Learning Assistants in Sierra Leone: model, innovation, and impact

Introduction

The Learning Assistant programme in Sierra Leone[1] is a community and school-based route for women to return to education and enter the teaching profession. It is a blended programme of supported distance study and para-professional working in primary schools, aimed at women who are economically and educationally marginalised. The LA programme has been in effect since 2013, in rural districts in Sierra Leone where there are few women teachers and overcrowded schools. The programme is designed and guided by the UK Open University, operationalised in Sierra Leone by the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE), and supported by Plan International.

The Learning Assistant programme is innovative in Sub- Saharan Africa, with multiple impacts beyond the classrooms where Learning Assistants are deployed. Retention and success rates for women on the programme are high: to date, 500 women are on track to become fully qualified teachers by September 2019.

In this report we reflect on data from 2019 field research in Sierra Leone. The research team (both teacher educators) returned to see former Learning Assistants whom we met in 2017, in particular Maria and Fatmata, two Learning Assistants who were profiled in 'It takes a village to raise a teacher' (Crisp, Safford and Wolfendon 2017), and headteachers, teachers and community leaders whom we also met in 2017. Maria and Fatmata are now Student Teachers preparing to sit the national teacher qualification examination. In addition, we include observations with two other Student Teachers to better reflect the wider impact of the programme. We were interested to learn how participation in the programme was influencing STs' actions and attitudes now they are classroom teachers. The field research focused explicitly on observations of teaching and pedagogy. Emergent findings indicate that the presence of women educators is driving cultural changes that create better experiences of schooling for children.

Context

Learning Assistants (LAs) undertake distance study to enter teacher colleges. At the same time, they help children and teachers in community primary schools, in order to gain practical experience of teaching and supporting learning. Self-study materials designed by the UK Open University to promote independent adult learning and child-friendly, learner-centered teaching practice guide the Learning Assistants. The LAs are mentored prior to entering teacher colleges by Learning Assistant Tutors (LATs) who are local tutors, additional support is provided by school and community leaders. When LAs enter teacher colleges, they become Student Teachers (STs) and are supported by Practice Study Mentors (PSMs). They follow the teacher college distance

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[1] For details of the LA programme, how it works, its stakeholders, support systems and community impact, please see 'It takes a village to raise a teacher' (Crisp, Safford and Wolfendon, 2017) and 'Learning Assistants in Sierra Leone: Community support for future teachers' (Crisp and Safford, 2018).

course and prepare for the national examination to achieve qualified teacher status and qualified teacher salary. At the same time, they continue to work in their primary schools, undertaking more teaching responsibilities and additional roles in schools.

In the Global North, the paraprofessional 'classroom helper', 'teaching assistant' or 'learning partner' is a familiar role in schools. Many classroom support staff are mature mothers who aspire to enter work, or to return to work and study; others are young people seeking entry into the teaching profession or the early childhood sector. They are supported and mentored in schools by teachers and headteachers, and they are recognised as paraprofessionals by government education ministries. Classroom support staff are often deployed to help groups or individual children who have additional physical, cognitive or language needs. A distinctive feature of classroom support staff in the Global North is that they live in school communities where there is often low teacher retention[2]. But this role and route into the education sector are not well known or widely implemented in the Global South.

The single most important factor in children's learning outcomes is the quality of the teacher (Barber and Mourshed 2007; Hanushek 2011), yet the pedagogic model in many countries around the world continues to be limited: the teacher delivers a lecture to the chalkboard, points to a written passage, has children repeat in chorus or selects a few children to speak, then has all children copy the text in their books. Whilst most countries have met targets for primary school enrolment, the quality of teaching is variable or poor and children are not learning (The World Bank 2018). For children's learning outcomes to improve, the quality of teaching must improve. The Learning Assistant model described in this report highlights multiple and positive impacts on teaching and learning: LAs are additional adults in overcrowded classrooms who act as role models for girls and boys; they are cohorts of women are in simultaneous education and employment; and, they gain status, recognition and confidence.

We propose that the features identified and outlined are both relevant to the experiences of Learning Assistants in Sierra Leone and, we suggest, would be applicable to many countries where additional appropriate adults in classrooms can positively impact on the quality of teaching and children's experiences of learning.

Field research objectives
There were three main objectives for the research:
- to track the Student Teachers in their journey towards qualified teacher status;
- to better understand how programme participation was influencing LAs' actions and attitudes as Student Teachers;

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[2] For instance, in England, the number of teaching assistants has risen 24% since 2010 whilst the number of teachers has declined, and the overall number of classroom support staff is slightly higher than the number of qualified teachers (DfE Schools Workforce Report 2017; Speck 2019).

- to identify shared characteristics of teaching and pedagogy across three districts.

Timeline and key activities

	Schedule	Location
Day 1	Visit to School 1 2 x ST observations 1 x HT interview 1 x PSM interview 2 x ST interviews 1 x group discussion with 15 STs	District 1, Kenema
	Visit to School 2 3 x ST observations 1 x HT interview 3 x STs group discussion	District 1, Kenema
	Visit to School 3 Informal discussion with HT 3 x STs group discussion	District 1, Kenema
Day 2	Meeting with Mami Queen women's leader Observation of Practice Study Mentor session with 16 STs Informal discussion with STs	District 1, Kenema
Day 3	Visit to School 4 Informal discussion with ST	District 1, Kenema
	Observe PSM session with 10 STs Informal discussion with STs	District 2, Petifu Junction
Day 4	Visit to School 5 3 x ST observations 1 x HT interview 1 x ST interview Informal discussion x 3 STs	District 3, Port Loko
	Visit to School 6 2 x ST observations 1 x HT discussion 1 x ST interview Informal discussion x 2 STs Visit to School 7 1x ST informal discussion 1 x Headteacher informal discussion	District 3, Port Loko

Data collection methods

Over four days, visits were made to seven primary schools across two districts where 10 Student Teacher (ST) observations were undertaken. Written feedback was provided to those observed, with the aim of it being shared more widely with STs and their Practice Study Mentors (PSMs). In

addition, two PSM sessions were observed followed by an informal discussion with STs. Informal discussions were held with 27 Student Teachers. Three Practice Study Mentors were observed in sessions with STs in two districts, and five PSMs were interviewed. Two Student Teachers featured in the 2017 research were observed and interviewed in depth. We also include observations with two other Student Teachers to better reflect the wider impact of the programme. In this report we draw specifically on the observations and interviews with these four STs to support the research focus on teaching and pedagogy. However, to better understand the context within which these practices take place, we also draw on interviews with headteachers and one community leader.

Schools

District 1	Rural Location / Close proximity to main Road/ Business centre	Number of pupils	Type of Attendance = Girls / Boys/Mixed	Type = Muslim/ Christian/ private/ government	Male/ female head teacher	Number of LA/STs	ST observed
School 1	Main Road	434	Girls	Christian	Female	4	Maria (2017)
School 2	Main Road	206	Mixed	Christian	Male	5	Flo
School 3	Main Road	195	Mixed	Government	Male	5	
School 4	Main road	525	Mixed	Muslim	Male	5	
District 3							
School 5	Rural Location	484	Mixed	Muslim	Male	3	Isatu, Fatmata (2017)
School 6	Rural Location		Mixed	Christian	Male	3	
School 7	Rural location		Mixed	Muslim	Male	3	

Ethics

This research built on existing research carried out by members of the research team, which explored issues relating to the influence of the LA programme as a catalyst for system change at a community level (Crisp, Safford and Wolfendon 2017; Crisp and Safford 2018). Ethics clearance was sought and approved of by the Open University's Human Research Ethics Committee, adhered to the university's research data management guidance, and was carried out in accordance with BERA, 2018 (British Educational Research Association) ethical guidelines. Information was provided for all participants and a consent form was shared and signed by those who were interviewed. The four case study Interviews were recorded on tablets and transcribed

with participants anonymised in the transcriptions. Observations were recorded in researchers' field notes. The participants featured in this report gave consent for their names to be used.

Findings

The report's emerging findings argue that the presence of the STs is driving change within schools and communities leading to better learning experiences for children in their classes. The findings focus on three main areas: making pedagogy visible through classroom observations; reflections on pedagogy and gender; and, insights from key stakeholders. However, it must be stated that for this research, children were not included as stakeholders due to ethical considerations and time limitations (see conclusion).

A focus on pedagogy: four case studies through classroom observations

The fieldwork of the 2019 visit focused explicitly on pedagogy, with observations of classroom lessons and interviews with former Learning Assistants (now Student Teachers) about their practice. We take this focus on pedagogy because the quality of teaching and the quality of children's learning present the greatest challenge in the global agenda for education. The following pedagogic snapshots are taken from observations of lessons by four Student Teachers: Maria, Fatmata, Isatu, and Flo. Maria and Fatmata were both observed in 2017. After the observations, the research team (in our role as teacher educators) provided feedback, noting areas of strength and areas for development.

Maria

School 1 is a Christian girls school with 434 students on role. The headteacher is female and she supports four STs in the school, including Maria.

When we first met Maria in 2017 as a Learning Assistant in a Catholic girls school, she had two young children[3]. She did not work or study until she became a Learning Assistant. She overcame opposition from her husband to join the LA programme. When we met her again in 2019 as a Student Teacher, she had a third child and was heavily pregnant with her fourth. The school is run by Agnes, an experienced female headteacher, who has integrated the Student Teachers into every aspect of school life. Maria is mentored by Agnes and by an experienced and sympathetic male teacher, Pascal.

> Maria is teaching social studies to Grade 3. She shares the class with another Student Teacher and they take it in turns across the day to teach the whole class. The text, abridged from a Grade 3 social studies textbook on the theme of 'transport in districts', is written across two boards. The children (50 girls) sit in four columns of desks and all face the front. The lesson is written in Maria's personal lesson notebook. Maria has her young baby strapped to her back – she teaches like this for the whole lesson.

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[3] For detailed portraits of Maria and Fatmata, please see Crisp and Safford (2017).

Maria reads through the whole text, and then she reads it again with the girls joining in. The girls read aloud very loudly, and headteacher enters the class to ask them to speak in softer voices. Each column of girls reads out the text whilst Maria points at the words. She stops occasionally to correct a word, asks them to repeat the word or she corrects their pronunciation. Maria points clearly to each word and scans the class to make sure everyone is participating, and the class follows the text closely as Maria reads aloud and groups of girls read aloud in turn.

After the girls have all read, Maria walks between the columns of girls, reiterating and rephrasing what's been said, interjecting or highlighting key points. She also refers to the visitors in the classroom as examples of people who have travelled by road to the school. She speaks clearly and continues to keep eye contact with the class. The girls take out their exercise books from their rucksacks/bags and copy down the text. Every girl has an exercise book, some are missing pens and Maria quickly provides these for them. She maintains a quietly purposeful atmosphere throughout the lessons.

During the writing, Maria takes the register. The girls write quickly, none appear to be struggling. When two girls are asked to read their writing to the visitors, they do so with confidence. They find some of the words (*submarine, canoe*) difficult but the words for local transport prove no problem. Maria writes six key words on the board as an extension task for those who have finished their writing and the girls proceed to copy these down.

Fatmata

School 5 is a Muslim school of mixed intake with 484 students on role. The headteacher is male and he supports three STs in the school, including Fatmata and Isatu.

When we met Fatmata in 2017 she had one child, and two years later as a Student Teacher she has not had any more children. Fatmata has 15 siblings, and she is strongly supported in her studies and career by her father and her disabled husband. Fatmata teaches in a highly overcrowded Muslim school in a remote rural district. The school serves five villages and 12 catchment areas, and many children live far from the school. Headteacher Mohammed has put Fatmata in charge of school discipline. She is also mentored by a highly experienced female teacher, Margaret. In the teacher college, Fatmata finds additional support from a female tutor.

We observed Fatmata teaching a very large Class 3 class: 109 children squeezed together on rows of benches. Fatmata shares the classroom with another teacher who is teaching Class 4 (also over 100 children tightly packed on rows of benches). The two classes sit back-to-back in the small space, facing chalkboards and teachers on opposite sides of the room. None of the children have textbooks, notebooks or pencils. Fatmata's starts her lesson on time and continues when some children are late and carrying in an extra bench to sit on. She does not stop to berate late-comers, who are quickly absorbed into the lesson.

The morning topic is mathematics and addition of four digits. Fatmata refers briefly to her lesson plan and then sets it aside. She starts with call-and-response songs, bringing children to attention and reminding them of what they have learned, and the children chant the two-times-table. She calls children by their names ('Thank you Ibrahim') and scans the room continually, making eye contact with children, gesturing, smiling, praising ('That's good!') and making frequent checks for attention.

After the songs, Fatmata quickly takes her chalkboard pointing stick and breaks it into 6 smaller sticks. The children are fascinated. She has them add-up to six in different combinations, holding up the sticks in different groups (2 + 4, 5 + 1, 6 + 0, and so on) as the class counts in unison. Next, Fatmata has the class count-up in 2s as she quickly writes sums on the chalkboard, such as '52 x 70', '38 x 71'. She points to the 'x' and says to the class 'This is the addition sign, is it not so?' Children are eager to correct her, all hand are up, and she allows some shouting out. She invites pairs of children to the board to write the addition signs and place them in the correct places on the sums, and praises them. ('Let us clap for Imani and Ada'). She then organises a series of rapid competitions, setting sums for pairs of boys and pairs of girls to solve on the board, and writing new sums as these are solved. She calls for volunteers and all hands are up. When children solve a sum, she asks the class 'Do we agree with Mariam?' 'Do we agree with Abbas?' If a sum is not correct, she calls more children to the board to solve it. As pairs of children work at the board, Fatmata allows the others to talk to each other as they try to solve the sum. In the middle of the lesson she has children stand up to sing and dance on the spot.

Isatu

Classes 1 and 2 are in one room (250 children), with half facing one board and half facing the other. Singing starts in Class 2 about the day, date and year and Class 1 join in – the song is in a mixture of local language and English. Children sit on benches, some are on chairs, and the youngest children sit on the floor. Some children bring in wooden crates, buckets or plastic chairs from home to sit on. Around 20 children in Class 1 are under-age siblings, some as young as 3 years old.

Isatu teaches Class 2. As she writes on the chalkboard, she has the children chant a song 'Yesterday we learned something' She encourages them to join in by responding 'Uhuh', and she then asks, 'Who can tell us what we learned yesterday?'. A boy answers and the children clap for him. She reminds them that they learned about living and non-living things. She asks for a definition of living things. Hands go up and she writes down one of the definitions. She then asks for examples of living things. Suggestions include a dog, sheep, and a cow. She smiles at the children and encourages them to put their hands up. The children give lots of examples and she lists them all on the board. She then picks up a piece of chalk and ask children to say whether it is living or non-living; she asks a young girl to come to the front to answer the question again. The children chant the sentences on the board. They have some difficulty with the definition, but no problem with listing the living things, *snake*, *dog*, *cow* but the non-living things *stone* and *duster* prove harder. She asks if any children can try to read from the board. Hands go up and one girl comes to the board and acts as the teacher, using Isatu's pointer. She asks a further three girls and they all hold the attention of the class. The children then copy down the sentences on the board and there is a slight increase in the noise level. Some children have books and pencils, others

just watch. As the other class starts to become noisier, Isatu's class quiets down and she adds an extension task to the board: 'Give 3 examples of living things and non-living things'.

Flo

School 2 is a Christian school of mixed intake with 206 students on role. The headteacher is male and he supports five STs in the school, including Flo.

Flo is teaching Class 1. 27 children are in the room clustered around desks and all face the front. There is a space in front of the board and Flo moves in and out of this space, visits tables, walks around the back of tables – the children's eyes follow her.

On the chalk board are two hand-drawn pictures: one of an apple and one of a fish. Underneath each one are three sentences.

A red apple	*A red fish*
I see a red apple.	*I see a red fish.*
It is in my picture book.	*It is in my picture book.*

Flo reads the sentences aloud, before encouraging the children to join in with her. Individual children offer to read the sentences. The majority of children who are asked to read are boys, even though there are fewer boys in the class.   After the children read the sentences, Flo shows the children a picture of an apple and of a fish in a picture book. The picture book is a reading book, multiple copies of which are on the desk but are not used in the session.

Flo notices the energy in the room is beginning to wane and she says children need a bit of a shake. She invites them to stand up and starts to sing an action song, 'Everyone stand up (and the children stand up), everyone sit down (and the children sit down), everyone stand up (the children stand up), everyone go down (and the children crouch down on the floor). The children join in happily and the song changes to include lines from the song *Heads, shoulders, knees and toes*. As that song finishes, the children sing lines from *Row, row, row your boat* with additional words and actions that have the children dancing with their hands in the air, flicking their feet and by the end they are all dancing. Every child joins in, as does Flo – she moves in and out of the desks dancing and singing.

Reflecting on pedagogy and gender

Learner-centeredness is a significant principle and aim of the Sustainable Development Goal 4 agenda for educational equity and quality. In classroom observations, we looked for evidence of learner-centered pedagogy, which is one of the key features of the Open University's self-study materials for Learning Assistants and the training materials for Learning Assistant Tutors and Practice Study Mentors. Across a dozen lessons in five schools (out of the seven visited), we noticed persistent instances of good practice:

- ✓ Preparation and lesson planning

- ✓ Secure subject knowledge

- ✓ Maximising teaching time

- ✓ Variety and pace: group competitions, energisers, singing, as well as lecture and chorus

- ✓ Drawing pictures for variety and for visual support

- ✓ Eliciting children's knowledge of a topic

- ✓ Modelling problem-solving

- ✓ Calling on many children, boys and girls, and using their names to make them feel included

- ✓ Praising children and giving positive feedback for trying as well as for correct answers

- ✓ Using local languages and translanguaging to ensure children understand

- ✓ Rephrasing/recasting to explain

- ✓ Asking purposeful questions

- ✓ Frequent asides and interjections in English and local languages to hold children's interest

- ✓ Professional working with other teachers

- ✓ Efficient and creative use of classroom space

- ✓ Calm classroom control, good relationships with children

- ✓ Checking children's learning in their books

- ✓ Confidence to spot own errors and self-correct in front of children

Not all of these indicators were observed in every lesson or observed consistently. Nevertheless, it was evident that STs we observed are applying an understanding of learner-centered pedagogy in practice. They also demonstrated some reflection on their developing skills and how children might experience their lessons:

- *When I teach English to Class 1, they don't know any English. They only know Krio. So they will not understand anything. I break it down for them, repeat everything in Krio, so they understand (Student Teacher, School 3).*
- *I draw pictures so they [children] understand (Student Teacher, School 3).*
- *These children are also our children. We are parents to them. (Maria)*
- *When I come to school, I am not ashamed of anything I find difficult. I ask, I learn, step-by-step. I want the pupils to do the same. (Fatmata)*

Positive influences on STs' practices appear to be in-school mentoring, prior experiences as a learner, and current studies. In classrooms where we saw effective practice, Student Teachers are supported by either a female headteacher, an experienced female teacher, a sympathetic male teacher or headteacher. Fatmata explicitly recalled with enjoyment her own childhood school

experiences where she had a friendly teacher who used songs, dance and other active methods, and she was determined to become that kind of teacher. Maria said she learned to teach by watching other teachers: *'I used to sit at the back [of the class] and observe teachers. I learned from them'*. Fatmata described doing group work and presentations in college residential schools which gave her ideas for classroom teaching. Flo told the research team that she learned how to teach through the different college modules and at the college study centre; she added that she thinks it's important for children to go outside and learn together, explaining that the class play football and do some reading in the schoolyard.

STs are also aware that their gender makes a difference. They have a strong sense of their responsibilities as role models, the journey they have made from their starting points, and the possibilities for change. They actively enjoy teaching, being with children in school, and being part of a professional community. Their comments illustrate how positive feedback from learners can make teaching enjoyable and rewarding.

- *I am very happy as a teacher. My life has changed. I was at home, thinking 'This is the end for me'. … We are in college now. … We are important [in the school] … we are part of everything here. …Being a female teacher is important. You can take care of yourself and your family … I ask the girls in my class, what would you like to be in the future? They say 'a teacher'. (Maria interview, 2019)*
- *When I am not in school, the pupils miss me. The pupils have changed me. I love teaching. (Fatmata interview, 2019)*

Discussions with headteachers confirmed that female STs do not use corporal punishments as readily as many male teachers. We also heard beliefs that women are better suited than men to look after young children, and that Student Teachers are like 'mothers' in the classroom. Where primary schools are opening nursery units or Early Childhood Development (ECD) units, STs are inevitably put in charge of these, and in one school a Student Teacher independently started up an ECD unit for very young children. Headteachers in discussions said that children were 'more relaxed' with STs, that STs are more 'gentle and understanding' with children, and that children are 'more confident to speak in class' with STs and therefore children participate more.

> *They enjoy their [Student Teacher's] teaching, from my observations, because they act like mothers. Class 1 [age 6] children need someone who treats them like a mother, who will encourage and not shout at them. A man teacher, when a child does not do something correctly or if a child drops something, will shout 'Why did you do that!'' and [mimes beating the child]. A woman will encourage, clean the child and put them back in place. They apply in school the ways they have at home.'*
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> Headteacher Mohammed interview, 2019

A community women's leader (the Mamie Queen) whom we met in 2017 also reported that STs tend to counsel children, especially girls, rather than use corporal punishment: *'Women are more likely than men to try to find out what the child's problem is'.*

Whilst some of these views may reflect some gender stereotypes that position women as natural carers, where children are relaxed and confident to participate, and are not shouted at or beaten for making mistakes, there are fertile conditions for learning. When children feel safe, and listened-to, they are likely to be happier in school and better positioned to learn and achieve. Whilst a wide variety of interventions can improve children's learning in low-resource schools, a recent large-scale systematic review (EBA, 2016) 'convincingly' establishes causality between increased time in school and improved educational outcomes: if time in school increases, and retention increases, learning tends to improve. Amongst the most effective interventions that increase time in school, the review identified supplementary and remedial tutoring, and decreasing the student-teacher ratio. LAs and STs contribute to such system change: increasing enrolment and retention by creating a safer, more supportive atmosphere in schools and providing additional support to teachers and children in classrooms.

The STs introduce an appropriate element of care for children, but they are more than 'mothers in the classroom' when they also practice elements of learner-centered pedagogy. We can speculate that, over time, as female teachers become more familiar figures in educational landscapes formerly devoid of them, depictions will shift from mothering and care to how and why they are effective teachers. And, because effective pedagogy is not the preserve of one gender, we can speculate how the presence of female teachers could enable male teachers to be more caring and learner-centered.

Key stakeholders reflect on impact and influence

Student Teachers: becoming professional
In interviews and informal group discussions, STs in 2019 were reflective about the intrinsic value of study and meaningful work, their sense of collegiality, their growing role in communities, their confidence to challenge traditional domestic arrangements, and their determination to succeed and go further:

- *You have time to read, you can be an expert in any area. You can learn about anything. (Maria, interview)*
- *Before, there were many people in the community we didn't know. Now, we know many people, and they know us. (Student Teacher in group discussion)*
- *It's enjoyable to come to school and work with friends. (Student Teacher in group discussion)*
- *I used to do all the cooking at home. Now, I don't have time to cook! (Student Teacher in group discussion)*

- *You can teach your own children, your neighbour's children. (Student Teacher in group discussion)*
- *I am so different now. I feel proud anywhere I go. I go the extra mile, to be bold. I don't waste my time. I was a drop-out, so this is a gift.   (Fatmata, interview)*
- *After I get my TC [Teaching Certificate], I'm going for HTC [Higher Teaching Certificate]. (Student Teacher in group discussion)*

STs have become influential beyond their schools. In 2019 four STs stood for local council elections, and one Student Teacher is now a local councillor. Another ST has become a community radio newsreader, outside of school hours.

Many STs are teaching in extremely challenging conditions. Over 100 children in a small classroom is not uncommon and in the younger classes there can be a high number of under-age children who come to school with older brothers and sisters. STs work in schools four or five days a week, and study on weekends when they also attend PSM sessions.

Practice Study Mentors: valuable role with space for modelling
The new role of PSM is beneficial in supporting STs and preparing them for Teacher Training College and National Council for Technical, Vocational and Academic (NCTVA) examinations. PSMs meet with their groups from two to four times a week. They are active in problem-solving: in one case, two subject teachers who team teach have split a large group of STs into sub-clusters to ensure participation across a wide geographical area. These same PSMs use a Bluetooth speaker to play TESSA (http://www.tessafrica.net/) audio resources off the tablet to their tutor groups. Of the PSMs we met, some had visited STs in schools many times, others not at all (yet); some had used the tablet to video and photograph STs, whilst others had not. Although there are inconsistencies, the role is important in giving STs a local point of contact outside the primary school. Relationships appear to be positive, and some PSMs have been with the STs since they were LAs, and so have a good understanding of their knowledge and skill levels.

Headteachers: STs staffing schools and safeguarding children
Headteachers in rural areas depend on STs to solve chronic staff shortages. In three schools visited in one district, each school had 5 STs and few or no regular teachers. A headteacher says that on Fridays (when STs are meant to be off duty in order to study) he has 'two empty classes' he cannot cover. In such schools, STs are the majority of teachers. In another school, at the start of the school day, the only teacher in the school was the Student Teacher - along with many children who were on time and ready to learn; hers was the only classroom with a teacher in it. A headteacher is typical in saying that the changes in the STs have been 'tremendous, both within themselves, for the school and for the community... they have their own focus and they have responsibilities.'

Headteachers report more children coming to school because there are female teachers. According to one Headteacher, '[Children] enjoy their [STs'] teaching, from my observations, because they act like mothers. Class 1 children need someone who treats them like a mother, who will encourage and not shout at them. A man teacher, when a child does not do something incorrectly or if a child drops something, will shout 'Why did you do that and [mimes beating the child]. A woman will encourage, clean the child and put them back in place.' This observation was forcefully endorsed by the Mami Queen women's leader (see below).

Community leaders: community confidence
In field observations and interviews, it was evident that there is community confidence in schools where there are STs: headteachers reported increased enrolments and attributed this to the presence of women in the school, and large numbers of underage children were seen attending with siblings. The Mamie Queen quoted earlier spoke passionately in 2019 about the pervasive culture of everyday violence in schools that is changing where there are female educators:

> *I have wept when I have seen what some male teachers have done to girl pupils…. Families send their children to school where there is a female teacher because they are more confident their children will be safer there. Student Teachers are SO important in our community. Children come to school [and] they love [the Student Teachers] because they are not afraid of them, as they are with many of the male teachers.*
>
> 'Mamie Queen' community women's leader, interview (2019)

Because the majority of LAs joined the programme after years of economic and educational marginalisation, the community leader also said it was important for children and the community to see that anyone can have a second chance to learn and earn: *'We have many children who attend Class 1, Class 2, Class 3. By Class 4 they start to drop [out, because of poverty]. Now they see an example of someone who dropped [out] but changed her life (Mamie Queen 2019 interview)'.*

Headteacher Mohammed (Fatmata's headteacher) said that the changes for Learning Assistants who are now Student Teachers have been *'tremendous …both within themselves, for the school and for the community… they have their own focus and they have responsibilities.'*

Discussion

The change process: targets, impact, and indicators of change
In observations of STs' lessons, we noted many instances of good practice and associated small shifts in classroom culture towards practice that is more interactive and learner-focused. These changes appear to be incremental and inconsistent. But we argue that they are indicators of long-term changes to pedagogy that take time to achieve, sustain and embed.

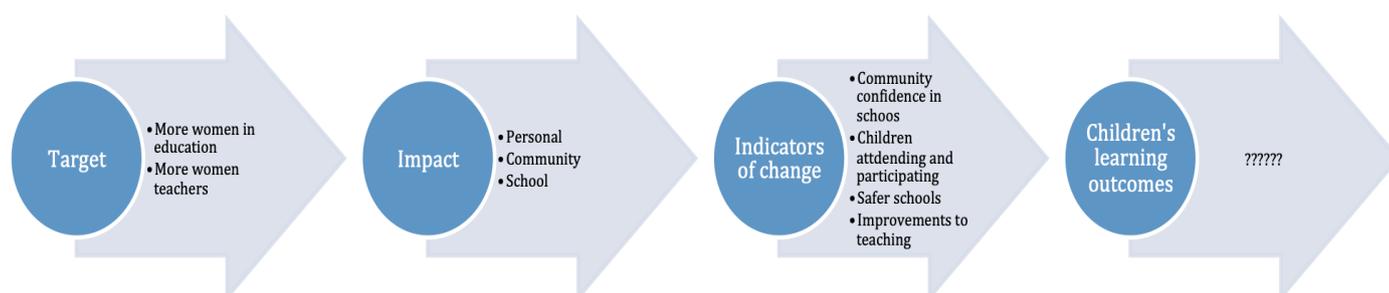The Learning Assistant programme appears to follow a four-phase change process (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The Learning Assistant four-phase change process

The LA programme started with **targets** to place more women in further education and train more women teachers. These targets have been achieved through the sustained participation and commitment of stakeholders, with ongoing mediation and support at all levels, from families and communities to teacher colleges and the ministry, the Forum of African Women Educationalists (FAWE), Plan International and the Open University.

The Learning Assistant programme has had profound personal and community **impact** (Crisp, Safford and Wolfendon 2017; Crisp and Safford 2018): cohorts of women in education and training have experienced personal transformation as paraprofessional learners, with resulting changes to family relationships, how communities perceive women and how women operate in communities.

The presence of Learning Assistants and Student Teachers is resulting in some **indicators of system change**. The presence of women educators positively alters the culture of primary schools and classrooms where they are deployed: there is less corporal punishment, higher attendance of boys and girls, community confidence, with children feeling safer, more relaxed and willing to participate. In observations of Student Teachers' lessons, we saw small shifts towards teaching practices that are aligned with global agendas for quality education for all.

What is not evident – yet – are sustained improvements in **children's learning outcomes** as measured by curriculum examinations. However, the Learning Assistant/Student Teacher programme is improving some of the systemic barriers to education: decreasing student-teacher ratio, improving attendance and retention, and creating more child-friendly classrooms through the presence of female teachers who encourage participation and who are beginning to practice in more learner-centered ways.

These indicators of system change give us some evidence and confidence that the Learning Assistant/Student Teacher programme is a sustainable model to improve learning environments and learning outcomes, as part of the change process in Sierra Leone and the global agenda for inclusive quality education for all.

Conclusion

The emergent findings from this research indicate that the presence of women educators is driving cultural changes that create better experiences of schooling for children. However, further research is needed to ascertain whether there are long-term benefits on children's learning outcomes. As such, future research should aim to include children as key stakeholders in the teaching and learning process.

In addition, two other areas warrant further consideration: the development of the Practice Study Mentor role and a more detailed analysis of the observed lessons. As such the two are connected; for the most part, everyone within this programme operates within a narrow pedagogic model, one that they have experienced in schools since they were children. These practices are deeply embedded and difficult to shift. However, if PSMs were supported to model more varied and effective methodologies to STs, there is the potential to improve pedagogical approaches of established teachers as well as developing new teacher capacity.   The early findings of these STs' effective pedagogy are not the preserve of one gender, but we can speculate how the presence of female teachers could enable male teachers to be more caring and learner-centered.   What is required is a more detailed analysis of the observed lessons of these four STs to better understand these context-specific teaching and learning experiences.

The features briefly outlined here are relevant to the experiences of Learning Assistants in Sierra Leone and, we suggest, would be applicable to many countries where additional appropriate adults in classrooms can positively impact on the quality of teaching and children's experiences of learning.   Furthermore, this research adds depth to existing understanding of the issues and benefits arising from the preparation and training of women to become teachers in their communities in Africa and other comparable locations.

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