



Creating a productive environment in the classroom: Lessons from High Performing Schools

Introduction

For effective learning to take place in the classroom, it is essential that school staff foster an environment in which pupils feel safe and supported, and where they can build their self-esteem and social skills. Using school time productively and applying learner-centred teaching methods are known to be central to motivating pupils to learn.

Successive Secondary Grade Learning Assessments (SGLA) show a significant majority of secondary school pupils are well below expected learning levels for both English and Maths. The most recent SGLA also shows that, on average, teachers teach for just 12.5 hours of the prescribed 25-30 hours per week and that most teachers are unable to cover the whole curriculum, not teaching up to 40 lessons from terms 1 and 2.



High performing schools make up for lost learning time, structure the school day and plan lessons.

Clearly, creating productive classroom environments is one of a number of factors that have an impact on learning, along with effective school leadership, ensuring the safety of pupils, the recruitment and deployment of qualified teachers and, effective teaching practice. This is one of a series of four briefings which recognise the importance of these factors by casting a light on the activities of better performing schools and their good practice.

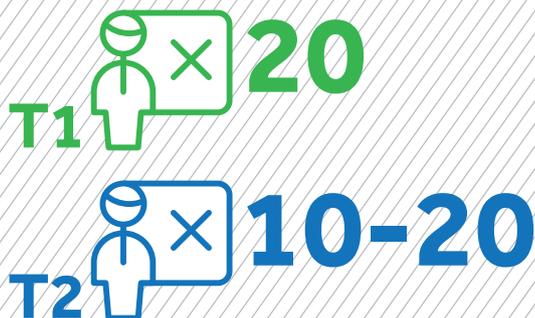
Better performing schools

Structure and organise the school day. This organisation helps ensure pupils are in class at the right time and not tempted to truant. In one school, the principal has appointed a teacher to act as their eyes and ears and provide regular feedback alongside the principal's own regular checks on what is happening in the classroom. In another, teachers routinely patrol the school premises to deter pupils loitering.

Structure and plan lessons to create a more pupil-centred classroom. The lesson plan manual, supplied by LWL, provides a five-step teaching method for Maths and English, which teachers have said has been crucial for them to organise and deliver structured and engaging lessons for pupils. One teacher spoke of how it has increased pupil participation in the classroom, shifting from blackboard scribing to a child-centred learning environment leading some of them to use this guidance for non-core subjects too.

Adapt schedules to accommodate more learning

opportunities. This enables the full curriculum to be taught within term time and for pupils to learn outside of school hours in quiet and focused environments. Through after-school classes, shorter recesses, weekend tutoring and homework assistance, schools help pupils catch up, revise key concepts from the previous term and ensure adequate time to cover the curriculum. In one school, the new principal moved the school closing time to later in the afternoon for more learning time. At another, teaching and learning activities resume as soon as term starts, removing the assumption that no serious work occurs in the first two weeks of the school year.



On average, teachers are unable to cover 20 lessons from term 1 and 10–20 lessons from term 2.

Better performing schools take measures to address this.

Track attendance of both teachers and pupils to boost class time. Teacher absenteeism is a major cause of reduced instructional time. In one school, teachers are expected to log in at the start and end of every lesson and management reviews the log weekly. In another school, pupils took ownership of the logbook and reported to the principal if they had had less contact time than scheduled. At some schools, teachers are sent away when they do not have permission to miss their teaching hours or pay is withheld in line with absences.

Collaborate with primary schools to create a smooth transition for pupils. Secondary school teachers better understand the knowledge gaps they need to address straight away before moving on to more complex concepts. Teachers with prior experience of working in primary schools have the experience and skills to patiently explain concepts in simple terms and existing connections that enable them to liaise with primary schools to better plan transition.

Assess pupils continuously through the year, in a variety of ways, so pupils stay on track. Continuous assessment helps teachers to understand what has been learned and where remedial learning may be needed and motivates pupils to learn. It indicates whether pupils are on track to achieve good results and can be used to contribute to overall final scores, introducing the possibility of using different assessment methods beyond tests or a final end-of-year exam. Checking pupils' notebooks is also a useful activity for classroom-based assessment, especially in contexts where textbooks are limited, and notebooks are the only study reference available.

Enforce clear examination rules and procedures to limit exam malpractice. While students are discouraged from cheating, better performing schools adhere to strict monitoring, through a shift-system which includes principals, teachers, parents, and others from the local community monitoring exams and ensuring senior students keep distance from one another as they write their exams. Verifying exam scores using a double-grading system reduces the possibility of teachers grading papers to exploit the good grade incentives they are offered.

Solicit support from the community, including the diaspora, for resources to improve school premises and fund teaching and learning materials. In some schools, CTA members have helped to construct additional classrooms to relieve overcrowding and there is evidence that schools with alumni and communities with families overseas periodically donate funds to cover the cost of school supplies so pupils do not go without.

Methodology

This Briefing Paper explores key findings from a qualitative deep dive study that highlights pockets of effective learning ('positive deviance') to consider what, if any, lessons can be replicated elsewhere to help other secondary schools make greater progress towards achieving their performance goals.

The study covered three districts of Western Rural, Kono and Karene targeting three schools in each area – two high performing schools and one average or low performing school, according to average pupil results in the May-June 2019 SGLAs.

The three-person research team included two Sierra Leonean researchers and spent three days in each school using key informant interviews (KIIs), focus group discussions (FGDs) and lesson/school observations to develop case studies. FGDs were carried out separately for boys and girls with the same set of eight pupils who had been randomly selected for the SGLA pupil test.