999, with marked gender and regional disparities. The Sierra Leone Civil War destroyed the country's social, economic, and physical infrastructure and resources. It displaced tens of thousands of learners, teachers, and parents, disoriented and traumatized children, and crumbled the entire education system (Love, B. L. (2019). . The aftermath of the war was felt in the severe shortage of teaching and learning materials, overcrowding in classrooms, and irregular payment of salaries (Muthanna et al., 2022). Inadequate availability of information and data on education

in Sierra Leone also hindered planned service provision (Hadjar, & Buchmann, (2016).

It is noteworthy as stated by Johnson, (2006) that immediately after the war in Sierra Leone, the Ministry of Education and education partners recognized that strategies had to be put in place to address the massive problems in the education system. The most important policy that was established in 2001 was the Free Primary Education Policy (Oranga et al., 2020). According to Boyden, J. (2015). education became free for all pupils in public primary schools, as school fees were abolished for boys and girls. Programs initiated included the Complementary Rapid Education for Primary Schools (CREPS) which was an initiative that was meant to cater to the needs of overage children who had lost schooling time as a result of the war and it was stated that by the time it closed in 2005, 50,000 children had benefited from the program. Since the end of the civil war in 2002, Sierra Leone has been committed to global imperatives like the Millennium Development Goals and witnessed an expansion in terms of enrolment figures at the end of 2006 (Kallon, E. V. N. 2021). Sierra Leone was ahead of the regional average for primary school attendance (Gromada & Richardson, 2021). The average for West/Central Africa for 2004 was 55% and Sierra Leone was 69%. What was not clear are the challenges likely to be encountered in the implementation of Free Quality School Education in Sierra Leone, poverty has been a major barrier to education access for many children, which led to the government introducing Free Quality School Education. However, it was unclear whether the funds allocated by the government for Free Quality School Education were adequate to meet the needs of the schools, which the study sought to establish. The government of Sierra Leone has therefore focused its main attention on formulating appropriate education policies to ensure maximum development of the human resources which are essential for all aspects of development and wealth creation through industrialization. All education stakeholders recognize that quality education at all levels will enable Sierra Leoneans to utilize their natural resources efficiently and effectively to attain and maintain desirable lifestyles for all Sierra Leoneans to achieve the desired Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and education for all, the introduction of Free Quality School Education was intended to reduce the cost burden on parents and enable more children access and attain the minimum basic primary education.

Over the last decade, Sierra Leone has ranked at or near the bottom of the UNDP Human Development ranking due to low literacy rates, high maternal and infant mortality rates, and low life expectancy, Salmela-Aro, K., & Chmielewski, A. K. (2019).

## Aim/objective

The primary objective of this study is to assess stakeholders' perceptions of implementing the Free Quality School Education initiative in Bombali District, Northern Sierra Leone.

## Materials/Methods

### Study design

A research design which is also known as a research strategy is a set plan to answer a set of questions. Therefore, this study employed the descriptive survey research design because the researchers collected data and reported how things were without manipulating any variables.

## Study area

The study was carried out in government, and government-assisted primary schools receiving subsidies in Bombali District, Northern Sierra Leone. Bombali District is found in the northern part of Sierra Leone. It has an area of 8,289 km.sq. It is bounded in the North by Karene District, Koinadugu District in the North East, in the Northwest, Port Loko District in the Southwest, and Tonkolili District to the South. The district comprises 11 Chiefdoms and 23 Administrative Wards, Sections, and Villages including but not limited to 8 parliamentary constituencies. The major towns within the district include Makeni City, Kamabai, Binkolo, Manjoro, Makari, Patebana Masimbo, Masongbo, Patebana Marank, Makumpbana, Kunsho, Gbendembu, Kalangba to name but few. There are 240 government, and government-assisted primary schools in the district and can be found in all of the 11 chiefdoms in the district and educational activities of the district are coordinated by the District Education Office (DEO) headed by the Deputy District Educational Officer of the Inspectorate Division of the MBSSE. The district office is located in the regional city of Bombali DEO, (2017). The entire District is within the interior highlands of Sierra Leone. Some areas of the District are low land such as areas of Makari-Gbanti chiefdom, Libeisayahun chiefdom, Gbendembu Ngowahun and Magbingba Ndowahun. The relatively high areas rising over 600 fits above sea level constitute some of the boundary areas of the district. Examples are the Camel hills of Biriwa chiefdom and residual hills of Wusum Mena hills rages flanking Gbendembu Ngowahun chiefdom. The district climate is subtropical and lies within the semi-equatorial climatic zone. The dominant winds are the North easterlies commonly referred to as the harmattan and South westerlies that bring rain into the whole country. Bombali district therefore experiences a dry season that commences sometime in November, and ends in April. The wet season starts sometime in April. and ends in late October. Temperature for the whole District is invariably high within the district, and covers an area of about 120 square kilometers. Bombali district further has two administrative divisions namely, the local, and central government authorities. These administrative divisions are represented by the local council the inspectorate division of the Ministry of Basic and Senior School Education, and the Teaching Service Commission, respectively (Bombali District Council and The Bombali District Education Office, 2017). Bombali district which is found in the North East region of Sierra Leone is the third largest district with an area of 7,985sq. Km. and it constituted a population of 606,183 people. Bombali District Council and the Bombali District Education Office, (2017).

## Population

The total population of teachers within Bombali district in government and government-assisted primary and secondary schools was approximately 3,200 (TSC figures 2015). Therefore the researchers targeted a study population of 1,187 participants from which a sampling size of 526 was proportionately selected as follows: (i) A total population of 240 government, and government-assisted primary schools in the study area from which 101 sample size randomly and purposively selected representing the Head Teachers' population. (ii) 410 teachers were randomly selected from the 101 government and government-assisted primary schools representing the teachers' population of 920. (iii) The researchers also selected 2 Deputy Directors from both the TSC and Inspectorate divisions of the MBSSE forming part of the targeted population. (iv) The researchers also selected 2 participants

one each, from the Bombali District Council (BDC) and Makeni City Council (MCC) respectively. (v) 11 counselors were randomly selected to represent the 23 wards of Bombali District.

## Sample Size of the Study

The sample size of this study was 526 recording 44.3% of the targeted population. The sample size was drawn from the various facets of the targeted population constituting; 101 head teachers, 410 teachers, 2 Local Government Council authorities, 1 District Education Officer (DEO), and 1 Deputy Director (DD) of the Teaching Service Commission were purposively selected to which 2 of the Directors of Education were selected as a sample population making it 100%. Addendum to the participants of the study, were 12 Councillors, 6 each, from Bombali District and Makeni City councils respectively.

## Sample and sampling methods

### Sampling Techniques

The researchers used different sampling techniques that cut across from simple random sampling techniques to purposive sampling techniques. The researchers used simple random sampling technique to select 101 primary schools out of the 240 schools respectively.

The researchers further adopted a purposive sampling technique to select the head teachers and teachers from the schools he randomly selected for the study. From the target population of 1,187 participants, the researchers used proportional sampling to select 526 participants, which represented 44.3% of the target population. Using proportionate sampling, there are 240 head teachers due to the division of 6 schools to lower and upper schools, respectively; from which 101 Primary Schools were selected as a sample. The 526-sample size constitutes; 101 head teachers, 410 teachers, 2 Local Government Council authorities, 1 DEO, and 1 Deputy Director of the Teaching Service Commission were purposively selected to which 2 of the Directors of Education were selected as a sample population making it 100%. Addendum to the participants of the study, 12 Councilors, 6 each from Bombali District and Makeni City councils respectively as shown in

Table 1 below:

**Table 1: Sampling Matrix of Participants**

Participants Description	Total Population	Sample size	Percentage
Head Teachers	240	101	42.1%
Teachers	920	410	44.6%
Deputy Director-Teaching Service Commission and Deputy Director of Education, Inspectorate Division (DDEO)	2	2	100%
Bombali District and Makeni city Council	2	2	100%
Counsellors-Local council (Wards) & Makeni City Council	23	11	47.8%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1,187</b>	<b>526</b>	<b>44.3</b>

Source: Researcher's Field Data 2016-2024

The researchers administered 6 questionnaires in each of the 101 selected primary schools in Bombali District, Northern Sierra Leone. The researchers were able to retrieve at least 5 questionnaires administered to the said primary schools which formed the main component of the sample size. The researchers further went on to conduct key informant interviews with personnel in both the Bombali district and Makeni city Councils respectively.

Therefore, the total sample size for the study was **526** which formed **44.3%** of the target population.

#### **Data collection method**

Here, the researchers utilized both primary and secondary sources of data for the study.

#### **Primary data collection**

Here, primary data was collected using questionnaires on the Stakeholders' perception on implementing the Free Quality School Education initiative in Bombali District, Northern Sierra Leone.

The questionnaire provided multiple options and allowed respondents to express their thoughts by selecting from the options provided.

#### **Secondary data**

Secondary data consists of existing knowledge on the topic being studied. Secondary data provides important material that guides and supports the researcher in determining the research objectives. The secondary data sources for this study were obtained from published and unpublished sources. This includes computer-based data, project documents, magazines, newspapers and textbooks on the research topic.

#### **Data collection and instruments**

The instruments used for data collection included structured questionnaire that was distributed among both head teachers, and teachers of the selected schools and collected by the researcher after they had been filled. 25% qualitative and 75% quantitative data were obtained from the participants of the study. The qualitative research targeted the local councils and the deputy directorate offices including community opinion leaders using key informant interviews, whereas the quantitative data targeted head teachers and teachers in the respective schools selected.

#### **Questionnaire**

The questionnaire was used for data collection because it offer considerable advantages to administer. It also presented an even motivation to a large number of people concurrently, and provided the research with an easy amassing of data. It is important to note that questionnaire gives respondents the independence to prompt their ideas or opinions, and also to make recommendations. The researcher administered 6 questionnaire in each of the 101 selected primary schools in Bombali District, Northern Sierra Leone. He then was able to retrieve at least 5 questionnaires he administered to the said primary schools.

#### **Questionnaires for Head Teacher's Perception**

The questionnaires for head teachers comprised seven sections and in all of these, the questions deal with stakeholders' perceptions about the implementation of the Free Quality Education in Bombali District, Northern Sierra Leone.

"Section A" selected personal characteristics of head teachers,

"Section B" collected information related to direct or indirect charges and costs affecting implementation of the free primary school education,

"Section C" collected data on the adequacy of instruction and learning resources,

"Section D" collected information on appropriateness of school environment, infrastructural facilities,

"Section E" deals with policy implementation of the free Quality School education,

"Section F" deals with the challenges to the implementation of free Quality School education and "Section G" collected information on the benefits of the free primary education.

#### **Questionnaire for Teachers' Perception**

The questionnaires for teachers comprised seven sections and in all of these, the questions deal with stakeholder's perceptions about the implementation of the Free Quality Education in Bombali District, Northern Sierra Leone.

"Section A" collected the background data of teachers.

"Section B" collected data related to direct or indirect charges and costs affecting the implementation of free Quality School education,

"Section C" collected data on the adequacy of teaching and learning resources,

"Section D" collected data on appropriateness of school environment, infrastructural facilities,

"Section E" dealt with policy implementation of the free Quality School education,

"Section F" dealt with the challenges to implementing the of free Quality School education and "Section G" collected facts on the benefits of the free Quality School education

#### **Key Informant Interview Schedules**

The researcher adopted additional data collection information by conducting Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to have a clear picture of understanding the study under review by strategic stakeholders within the educational Sector in Bombali District. Interviews were conducted with the Bombali District Education office of the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary School Education Official and the Bombali District Council Chairman and authorities on examining the Perceptions of Stakeholders to the effective implementation of Free Quality School Education in the Bombali District, Northern Sierra Leone. The interview guide included items covering the objectives of the study. The interview schedule gathered data on the School Stakeholder's Perceptions of the implementation of Free Quality School Education in the Bombali District, Northern Sierra Leone. Interviews were conducted on appointed schedules to avoid or minimize the culture of silence from interviewees.

#### **Data presentation and analysis**

##### **Data presentation**

Data was presented in tables.

##### **Data analysis**

After all the data had been collected, the researcher conducted a data cleaning process, which involved the identification of incomplete or inaccurate responses. The same were corrected to improve data quality. The results were presented using tables.

**Results and analysis**  
**Demographic and Socio-economic Characteristics of Stakeholders in FQPE**

**Table 2: Gender of Stakeholders**

Sex	No. of Head Teachers		No. of Teachers	
	Frequency	Percentages	Frequency	Percentages
Male	68	67.33	141	34.4
Female	33	32.67	269	65.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>410</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Field data 2024

The results in the table above revealed that there were fewer female head teachers 32.67% of the total population surveyed while there were more male head teachers recording 67.32% of the head teachers revealing the gender of their demographic and socio-economic characteristics. Furthermore, the table indicated that there were more female teachers which recorded 65.6% whereas 34.4% were recorded male teachers respectively. It is prudent to note from the findings of the gender disaggregation of respondents that, there are more male Head teachers than Female Head Teachers whilst there are more female teachers than male teachers in both Government and Government-Assisted Primary Schools in Bombali District, Northern Sierra Leone. The table above also justifies the evidence of respondents' gender participation

**Age Bracket of Participants (Head Teachers and Teachers)**

**Table 3: Age bracket of respondents**

Age Bracket (In Years)	No. of Head Teachers		No. of Teachers	
	Frequency	Percentages	Frequency	Percentages
16-25	5	4.9	161	39.3
26-35	22	21.8	180	43.9
36-45	57	56.4	43	10.5
46-55	13	12.9	14	3.4
56 and above	4	3.9	12	2.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>410</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Field Data 2024

The table above indicated that 56 % of the head teachers were between the age 36-45 years old, 22 % were between the age 26-35 years old, 13 % were between the age 46-55 years old; 10 % were between the age 16-25 years and 4 % were between the age 56-60 years old. The findings from the table above also revealed that 48% of teachers were between the age 26-35 years old, 39% were between the age 16-25 years old; 11% were between the age 36-45 years old; 3% were between the age 46-55 years old and finally 3% were between the age 56-60 years old. This shows that majority of the head teachers and teachers are within the working-class age bracket during the implementation of the FQSE in the Bombali district.

**Table 4: Marital Status of Stakeholders**

Marital Status	Head Teachers		Teachers	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Married	67	66.3	121	29.5
Unmarried	34	33.7	289	70.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>410</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Field Data 2024

The table above shows that 66 % of head teachers were married 34% were unmarried, 70.5 % of teachers were unmarried and the remaining 29.5% of teachers were married during the implementation of the FQSE in Bombali district.

**Table 5: Educational Level/Qualification of Head Teachers and Teachers**

Educational Level/Qualification	Head Teachers		Teachers	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
HTC	55	54.5	161	39.3
TC	33	32.7	208	50.7
WASSCE/GCE and BECE Results	13	12.8	41	10
Total	101	100	410	100

Source: Researcher's Field Data 2024

The results revealed that 55% of head teachers had HTC, 33% had TC, while 39% of teachers had HTC, and 51% had TC. The table further revealed that 13% of the head teachers were untrained but had GCE/WASSCE and BECE certificates. This revealed that there were untrained head teachers and teachers servicing government and government-assisted primary schools during the implementation of the FQSE in Bombali district.

**The Perceptions of the Participants, and the Stakeholders on the Implementation of FQPE Poverty alleviation strategy.**

Some stakeholders viewed the Free Quality School Education as a pro-poor policy. Others perceived the implementation of the FQSE as a political strategy for political gains. The FQSE was also perceived as a way of reducing pupils' drop out of school at the primary level. Some stakeholders thought that FQSE would reduce the high illiteracy rate of the country's young population. The FQSE was also viewed by some stakeholders as a strategy to expand the girl child enrollment in primary school as, a means to reduce teenage pregnancy. Stakeholders were with the conviction that FQSE would create a greater improvement in the conditions of service of teachers in the primary sector. Others thought that the implementation of the FQSE would improve the reading poverty of pupils at the primary school level in both Government and Government-Assisted primary schools. Majority of them viewed the FQSE as a strategy to improve pupils' access to primary education.

**Discussions**

Findings, revealed that majority of the head teachers are between the ages 36-45 years. The majority of the teachers are between the ages 26-35 years. Administrators and the teachers are at very active

ages when they can contribute their fullest. Most of the head teachers are trained and qualified. The majority who are males have HTC (P) certificates. It is surprising to learn that there are heads of schools, both males and females that are untrained and unqualified. The majority of head teachers with HTC have served between 11 – 15 years. Stakeholders regarded the Free Quality School Education as a pro-poor policy. Others supposed the implementation of the FQSE as a political strategy for political gains. The FQSE was similarly professed as a way of tumbling pupils' drop out of school at the primary level. Certain stakeholders believed that FQSE would decrease the extraordinary illiteracy rate of the country's young population. Furthermore, the FQSE was also seen by some stakeholders as a strategy to magnify the girl child enrollment in primary school as, a way to moderate teenage pregnancy. Moreover, Stakeholders were with the belief that FQSE would create a greater enhancement in the conditions of service of teachers in the primary sector. Also, others believed that the enactment of the FQSE would increase the reading deficiency of pupils at the primary school level in Government and Government-Assisted primary schools. Again, majority of the stakeholders viewed the FQSE as an approach to increase pupils' entree to primary education.

## Conclusion

Based on finding, it was concluded that the FQSE has also been touted as a means to reduce dropout rates among students at the primary school level. It was seen by some stakeholders as a strategy to increase primary school enrolment rates for girls and as a means to curb teenage pregnancy. Furthermore, stakeholders believed that FQSE would significantly improve the working conditions of primary school teachers. Again, the majority of stakeholders viewed FQSE as an approach to increase students' transition into primary school.

## Recommendations

From the analysis and conclusions drawn regarding the challenges surrounding the implementation of Free Quality Primary Education, the researcher proffers the following as attainable recommendations to government, policymakers, school heads, teachers community stakeholders, and future researchers:

- The government of Sierra Leone through the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education should recruit more teachers to teach in both government and government-assisted schools experiencing shortages to facilitate a better learning environment.
- The government through Ministry of Basic and senior Secondary Education should consider the qualification and competence of principals, heads of departments, senior teachers, and teachers before approval to ensure the proper management of school funds and facilities.
- The study also recommend that the government and other stakeholders should contribute more funds towards purchasing teaching and learning materials for effective learning.
- There is need for head teachers to mobilize the community to put resources together to help the government build more facilities.

The study more over recommend that government should come up with more training courses for the management team.

- The government of Sierra Leone should put aside adequate budgets for government and government-assisted schools to eliminate the effect of management challenges and enable schools to run efficiently.
- The government should provide better salaries, and other motivation packages for teachers to facilitate their work effectively.
- Government should also provide School subsidies on time so school heads can effectively run their schools, and avoid taxing parents to supplement the subsidy.
- The Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary School Education should distribute enough learning and teaching materials to all schools for the benefit of the teachers and pupils.
- School inspectors should accelerate their monitoring of schools to enhance the effective implementation of the FQPE.
- Public school authorities are encouraged to explore various ways of income generation in line with their core functions to cut down over-reliance on government funding.

### Conflict of interest

Authors have declare no conflict of interest

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