

Teacher Retention and Mobility in Sierra Leone

What factors motivate teachers to stay at or leave schools?

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Contents

<i>Abbreviations and acronyms</i>	4
Background to the research project	5
A note on the teacher workforce in Sierra Leone	8
1. Introduction	10
2. Methodology	12
2.1. Methods	12
2.2. Sample	13
3. Findings	15
3.1. Teacher level factors	15
3.2. School-level factors	18
3.3. System-level factors	22
4. Conclusion and considerations	28
Limitations of our study	28
References	30

Abbreviations and acronyms

EWI	Education Workforce Initiative
FGD	Focus group discussion
GIS	Geographic Information System
JSS	Junior secondary school
SSS	Senior secondary school
TSC	Teaching Service Commission

Background to the research project

This report is one of several (see [Table 1](#) below) on the research project on the *Impact of GIS-Supported Teacher Allocation in Sierra Leone (Hub-Led Research Programme 3)*.

The education workforce is the most important school-level determinant of student learning ([Education Commission, 2019](#)). In Sierra Leone, the pupil-to-qualified-teacher ratio rises from 44:1 for schools in urban centres to 76:1 for schools in rural areas ([Mackintosh et al., 2020](#)). Meanwhile, an average of a quarter of the workforce is absent from school on any given day. Even though the Teaching Service Commission (TSC) has created new protocols for teacher deployment, these reforms have not achieved the intended results.

In this context, the TSC is exploring new options – including an innovative teacher preference matching model – to harness geospatial data to strengthen workforce allocation. EdTech Hub and research partners Fab Inc and the Education Commission are undertaking a Hub-Led research (HLR) study to support the TSC to build evidence on the most feasible approach to Geographic Information System or GIS-supported teacher allocation in Sierra Leone. Using a mixed-methods study, we are assessing the impact of this approach on teacher attendance and retention.

This HLR seeks to understand whether improving teacher allocation using GIS data can increase job uptake, decrease teacher absenteeism, and improve teacher retention.

This qualitative study provides insights into why teachers in Sierra Leone move schools. For this study, we conducted semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions in two districts, in urban and rural areas, and across school levels. Factors playing a role in teacher retention and mobility are explored across three different levels: the teacher level, the school level and the system level.

Prior to this study, we conducted a literature review, and a series of qualitative and quantitative research based on the findings. In February 2022, we explored teachers' school choice preferences and what matters most for teacher deployment in Sierra Leone through qualitative research (the report can be found [here](#), and a related blog post [here](#)).¹ Between




¹



<https://edtechhub.org/2022/05/06/using-technology-to-improve-the-equity-of-teacher-allocation-in-sierra-leone-the-challenge-and-a-way-forward/> Retrieved 21 March 2023

October and December 2022, we also looked at teacher movements and retention rates through a quantitative study. The findings from the quantitative study can be found [here](#), and the summarising blog post [here](#).

Table 1 below summarises our study's research activities and outputs.

Table 1. *Timeline of HL3 research activities and outputs*

Date	Phase	Activities
2021	Proposal	<p>EdTech Hub, Fab Inc, and Education Commission worked on a technical proposal to present to the Teaching Service Commission (TSC) on supporting teacher allocation using GIS and a preference matching model.</p> <p> Key output: Factors Related to Teacher Absenteeism in Sierra Leone: Literature review</p>
2022	Kick-off	<p>Worked with the TSC to further scope the research and understand what the TSC needed to know to improve teacher allocation.</p> <p> Key output: <i>The impact of GIS-supported teacher allocation in Sierra Leone (Inception Report, unpublished) 2022</i></p>
February 2022	Qualitative fieldwork	<p>Undertook semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with teachers and school leaders in two districts to explore teacher preferences.</p> <p> Key outputs:</p> <p>Using technology to improve the equity of teacher allocation in Sierra Leone: The challenge and a way forward (Blog post on qualitative work) May 2022</p> <p><i>Report on qualitative fieldwork:</i></p> <p>What Matters Most for Teacher Deployment? A Case Study on Teacher School Choice</p>

		<i>Preferences in Sierra Leone)</i>
Oct–Dec 2022	Quantitative analysis	<p>Quantitative analysis was carried out nationally to analyse movement and retention of payroll teachers from 2015 to 2021.</p> <p> Key output: <i>Report from quantitative analysis</i></p> <p><i>School-to-School Mobility Patterns and Retention Rates of Payroll Teachers in Sierra Leone</i></p>
March 2023	Qualitative fieldwork	<p>Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with teachers and school leaders to explore reasons for high and low retention in areas identified by quantitative analysis.</p> <p> Key output [This report]:</p> <p><i>Teacher Retention and Mobility in Sierra Leone: What factors contribute to teachers' motivation to stay or leave schools?</i></p>

Our research partners on this study, the Education Commission and Fab Inc, have done extensive work on education data consolidation and the development of options for teaching workforce reforms in Sierra Leone through the Education Workforce Initiative (EWI).

To align with this research project, EdTech Hub has worked with Fab Inc and the TSC, through its country engagement work, to create an open-source, flexible algorithm for the teacher deployment exercise, to make the process easier and quicker. Using this integrated approach of research and technical assistance, we continue to engage with the TSC to support their efforts in improving the teacher deployment exercise. As part of this work, we engaged with stakeholders in both the TSC and the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE). We wanted to understand what has and has not worked well regarding teacher deployment and, going forward, how stakeholders believe teacher deployment can be improved. You can find this paper [here](#).

A note on the teacher workforce in Sierra Leone

In Sierra Leone, the teacher workforce is made up of those on the government payroll, those paid by private households, institutions, and schools, and lastly, volunteer teachers. Teachers on the government payroll make up 42% of the workforce and receive a monthly salary from the government. The remaining 58% of teachers are either paid privately or are volunteer teachers and therefore do not receive an official salary. To be able to go on the government payroll, a teacher must be qualified; that is, they must at least have a Teacher's Certificate. However, in previous years, this rule has not been enforced as strongly as now, particularly after the civil war, when the demand for teachers was high. As a result, there are a number of unqualified teachers on the government payroll, who would not qualify for the payroll today. Thirty-two per cent of teachers in Sierra Leone are volunteer teachers; they may receive a small monetary subsidy from their school leaders. It is also common for teachers, including volunteer teachers, to have other jobs to generate extra income, such as conducting extra lessons for students. In some cases, teachers are motivated to work as volunteers, believing they will eventually be put on the government payroll.

Teachers are considered qualified once they have acquired at least the minimum academic qualifications required to teach at the relevant school level ([Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education, 2021](#)). According to the Teaching Service Commission (TSC), the minimum academic qualification required is the Teachers' Certificate (TC) or its equivalent. The minimum requirement for the pre-primary and primary levels is a TC, whereas the minimum for a junior secondary school teacher is the Higher Teachers' Certificate (HTC) Secondary, and for senior secondary, it is a bachelor's in education (B.Ed). Any of the following qualifications are acceptable for registration with the TSC as a qualified teacher:

- Teacher's Certificate (TC)
- Higher Teacher's' Certificate (HTC) — this can be for primary or secondary
- Bachelor of Science in Education (B.Sc. Ed.)
- Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.)
- Master of Education (M.Ed.)

- PhD in Education
- A degree in another field + a post-graduate diploma in education

The recruitment and deployment of teachers in Sierra Leone typically involves identifying schools where non-payroll teachers (those not on the government payroll) will be put on the payroll. Teachers who are already working in government and government-assisted schools are chosen to go on the government payroll and take up an assignment in the identified schools. This may or may not be the school they are already teaching in. Teachers identified to go on the government payroll must have the minimum academic qualifications needed to teach at their allocated level. Once a teacher is identified to go onto the government payroll, they are given a pin code. Although this pin code is assigned to the individual teacher rather than the school, it is given to the teacher with the requirement that they must teach in the assigned school for at least three years. After three years, the teacher can apply to transfer to a different school.

The government aims to have at least one teacher on the government payroll in all government and government-assisted schools.

1. Introduction

Many low- and middle-income countries struggle to ensure there are enough qualified teachers to meet education system demand. However, teacher shortages are not generic — teacher supply is often a localised issue and can vary by geographic area and education level. At the secondary level, for example, there may be an oversupply of teachers for some subjects but shortages in others. Governments can also find it difficult to incentivise teachers to take up positions and remain in rural and hard-to-reach areas. Deployment that is not data-driven and does not take teacher preferences into account exacerbates this challenge ([↑Education Commission, 2019](#)). Low retention — driven by poor working conditions, low salaries, and insufficient training and support — is another key factor impacting persistent teacher shortages ([↑UNESCO, 2022](#)). All of these factors compound existing inequities.

In Sierra Leone, the ratio of pupil-to-qualified teacher varies between 44:1 for schools in urban contexts and 76:1 for schools in rural contexts ([↑Mackintosh et al., 2020](#)). In addition, up to a fifth of teachers fail to take up their assignments in remote locations ([↑Mackintosh et al., 2020](#)). Moreover, learners in urban centres consistently perform better than their peers in rural areas ([↑Leh Wi Lan, 2021](#)). To address this issue, the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) and the Teaching Service Commission (TSC) are currently exploring different approaches to increase the equity and efficiency of teacher deployment and promote teacher retention, especially in hard-to-reach areas.

The current study is the third in a series of research studies, which aim to generate evidence that can support the MBSSE and TSC with their teacher allocation and deployment strategy. Our first study investigated teacher preferences for school choice and uncovered important considerations for teacher deployment ([↑McBurnie et al., 2022](#)). Following this, we investigated mobility patterns for teachers who are on the government payroll, and payroll teacher retention rates ([↑Espinoza-Revollo et al., 2023](#)). The latter study helped us understand where teachers move to when they change schools, and also helped us identify areas with high (hot spots) and low retention rates (cold spots). The current study is explanatory in nature and aims to understand why teachers stay at or leave their schools.

In Sierra Leone, a payroll position is tied to the individual teacher, not the school. This means that if teachers move schools, they take their salary with them. This is important for understanding teacher deployment

because without the right incentives, teachers who are deployed in rural areas might move and take their salary with them, leaving schools in remote areas chronically understaffed. Understanding which factors influence teachers' decisions to leave or continue working at a school, in addition to obtaining a payroll position, will help inform future deployment strategies tackling low qualified-teacher-to-pupil ratios in remote areas.

We investigated teachers' reasons for staying at, or leaving, their school through the following research question:

What are the factors shaping teachers' motivation to remain at, or leave, their school of employment?

The study aims to answer this question by exploring factors at three different levels:

- Factors contributing to retention and mobility at **the teacher level**, such as family commitments, gender, travel time to school, etc.
- Factors contributing to retention and mobility at **the school level**, such as relationships with colleagues and school leaders, school location, and school environment.
- Factors contributing to retention and mobility at **the system level**, such as opportunities for promotion, salaries, and professional development.

This framework was informed by the literature review ([↑Vijil et al., 2022](#)) and teacher preference study ([↑McBurnie et al., 2022](#)) and shaped our research methods and protocols. The following sections outline our methodology ([Section 2](#)), findings ([Section 3](#)) and considerations for future research ([Section 4](#)).

2. Methodology

This section outlines the research methodology for this study, including a detailed description of the activities, as well as our sampling process.

2.1. Methods

Through semi-structured interviews (SSIs) with school-leaders and four teachers at each school, we aimed to understand the factors contributing to teachers leaving or staying at three different levels: the system level, school level, and teacher level. In addition, we conducted focus group discussions (FGDs) with teachers only. The FGDs consisted of three participatory activities through which we explored perceptions of location and distance from the home to the school (Activity 1) and factors contributing to teachers leaving or staying (Activity 2). We assigned these factors to three different teacher profiles to better understand the extent to which gender and other personal characteristics play a role.

We conducted FGDs before the interviews, in order to be able to follow up on information gathered from the FGDs with teachers. The last question of the interview consisted of a ranking exercise with cards stating the overall categories of the factors contributing to retention. Since interviews took place after the FGDs, teachers had been prompted to think about these factors at several points during the FGDs and the interviews. Teachers received six cards, each labelled with one of the following factors: *school conditions*, *school location*, *promotion*, *professional development*, *relationships*, and *other*. For the 'other' card we asked teachers to explain which factor they thought contributed to retention.

After collecting the data, all interviews and recordings of FGDs were transcribed and translated, in case interviews had been conducted in Krio. Transcripts were tagged with the research approach (semi-structured interview or FGD) and the respondent's background (gender, payroll status, etc.) and location (urban vs rural). Transcripts were then thematically coded, based on themes that were deducted from our previous studies and the literature review. Thereafter, codes were added inductively to capture other new themes that arose from the data. Codes were then grouped and analysed collaboratively by the researchers. In addition, we ran several reports between the codes and transcript tags to understand basic descriptive statistics of the data.

2.2. Sample

Findings from the previous two studies were used to inform our sample for the current study. We wanted to understand why teachers move from one school to another; however, because of logistical and ethical constraints, we could not select teachers based on their personal movement history. Instead, we decided to interview teachers at schools with relatively high and low retention rates, in two districts that had high variance of retention rates. The study was therefore undertaken in Western Area Urban district in the Western Province and Tonkolili district in the Northern Province of Sierra Leone. The following selection criteria were used to select the two districts:

- Greatest variance in retention rates between cold and hot spots within a 2-hour radius of the district headquarters
- Variance in settlement type
- Variance in school level

Within each district, we then selected primary and secondary schools with high and low retention rates. This resulted in four primary schools and four secondary schools for each district and an even distribution between rural (Tonkolili) and urban (Western Area Urban) schools. At each of the selected schools, we aimed to conduct four semi-structured interviews with teachers, one with the school leader, and a focus group discussion with a maximum of seven participants, excluding the school leader. At each school, we aimed to interview two female and two male teachers on the government payroll. If this could not be done, we aimed for equal distribution of females and males, and also included teachers who were not on the government payroll. Our sample included the following school types:

- Government schools
- Government-assisted mission schools
- Government-assisted community schools

Government-assisted mission schools are partially funded and governed by a religious mission and partly by the government, while government-assisted community schools are schools that are founded and supported by the community and the government.

Due to political tensions and related security concerns, we visited four schools in Tonkolili district and seven schools in Western Area Urban district. Notably, in some schools, teachers were absent on the day of our visit, were otherwise engaged (e.g., supervising exams), or did not want to participate in the research. We carried out a total of 54 interviews and 10 focus group discussions. [Table 2](#) below summarises the profiles of research participants.

Table 2. *Sample size and characteristics*

	Position	Gender		Payroll status		School Type		
		Male	Female	Payroll	Non-payroll	Primary	JSS*	SSS**
Western Area Urban	School leader	4	3	7	—	3	3	1
	Teacher	20	7	18	9	11	13	3
Tonkolili	School leader	4	—	4	—	2	1	1
	Teacher	11	5	10	6	8	4	4

*JSS = Junior secondary school. SSS** Senior secondary school

It is important to note that we asked teachers about their personal history of moving between schools, as well as about why they think teachers change schools and leave the profession generally. From our sample, 22 teachers and school leaders reported having changed schools and 36 reported never having changed schools. In the following section, we outline emerging themes from the study.

3. Findings

Several factors influence teachers' reasons for wanting to stay at or leave their school. Participants highlighted factors from all three levels of our conceptual framework, including personal motivation for teaching, family commitments, qualifications, and religion (teacher level); distance from school, school environment, and relationships within and outside the school (school level); payroll and salary, professional development and career progression, and other opportunities (system level). In this section, we examine each of these factors in detail.

The findings discussed in this section capture the following.

1. The reasons reported by the participants who changed schools
2. All participants' responses about why they think teachers in general change schools or leave the profession.
3. All participants' responses about why other teachers in their school changed schools or left the profession.

3.1. Teacher level factors

Teacher-level factors, such as personal motivation, family, qualifications, and religion affect teacher retention. We explore these factors in more detail in the sections below.

3.1.1 Personal motivation

Our findings suggest that personal motivation for teaching plays an important role in teacher retention. For example, a teacher who joins the profession to get educated and progress up the career ladder might be more likely to leave the profession for another occupation than a teacher who joins the profession because of a sense of vocation. Intrinsic motivation to teach may keep teachers engaged in the profession, even though the pay is low, or even if they are not on the government payroll. Some teachers cite altruistic reasons, such as serving their community, or having a family member who was a teacher who influenced them. Love for teaching was a common response across our sample:

"Well, I love teaching. Because any job you want to partake in, you should love it first. Because if you don't love it, then you will not stay long in it. So because I loved it, and my late father was a professor, a

lecturer, a teacher.” (School leader from an urban school in Freetown)

The school leader quoted above has been an educator for over 30 years and cites her passion for teaching as the main motivating factor for choosing and remaining in the profession. When asked if she would be interested in other professional opportunities, she said that she was getting ready for retirement, but would be interested in sharing her knowledge and experience as a consultant.

When we asked teachers if they wanted to continue teaching, 32 teachers said ‘yes’ and 14 ‘no’. Teachers give different reasons for liking their job. Some teachers enjoy the intellectual side of teaching, such as their subject, solving problems, increase in academic status and understanding, and the self-study required to teach. One teacher from a junior secondary school identified teaching as a ‘noble profession’ as children need support and mentorship:

“It’s a noble job. And looking at these kids and looking at our situation in the country now at least, these kids really do need help, [...] they need people who they can look up to, at least as a mentor to advise them and to show them the right way.”

Quite a few teachers said they enjoy teaching because of their students — this included their love of students, enjoying passing on their knowledge, and interacting with, encouraging, and seeing students progress. Some teachers mentioned that they like learning from their students as it helps them understand human behaviour in general. Supporting students was a common response among participants in relation to their motivation for joining and staying in the teaching profession.

3.1.2. Family commitments

For teachers who reported having changed schools, family commitments were one of the top reasons reported for moving. Family issues also surfaced in responses from participants about colleagues who had left their school. A couple of participants’ colleagues had moved because they got married (all female teachers) and a few because they had to care for family members living in another location. A response from a focus group discussion in a rural school reported that teachers in urban areas come to villages to gain employment and then return to be with their families:

“... for the villages, at any time we have opportunities for employment. People living in the urban areas will come to gain employment and after getting employment, they will decide to go back and join their families in the urban [area] where they came from.”

This example is one among several highlighting the challenge with the current allocation system. Furthermore, as the study on mobility patterns highlighted ([↑Espinoza-Revollo et al., 2023](#), p. 21), female teachers' movement patterns differ from those of male teachers. Even though our sample size was too small to draw clear-cut conclusions about what causes gender differences in mobility patterns, one female teacher from a rural primary school noted:

“For us, the female teachers will normally stay in a particular school because of family reasons.”

In addition, some teachers mentioned that due to care duties, female teachers are less inclined to work at two schools or have another job in addition to teaching.

3.1.3. Qualifications

Teachers mentioned that some of their colleagues moved after upgrading their teaching certification, as they needed a school that aligned with their higher qualifications. A senior secondary school teacher in Tonkolili, who was also one of the founders of the school explained,

“Initially, when I was not yet a trained and qualified teacher, I was in primary school. I went to do my Higher Teacher Certificate secondary, which made me switch over to the secondary school. That is how I changed schools [...] Also, I'm one of the founders of the secondary school because we came out with the initiative supported by some stakeholders, and then we started the secondary school, so that was basically why I went to do HTC [Higher Teacher's Certificate] secondary for the school.”

This particular teacher is one of only four teachers in this school who have a payroll position, the other sixteen teachers are community teachers. His quotation shows his commitment to serving his community by obtaining higher qualifications in order to teach at secondary level. While other teachers mention leaving for higher

qualifications, they do not all share the same motivation for doing so. Several teachers at secondary level in the urban context mention leaving to get a Bachelor's or Master's degree, and leaving the profession altogether after that.

3.1.4. Religion

Although most teachers in our sample indicated that their opportunities for promotion are not contingent on their religion, religion is mentioned as a factor in teacher retention. Several teachers mentioned that they themselves or other teachers in their school remain because their religion aligns with the school:

"Most of the teachers teaching here are Catholic teachers [...] so because of the Catholic school they will want to stay."

Equally, the relationship with the religious mission that supports the school can also be a reason teachers want to leave.

"The Mosque thinks that they can do anything to us because of their building, that is why teachers want to move away."

Most teachers in this school in Freetown mentioned that the difficult relationship with the mission was a reason why teachers had left their school in the past, and why teachers would leave the school. Notably, this school had one of the lowest retention rates in our sample.

3.2. School-level factors

School-level factors, such as school environment and relationships, are important factors contributing to teacher retention. A conducive work environment and strong relationships will encourage teachers to stay. When these elements are not in place, teachers consider leaving their school. We explore these factors in more depth in the sections below.

3.2.1. Relationship with school leadership

Our findings suggest that teachers' relationships with school leadership significantly influence teacher retention and mobility. Firstly, school leaders provide financial support to teachers without a payroll position in order to encourage them to teach. School leaders frequently mention making

efforts to connect with their colleagues, as the following school leader from a senior secondary school in Freetown explains:

“Very, very cordial. You know I'm someone I don't think the office is my place. As a principal, I will come there later on to do administrative work, but I'm always with the teachers and the pupils. I go and sit in classes.[...] And sometimes, you know, when you want these teachers to feel you belong, you are with them. Sometimes I cook, I bring it to the staff, we eat, that communion, we Africans, that communion eating, they will feel like I'm part of them because I was part of them before.”

Teachers in this particular school emphasised that they felt supported by the head teacher and that their positive relationship with her was a reason to stay at the school.

Secondly, teachers across schools indicated that the relationship with the school leader was an important factor in choosing a school, as well as a reason to remain at a school. They also shared that a poor relationship with the school leader was a significant reason for leaving a school. The following teacher from an urban school in Freetown explained,

“One of the main reasons why teachers normally do want to leave the school is because [...] the relationship with [...] the school leaders is not cordial.”

3.2.2. Relationships between teachers

Good relationships between teachers is considered a determining factor in teachers' motivation to stay at or leave a school, at both primary and secondary levels. Most teachers reported that their relationships with current colleagues are cordial, and at times reported relationships as familial. For example, according to one teacher,

“We are a family. We live like brothers and sisters, to be honest. We share our food, we share our thoughts. We will share our private lives and ask for help or advice, and we cooperate very well.”

Teachers report supporting each other professionally, as well as with personal problems, and financial support is common in some schools. Teachers across our sample emphasised the importance of “cordial

relationships between teachers” as determining factors for staying at or leaving a school.

“The relationship between teachers because where you have a bad relationship, you will not stay there.”

This was a common response in all school types and districts. It should be noted that the wider education ecosystem was often mentioned in relation to the importance of relationships for staying at or leaving the school. These relationships are seen as part of a conducive work environment.

“The conducive environment makes avenue for the teaching aspect and if there is no good relationship among the teachers and also the administration as well, and for the person to stay in school, they will find it very difficult.”

School leaders, as well as parents and other community members, are part of the wider school ecosystem and teachers’ relationships with these various stakeholders are essential to teacher well-being and motivation to stay.

3.2.3. Relationships with parents and other community members

The relationship between schools, the communities, and parents varies strongly by school, but is mentioned as a factor in teacher retention. Some participants indicated that parents and the community support them by making sure the children attend school, sending them back when they leave school during the day, collaborating on finding solutions, and providing feedback. In this regard, teachers reported having positive relationships with parents and communities. A common response across our sample was that these relationships can contribute to teachers’ overall satisfaction with their work environment, and can be a determining factor for staying at or leaving a school. A good relationship with the community could contribute to teachers wanting to stay in their profession. For example, when community members encourage teachers, or support them by giving them food (rural).

“When they know that you are a teacher, [they] will just call upon you and give you what it is that you need. They will just call upon

you quickly and give you what went on. It is even in terms of food, they do assist us, like community teachers, they do have their own plantations. After harvesting, some call up upon you and render a help unto you."

Teachers indicate that this kind of support makes a difference in how they feel valued within the community, and that it can positively impact their motivation to stay at a school.

Teachers in other schools say that parents do not attend parent-teacher meetings, or have conflicts with the school and teachers. At times, there are disputes over who has ownership over the school and its policies. In other instances, teachers have reported violence inflicted on them by parents, both verbal and physical, when they had disagreements.

"They [community members] started to disgrace the teacher publicly in front of the students, and that will lead the teachers to transfer to another school."

The teachers in this particular rural school did not feel safe because of frequent harassment by parents and other community members. They indicated that as a reason for teachers leaving in the past. A teacher in another school reported wanting to leave because of problems with harassment for not being trained and qualified.

3.2.4. School environment and location

Some teachers mentioned that a conducive teaching and learning environment would make teachers stay. For some teachers, having a conducive teaching and learning environment was to have peace of mind, while others defined it as having good school facilities and cleanliness.

"What normally makes me stay in a particular school? The reason is that if I happen to meet some of the facilities that will motivate me to have that love for that particular school. So that's why I decided to stay rather going to any other school."

Some teachers also reported that provision of adequate teaching and learning materials would encourage teachers to stay at their school. Three teachers specifically mentioned provision of ICT as a reason for staying.

In relation to the school environment and school satisfaction, teachers also mentioned the distance from their home to their schools as a determining factor for staying or leaving. Some teachers reported that they would be interested in teaching at schools closer to their homes or with different shift schedules. Others would be interested in schools with better conditions than their current schools.

In the urban context, teachers frequently mentioned that the distance from their house to the school is quite long. It often requires taking multiple forms of transportation, and / or walking part of the route. In the rural schools, we came across teachers who either lived very close to the school because they were from the community, or who had to cover a considerable distance on foot or by bike. In relation to the distance, the issue of paying for transport surfaced. With the cost of fuel at historical heights in Sierra Leone, teachers end up spending their income on transportation to get to their schools. Teachers who lived far away from their schools said that location would be a contributing factor to changing schools.

Finally, safety and abuse within the school environment were mentioned as factors that will make teachers leave or stay at a particular school. This issue is more specifically connected to female teachers. Upon analysing the third activity of the FGDs, where teachers had to allocate factors contributing to school satisfaction to different teacher profiles, we discovered that a safe environment and good relationships were more frequently assigned to the female teacher profiles.

3.3. System-level factors

System-level factors, such as monetary factors and opportunities for professional development and promotion, are important factors contributing to teacher retention. The next sections will elaborate on these factors.

3.3.1. Monetary factors

Even though our qualitative data collection focused on the retention and mobility of payroll teachers, the issue of obtaining a government salary surfaced frequently as a contributing factor for teacher retention. Teachers explained that changing schools in order to get on the payroll is common practice. In fact, among the teachers in our study who reported changing schools, securing a payroll position was one of the top reasons given for doing so.

Since a payroll position is bound to an individual and not a particular school, teachers take their salary with them if they change schools. The following teacher describes how he changed schools to obtain a salary or payroll position (commonly referred to as pin code), and then moved back to his previous school.

“The reason why I transferred there is that the actual number of pin codes that was given to the school was not enough. And that school that I was approved, [...] they are fortunate to have a huge number of pin codes for teachers. [...] So I was there, I taught for three years at the school, and the principal accepted the transfer.”

Schools are allocated a number of payroll positions based on their needs. However, when schools cannot fill those positions because they do not have enough qualified teachers, teachers from other schools can apply and change schools. This teacher explains the process of how he moved to another school to get the payroll position, served the mandatory three years at that school, and then went back to his original school. The amount of payroll positions allocated to a particular school varies, and depends on the allocation of positions through the district offices. Notably, most teachers indicate that if they are satisfied with their school, they would prefer to stay and obtain the payroll position at their current school. However, as the teacher above describes, if those positions are not allocated to their school, they are willing to change schools to obtain the salaried position. After serving in that school for a mandatory amount of time, they can opt to move back to their first school, or move somewhere else altogether, depending on their personal circumstances.

Once teachers are on the government payroll, salary remains a determining factor for teacher retention, and in particular retention in the profession itself. Teachers on the government payroll on average earn NLe 1200 per month, which amounts to USD 61 per month. A teacher from a rural primary offered an explanation of how a payroll salary does not cover the cost of living:

“Looking at the cost of living and the earning power of teachers nowadays. Now, a teacher will earn NLe 1000 at the end of the month, which of course, the bag of rice is now NLe 600 to NLe 700,

so if a teacher got another job somewhere else, they may decide to leave the teaching profession and join that particular work.”

Therefore, teachers say that increasing teacher salaries or adding additional benefits will encourage teachers to stay in their schools. This also ties in with the importance of social connections in a teacher's place of appointment, which would offer the necessary additional financial support. In one of the schools, for example, teachers were allowed to do petty trading inside the school compound, which provided an incentive for them to stay at their school.

Teachers on the government payroll do receive a pension at the end of their service, but they do not enjoy the same benefits as other civil servants, such as health care and transportation allowances. Therefore, the provision of benefits could ease some of the struggles teachers face and has been raised as an incentive for teachers to stay at a school. Teachers indicate that if a salary increase is not possible, they should at least receive benefits, such as health care and transportation. As a secondary teacher from Freetown explains,

“We are only taking our normal salaries, while other smaller government-owned institutions like the police, and the military, have hospitals, they have their barracks, they have, well, take-home salaries of 2 million, the lists, they have a bag of rice, and staff transportation. They have to go to the drawing board and encourage us as teachers.”

If teachers can get the kinds of benefits listed by the teacher quoted above at another school, it would be a reason for the teachers to go there.

When we asked teachers who were not on the government payroll if they would move to another school for a payroll position, nearly all teachers said they would.

“A pin code will help a teacher to stay, let's say for instance, you know, for every human being, when you are working, at least you expect to have something at the end of the day.”

As the teacher's quote above explains, providing a payroll position will encourage teachers to stay at a school. Although our findings suggest that there are other important factors impacting retention, teachers do need to have their financial needs met. If there is another school or opportunity,

wherein their social and environmental needs are met, and they receive a salary, that is what they prefer.

3.3.2. Opportunities for promotion and professional development

Opportunities for further studies and promotion are considered a significant incentive for retention. Teachers indicated that being provided with opportunities for professional development through their schools would motivate them to stay. A teacher from a primary school in Freetown explained,

“Because if you are promoted, it means you will stay there for a long [...], but [if] you are teaching without promotion it would tempt you to leave that school and go for another one.”

This teacher’s example highlights how promotion can be both an incentive to stay and a reason to leave when opportunities for promotion are not available. The teacher’s statement was echoed by another teacher from Freetown, who used his own situation as an example:

“Now, let me take my own case to be a case study: I have taught for this mission for 20 good years now. But still, I’m still an assistant teacher. And definitely, if it were not for the sake of this head [teacher] now, I’m planning to leave this mission.”

The above quotation highlights two essential things. Firstly, it explicitly mentions the lack of promotion as a reason for leaving a particular school. Secondly, it reaffirms the importance of the relationship with the school leader as an incentive for staying, as discussed in [Section 3.2.2](#). It also underscores the role of religious missions in the current promotion system. At the time of our study, a teacher could be up for promotion every five years. However, this system depends heavily on the school leader and / or mission secretariat and often results in the arbitrary allocation and promotion of teachers. This lack of transparency regarding the promotion process in turn leads to dissatisfaction and a lack of motivation among teachers.

This is not just an issue in the urban context. A teacher from a secondary school in Tonkolili told us that the allocation of positions, based on sentiment, is what makes schools in their district fall apart.

“Even if the person is not qualified, this man has a Teacher's Certificate, but because he is connected to the family or to the school, or son of the soil, what's going to happen? [...] With all your money, my Masters, — you are going to leave. And that issue has led some schools today to fall apart.”

A Teacher's Certificate is the lowest possible qualification for primary schools. For secondary schools, a Higher Teacher's Certificate for secondary is required. As this teacher argues, teachers are being promoted for reasons that have nothing to do with their qualifications, which results in other teachers leaving.

Religious missions also play a role in the extent to which a teacher can be promoted. Although all participants stated that promotions are available regardless of religion, i.e., someone who is a Christian can be promoted at an Islamic mission school, a teacher cannot become a school leader if they do not have the same religion as the school's mission. Another aspect of promotion ties in with opportunities for professional development which lead to promotion. Teachers who are not on the government payroll rely on stipends provided through school subsidies, or community support. Some of these teachers lack the necessary qualifications to be considered for the government payroll. However, if they take leave to get the qualifications they need to have a chance of getting on the payroll, they do not receive their stipend. A teacher highlighted this as follows.

“And also, non-pin-code teachers are not having the right to have a study leave because if you leave you will not have a stipend at that particular moment. Therefore, we need also the MBSSE to put strategies to have a way to give us study leave.”

These teachers are stuck in a vicious circle of not being enabled to receive the training they need to get qualified in order to go on the government payroll.

The quotations above all highlight the importance of a transparent promotion system, in relation to receiving a higher salary. However, promotion is not just related to monetary benefits, teachers also mention opportunities within their school for increased responsibility and additional (leadership) roles. Although most teachers refer to promotion in relation to an increase in pay, it can also be interpreted more broadly, as one teacher from a rural secondary school explained,

“But he also gives promotions, by the way you work in school. He can say from now, you are the chairman of the games and sports in the school or the exams’ chairman, because of the way you work. By extension, he gives promotions based on how you work in the school.”

This suggests that opportunities for promotion are also important as a way of rewarding teachers and showing appreciation.

4. Conclusion and considerations

Why do teachers stay at or leave their schools? Some of our findings in highlighting the factors influencing teachers' levels of satisfaction with their schools are in line with the teacher preferences study: the importance of location, professional development, and promotion ([↑McBurnie et al., 2022](#)). However, the study has also provided some new insights: relationships with the wider school community are a significant factor contributing to teacher retention, and tie in with a range of other motivating factors, such as safety, school environment, promotion, and professional development. This also explains the localised nature of the labour market for teachers in Sierra Leone. Every teacher needs a decent income, however, since teacher salaries are low, and relationships and distance from the home to the school make up the other vital motivators, it makes sense that teacher mobility patterns are localised.

The three studies of the HLR 3 project combined ([↑Espinoza-Revollo et al., 2023](#); [↑McBurnie et al., 2022](#) and this report) suggest that teachers prefer to remain in familiar social environments, rather than move far away from them, even if moving would allow them to obtain payroll status. Money is **not the only** factor that motivates teachers. There are examples of teachers obtaining payroll status in a different school, and then moving back to where they came from, taking the salary with them. This suggests that a localised approach to teacher allocation, in combination with targeted continuous professional development to support unqualified teachers, is vital to teacher retention. Teachers need to be supported, not only to obtain the necessary qualifications to be able to progress, but they also require salaried positions. This level of support and change could help tackle the uneven distribution of qualified teachers in schools, particularly in rural settings.

Limitations of our study

The exploratory nature of the study means the sample size is too small to run statistical analyses. In addition, we had to stop our data collection in Tonkolili because of political tensions, which resulted in an even smaller sample size representing rural views. [↑Espinoza-Revollo et al. \(2023\)](#) describe how the mobility patterns for women differ from those of men, and part of our current study aimed to explore why. However, due to the small sample size and the absence of women in some of our sample schools, we did not find clear-cut explanations for gender disparities in

mobility patterns. Furthermore, we chose to select districts with high variety in retention rates, which limited our ability to investigate individual hot and cold spots more specifically. Therefore, our results highlight more general factors influencing teacher retention and mobility in Sierra Leone. More targeted research is needed to fully understand the specific needs at school level, as well as to explore the differences in mobility patterns between female and male teachers.

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