Implications of Transformational Pedagogy in Classroom Teaching in Sierra Leone: Evidence from Policy Implementation, Teacher Development Reforms, and Learning Data

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Abstract

In the past decade, Sierra Leone has undertaken substantial education reforms, including the introduction of Free Quality School Education (FQSE), curriculum revisions, and new teacher development policies. These reforms are designed to enhance learning outcomes and advance educational equity (World Bank, 2023). The policy direction has shifted from teacher-led, memorization-based instruction toward student-centered approaches that prioritize active participation and skill acquisition. Transformative pedagogy, which fosters critical thinking, collaboration, and student empowerment, is a central component of this transition (MBSSE, 2020). Persistent challenges remain, including disparities in teacher qualifications, inadequate learning materials, and overcrowded classrooms (MBSSE, 2024; UNICEF Innocenti, 2025). This article investigates the implementation of transformative pedagogy in Sierra Leone through analysis of the Basic Education Curriculum Framework (MBSSE, 2020), national learning data (MBSSE, 2022), school census data (MBSSE, 2024), and research on scaling teacher training (UNICEF Innocenti, 2025). Employing document analysis (Bengtsson, 2016) and a SWOT framework, the study identifies factors that facilitate or impede transformative pedagogy and recommends policy and practice interventions aligned with ongoing teacher and curriculum reforms (TSC, 2020; MBSSE, 2020).

Keywords: **Transformative pedagogy, learner-centred instruction, structured pedagogy, teacher professional development, foundational learning, SWOT analysis**

1. Introduction

1.1 Why transformative pedagogy matters in Sierra Leone now

Sierra Leone's education reforms aim to expand access and improve learning outcomes. The rollout of Free Quality School Education (FQSE) has increased enrolment, placing greater demands on classrooms, teachers, and resources (World Bank, 2023). This growth highlights a persistent issue: many students advance without mastering basic skills, particularly in reading and numeracy, which are essential for academic and lifelong success (UNICEF, 2023; MBSSE, 2022). The core challenge is not just increasing access, but ensuring better learning, with classroom pedagogy central to this shift (MBSSE, 2020).

Transformative pedagogy in Sierra Leone promotes equity by engaging all learners, reducing passive memorization, fostering critical thinking, and strengthening foundational skills (MBSSE, 2020; UNICEF, 2023). The Curriculum Framework notes a traditional reliance on memorization, teacher-led instruction, and exam preparation (MBSSE, 2020). The effectiveness of transformative pedagogy depends on sufficient resources, well-prepared teachers, and supportive assessments.

Research shows that students learn more effectively through frequent practice, reasoning, feedback, and real-life application (WHO, 2021; UNICEF, 2023). Instead of lectures and memorization, schools should use methods that increase practice and feedback, particularly where learning gaps exist (MBSSE,

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2020; MBSSE, 2022). In Sierra Leone, challenges such as rural location, low income, disabilities, gender norms, and language barriers require inclusive teaching. With proper support, transformative pedagogy can address these needs by encouraging participation, varied learning strategies, and targeted support for struggling students.

1.2 Defining transformative pedagogy for Sierra Leone's classrooms

This article defines transformative pedagogy as teaching that promotes active learning, group work, discussion, reflection, problem-solving, and the development of students' confidence and social skills (Mezirow, 2000; Donnell, 2007; Levy & Kerpelman, 2010). While it began in adult education, in classrooms it is demonstrated through group activities, regular questioning, feedback, peer learning, local examples, and hands-on tasks beyond memorization (Donnell, 2007; Meyers, 2008).

In Sierra Leone, structured pedagogy is the most effective way to implement progressive teaching. It provides teacher guides, lesson routines, student materials, and training or coaching to support consistent, large-scale use of learner-centred methods (UNICEF, 2025). Structured pedagogy supports teacher professionalism by offering clear routines, models, and tasks, especially in early reading and math, where learning gaps are greatest (MBSSE, 2022; UNICEF, 2025). This consistency is particularly important when teacher training is uneven or teachers are assigned outside their main subject, as it helps sustain effective practice and reduces reliance on rote methods (World Bank, 2021; MBSSE, 2024).

1.3 The Sierra Leone problem statement: reform intent versus classroom reality

Despite policy support for learner-centred teaching, Sierra Leone's classrooms face challenges due to a shortage of qualified teachers, limited resources, and difficult conditions. School census data show significant disparities in teacher qualifications and deployment. In 2023/24, only 42% of senior secondary teachers were qualified to the level they taught, revealing ongoing gaps between training and

classroom needs (MBSSE, 2024). The pupil-qualified teacher ratio (PQTR) at senior secondary was 87:1, indicating a shortage of well-trained teachers, even though overall ratios appear acceptable (MBSSE, 2024). Transformative pedagogy requires teachers with strong subject knowledge, confidence in learner-centred methods, and effective classroom management. When teachers are unprepared or teaching outside their specialization, they often revert to lecturing and board work, especially in exam-focused settings (MBSSE, 2020; World Bank, 2021; MBSSE, 2024). The main issue is not the value of transformative pedagogy, but whether the current system supports its consistent and widespread use, and what barriers persist.

1.3 General Objective

To examine the implications of implementing transformative pedagogy in Sierra Leone's classrooms and propose strategies for its effective and sustainable implementation.

1.4 Specific Objectives

1. To identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of reformative pedagogy in Sierra Leone's classrooms.
2. To assess the practical implications of implementing transformative pedagogy under current curriculum and teacher workforce conditions.
3. To develop an intervention package to improve the implementation and sustainability of transformative pedagogy.

1.5 Research questions

1. What are the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats associated with transformative pedagogy in Sierra Leone's classroom setting?
2. What are the real-world implications of implementing transformative pedagogy under Sierra Leone's current curricular, teacher workforce, and classroom conditions?

3. What intervention package can be derived to strengthen implementation fidelity and sustainability?

1.6 Limitations

This article reviews policy documents and existing evidence, without new interviews. The SWOT analysis is based on document review and secondary data, making findings nationally relevant but not reflective of detailed classroom experiences. Future research in Sierra Leone should include classroom observations and interviews, along with learning outcomes data, to better assess the impact of teaching methods and to explore factors such as the language of instruction, school leadership, and community involvement (World Bank, 2021; UNICEF Innocenti, 2025).

List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full Meaning / Definition
CRD	Curriculum and Research Directorate
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
EGRA	Early Grade Reading Assessment
EGMA	Early Grade Mathematics Assessment
FQSE	Free Quality School Education
MBSSE	Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education
PQTR	Pupil–Qualified Teacher Ratio
PTR	Pupil–Teacher Ratio
SWOT	Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats
TSC	Teaching Service Commission

2. Method
2.1 Research design

This study is an exploratory, document-based qualitative synthesis supported by secondary quantitative indicators. It follows the logic of a classroom-implication study without collecting new interview data. This approach is appropriate given the availability of recent policy, census, learning assessment, and implementation research data in Sierra Leone, which can be analyzed to identify factors enabling or constraining pedagogy (MBSSE, 2020; MBSSE, 2022; MBSSE, 2024; UNICEF Innocenti, 2025). The study design aligns with policy implementation analysis, treating documents and datasets as key sources for understanding intentions, constraints, and feasibility (Bengtsson, 2016).

2.2 Data sources and inclusion criteria

Documents and datasets were purposively selected based on their relevance to pedagogy reform and recency (primarily 2020–2025). Sources include the Basic Education Curriculum Framework (MBSSE, 2020), the National EGRA/EGMA baseline study (MBSSE, 2022), Annual School Censuses 2023 and 2024 (MBSSE, 2024), teacher professional development and policy documents (TSC, 2020), UNICEF Innocenti research on scaling structured pedagogy training (UNICEF Innocenti, 2025), and additional sector evidence on teacher quality and management (World Bank, 2021).

2.3 Data analysis

Using Bengtsson's (2016) manifest content analysis, relevant text segments were coded, categorized, and organized under the four SWOT themes: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Quantitative indicators from official reports were used to create summary visualizations, including PTR and PQTR by level, teacher qualification rates, EGRA oral reading fluency distributions, and teacher training pre- and post-gains (MBSSE, 2022; MBSSE, 2024; UNICEF Innocenti, 2025). Results are presented as interpretive tables and figure summaries, consistent with mixed evidence synthesis in education systems research (UNICEF Innocenti, 2025; World Bank, 2021).

3. Results
3.1 System context indicators shaping pedagogy feasibility

National school census data indicate that the feasibility of progressive pedagogy must be interpreted in light of teachers' workload and

qualifications. PTR trends between 2022/23 and 2023/24 were relatively stable across levels, with primary PTR holding at 44 and overall PTR increasing from 37 to 38 (MBSS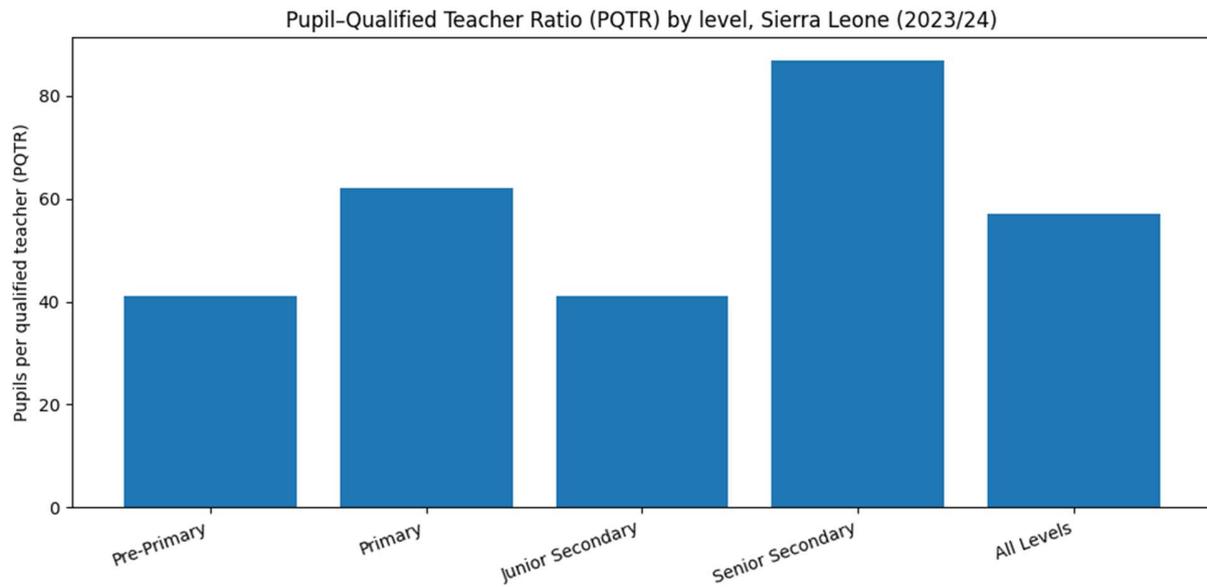E, 2024). While PTR alone matters, PQTR is often more pedagogically relevant because learner-centred teaching is difficult to sustain where few teachers have sufficient subject and pedagogical preparation (World Bank, 2021).

Figure 1 Pupil–Teacher Ratio b**y** level, (2022/23 vs 2023/24).
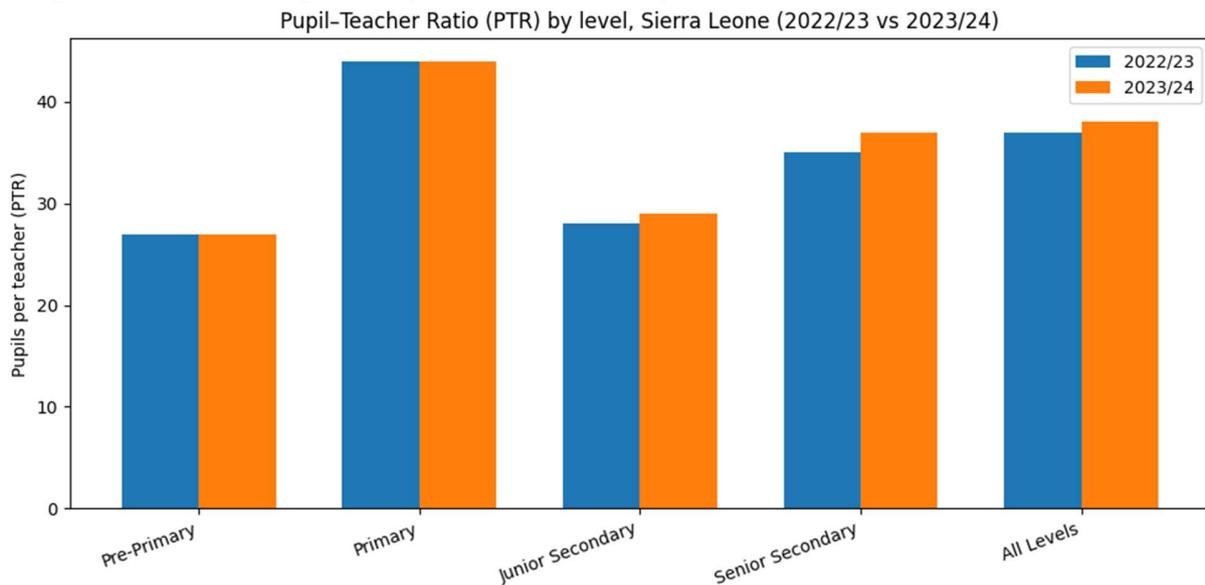
Stable PTRs suggest that classroom crowding may persist but is unlikely to worsen quickly. This underscores the need for transformative practices to be feasible within existing staffing constraints (MBSSE, 2024).

Figure 2 Pupil–Qualified Teacher Ratio by level, (2023/24).

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The Pupil–Qualified Teacher Ratio (PQTR) is substantially higher than the PTR at every level, indicating that teacher qualifications are a binding constraint on quality teaching. The PQTR in 2023/24 was reported as 62 (primary), 41 (pre-primary), 41 (junior secondary), and 87 (senior secondary) (MBSSE, 2024).

Figure 3 (Share of teachers qualified to teach their level, 2023/24).
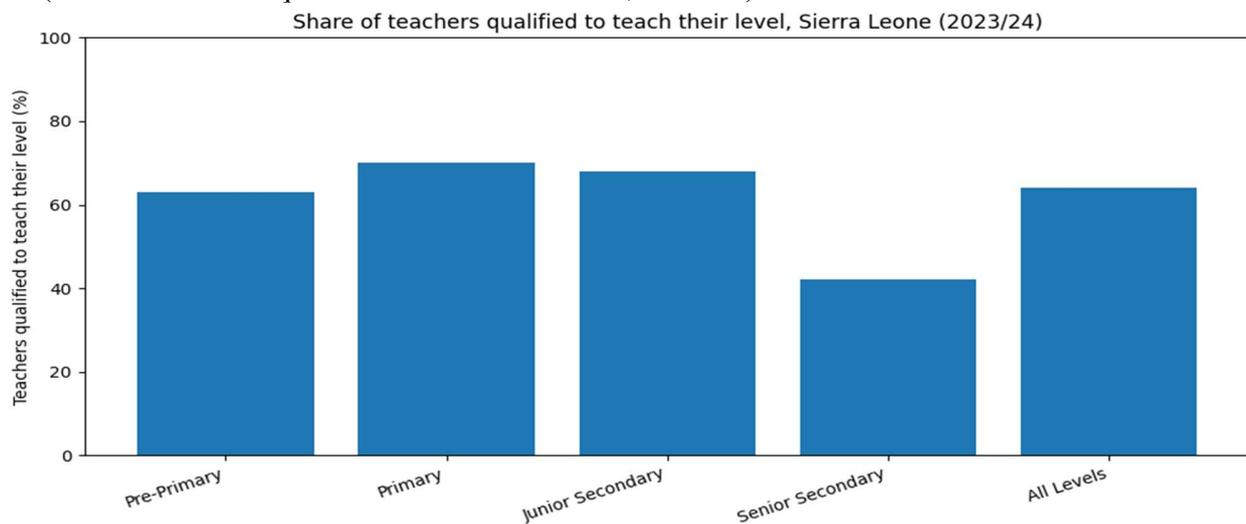
The proportion of teachers qualified to teach the level they were teaching was reported as 63% (pre-primary), 70% (primary), 68% (junior secondary), 42% (senior secondary), and 64% overall (MBSSE, 2024).

These figures indicate that the issue is not only the number of teachers, but also the uneven distribution of qualified teachers, which may not align with the complexity of curricula and assessments at higher levels (World Bank, 2021; MBSSE, 2024). For transformative pedagogy, learner-centred practice is more effective when teachers have subject mastery and confidence, and less effective when teachers are assigned outside their area of expertise (World Bank, 2021).

3.2 Evidence of learning needs that transformative pedagogy must address

Sierra Leone's EGRA/EGMA report provides foundational learning evidence to help diagnose learners' pedagogical needs. The assessment includes distributions showing large proportions of learners at very low performance levels, along with improvements over time between measurement points such as 2014 and 2021 (MBSSE, 2022). For instance, in oral reading fluency distributions, the proportion of pupils scoring "zero" remains substantial, particularly in lower grades, though it declines over time (MBSSE, 2022).

Figure D Oral Reading Fluency distribution, P2 & P4; 2014 vs 2021.
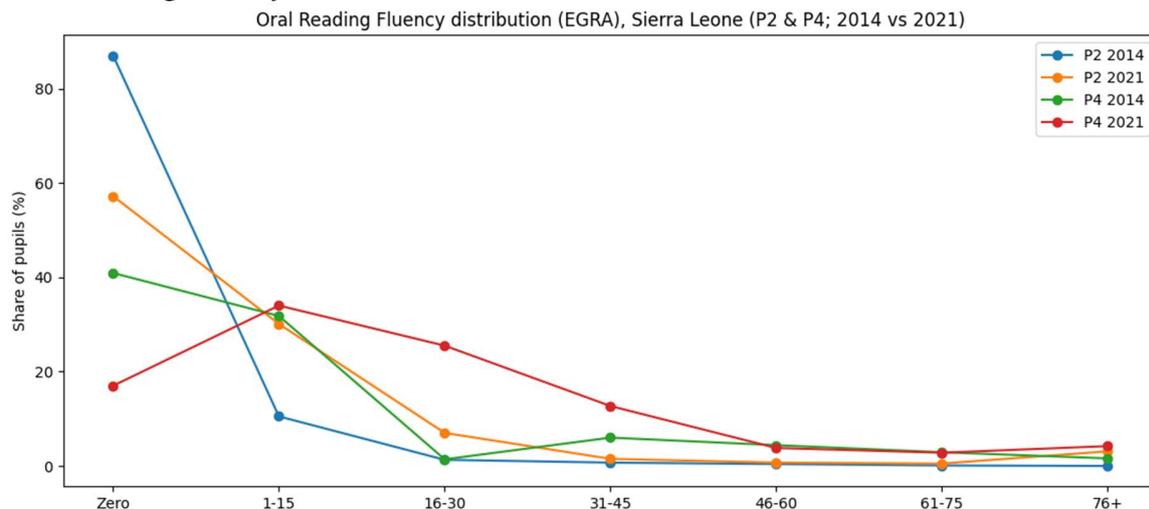
The data show that many learners continue to struggle with reading fluency, highlighting the need for pedagogy that increases practice opportunities, accelerates feedback, and offers targeted support for non-readers and emerging readers (MBSSE, 2022).

This is significant for transformative pedagogy because basic skills are developed through guided practice, repeated application, and immediate feedback approaches emphasized in learner-centred, activity-based instruction (Meyers, 2008; UNICEF Innocenti, 2025). When students lack decoding or reading fluency, lecture-based instruction can exacerbate gaps by benefiting those already proficient and neglecting those who require structured practice (MBSSE, 2022; UNICEF, 2023).

3.3 Pedagogy reform implementation evidence: teacher training gains

A key policy finding is that Sierra Leone has demonstrated the feasibility of large-scale teacher training. UNICEF Innocenti's research shows that pre- and post-training assessments (a nine-item test) revealed average scores increasing from 4.90 to 6.82 out of 9 among teachers who received last-mile training, indicating significant knowledge gains (UNICEF Innocenti, 2025).

This evidence supports the view that teacher professional development, when designed with consistent materials, modeling, and structured routines, can effectively convey core pedagogical concepts at scale (UNICEF Innocenti, 2025). However, research also indicates that training alone does not ensure classroom transformation; ongoing coaching, sufficient materials, and strong instructional leadership are essential to embed new practices (UNICEF Innocenti, 2025; World Bank, 2021).

3.4 SWOT results: consequences for transformative pedagogy in Sierra Leone

The tables below synthesize Sierra Leone-specific themes emerging from the document analysis, aligned to the realities revealed by national indicators.

Table 1. Strengths associated with transformative pedagogy in Sierra Leone

Theme	Codes (Sierra Leone classroom meaning)	Evidence anchor
Strength	Promotes active participation and learner voice (discussion, questioning, peer explanation)	Curriculum framework critique of rote learning and need to shift practice (MBSSE, 2020)
Strength	Supports foundational learning routines (guided practice, feedback, repetition with meaning)	EGRA/EGMA evidence of low foundational learning levels requiring improved instruction (MBSSE, 2022)
Strength	Enables inclusion through varied learning modalities and group work	Learner-centred approaches support inclusive participation (WHO, 2021)
Strength	Builds classroom relationships and learner confidence	Structured pedagogy training design includes modelling and engagement strategies (UNICEF Innocenti, 2025)
Strength	Creates clearer lesson structure when paired with teacher guides	Structured pedagogy materials + training model (UNICEF Innocenti, 2025)

In Sierra Leone, the primary argument for transformative pedagogy is diagnostic rather than philosophical. Foundational learning data reveal that many students perform below expectations, reflecting classrooms with limited meaningful practice, formative feedback, and engagement (MBSSE, 2022; UNICEF, 2023). Transformative pedagogy addresses these issues by increasing learner participation, practice, and feedback (Meyers, 2008; UNICEF Innocenti, 2025).

Table 2. Weaknesses associated with transformative pedagogy in Sierra Leone

Theme	Codes (what tends to go wrong)	Evidence anchor
Weakness	Implementation slows syllabus coverage when teachers lack routines/materials	Curriculum renewal is intended to shift away from coverage-driven rote practice (MBSSE, 2020)
Weakness	Classroom management challenges during group work in large or cramped rooms	PTR/PQTR context implies pressure on teacher capacity (MBSSE, 2024)
Weakness	Teacher confidence is uneven where qualification mismatches exist	Low senior secondary "qualified to teach level" share (MBSSE, 2024)
Weakness	Without structured supports, "learner-centred" can degrade into noise rather than learning	Implementation research stresses need for consistent training fidelity and materials (UNICEF Innocenti, 2025)
Weakness	Material shortages undermine hands-on activities and formative assessment	Training delivery contexts report material and logistics constraints (UNICEF Innocenti, 2025)

Table 3. Opportunities linked with transformative pedagogy in Sierra Leone

Theme	Opportunities (what Sierra Leone can leverage)	Evidence anchor

Opportunity	Teacher governance reforms can coordinate CPD expectations	Teacher development and performance policy direction (TSC, 2020)
Opportunity	Structured pedagogy training has demonstrated scalable learning gains	Pre/post test gains at scale (UNICEF Innocenti, 2025)
Opportunity	Foundational learning is a central reform priority	Global foundational learning framing supports targeted instruction (UNICEF, 2023)
Opportunity	Curriculum frameworks create legitimacy for learner-centred instruction	Basic education curriculum framework (MBSSE, 2020)
Opportunity	Education data systems enable targeting and accountability	Annual school census and learning assessment reports (MBSSE, 2022; MBSSE, 2024)

Table 4. Threats associated with transformative pedagogy in Sierra Leone

Theme	Threats (system constraints)	Evidence anchor
Threat	High PQTR qualified teachers are not enough for class loads	PQTR values, especially senior secondary (MBSSE, 2024)
Threat	Qualification mismatch risks weak subject teaching and reversion to lecture	Only 42% qualified to teach senior secondary level (MBSSE, 2024)
Threat	Assessment and credential pressures can re-entrench memorization	Curriculum identifies exam-driven coverage culture (MBSSE, 2020)
Threat	Training without sustained coaching leads to decay of practice over time	Implementation research highlights sustainment issues in cascade models (UNICEF Innocenti, 2025)
Threat	Delays in learning materials distribution and classroom resource gaps	Implementation constraints documented (UNICEF Innocenti, 2025)

4. Discussion

4.1 Strengths: what transformative pedagogy enables in Sierra Leone

The evidence base strongly suggests that Sierra Leone's learning challenge is not only about expanding access, but about improving learning quality. The national curriculum framework clearly critiques historical reliance on mechanical memorization and teacher-centred instruction, framing pedagogy change as essential for deeper learning and competency development (MBSSE, 2020). This critique aligns with foundational learning patterns documented in national EGRA/EGMA evidence, where large proportions of learners continue to perform at low levels in reading-related indicators, even as improvements have occurred over time (MBSSE, 2022).

Transformative pedagogy targets these gaps by increasing four mechanisms that are strongly associated with learning gains:

1. Opportunities to respond. Learners develop reading, numeracy, and higher-order competencies through practice speaking, reading, solving, explaining, and applying, not only through listening (Meyers, 2008; UNICEF, 2023).
2. Formative feedback loops. Transformative pedagogy makes checking understanding routine: teachers observe learner responses, identify misconceptions quickly, and modify instruction (UNICEF Innocenti, 2025).
3. Peer learning mechanisms. Structured pair and group work increases learner talk time and provides additional opportunities for explanation, thereby strengthening understanding and confidence (Levy & Kerpelman, 2010).
4. Substantive engagement. Transformative pedagogy encourages contextually relevant tasks that connect learning to everyday life,

supporting motivation and persistence (Donnell, 2007; WHO, 2021).

In Sierra Leone, structured pedagogy has practical value because it translates "learner-centred ideals" into routines teachers can consistently enact. UNICEF Innocenti's research shows that teacher training at scale, aligned with structured lesson routines, is feasible and can measurably improve teachers' pedagogical knowledge (UNICEF Innocenti, 2025). This matters because many classrooms operate with constraints, such as large class sizes, limited books, and uneven pre-service preparation, under which purely "open-ended" learner-centred expectations can fail. Structured pedagogy can reduce mental effort for teachers by clarifying lesson steps, embedding interactive routines, and providing teacher language (UNICEF Innocenti, 2025).

4.2 Weaknesses

A recurring weakness is the "implementation gap" between learner-centred rhetoric and classroom realities. Three constraints are particularly binding in Sierra Leone.

First, there is a shortage of qualified teachers relative to the number of learners. PQTR values, especially senior secondary (87:1), suggest that even if total teacher numbers appear moderate, qualified teacher availability is constrained (MBSSE, 2024). Transformative pedagogy requires teachers to manage discussion, facilitate group work, design or use tasks aligned to learning goals, and provide feedback. In places where teachers lack content confidence, these tasks can feel risky, pushing teachers toward lecture and copying (World Bank, 2021; MBSSE, 2024).

Second, qualification mismatch by level. The senior secondary figure (42% qualified to teach their level) implies that subject mastery and pedagogical readiness are uneven precisely where curricula become more specialized and examination stakes rise (MBSSE, 2024). Under such pressure, teachers may prioritize "coverage" and the rehearsal of likely exam questions over deeper learning, even when policy encourages competence-based teaching (MBSSE, 2020; World Bank, 2021).

Third, material and coaching fragility. Even effective training can be undermined by late or insufficient teaching/learning materials, limited coaching visits, or weak instructional leadership. UNICEF Innocenti's analysis notes implementation limitations and highlights coping strategies teachers used during training and early implementation, such as collaborative lesson planning, modelling, and improvisation to offset shortages (UNICEF Innocenti, 2025). Yet improvisation has limits: transformative pedagogy is better sustained when teachers have reliable access to learner materials and ongoing professional support (UNICEF Innocenti, 2025; World Bank, 2021).

From a systems perspective, these weaknesses suggest that pedagogy reform must be treated as an "implementation problem" rather than a "knowledge problem." Teachers may understand learner-centred principles but still be structurally prevented from applying them consistently (UNICEF Innocenti, 2025). This helps explain why policy documents can strongly endorse learner-centred practice while classroom realities lag behind.

4.3 Opportunities

Sierra Leone has several alignment advantages that create a favorable window for strengthening transformative pedagogy.

Policy legitimacy. Curriculum renewal provides formal legitimacy for moving past rote learning, framing learner-centred approaches as part of national expectations (MBSSE, 2020). This legitimacy is critical because teachers and school leaders often interpret pedagogy through what policy and examinations reward.

Teacher governance and CPD coordination. The Teaching Service Commission's teacher development and performance policy direction creates a platform for coordinating CPD expectations, linking training to professional standards and accountability (TSC, 2020). Such governance structures can help shift professional norms away from viewing pedagogy change as a temporary "project" and toward a sustained professional expectation.

Foundational learning agenda. International and national focus on basic learning creates a coherent pedagogical target: early-grade literacy and numeracy. UNICEF's global tracking emphasizes foundational learning as central to education equity and long-term outcomes (UNICEF, 2023). Sierra Leone's learning assessment evidence provides a baseline for tracking improvement and targeting interventions (MBSSE, 2022).

Data systems for targeted implementation. Annual school census data, combined with learning assessments, enable targeting: policymakers can identify areas with high PQTR, low teacher qualification rates, or weak learning outcomes and prioritize those contexts for coaching and resource support (MBSSE, 2024; MBSSE, 2022).

4.4 Threats

The biggest threats are structural. If qualified teacher supply and coaching systems do not improve, teachers may revert to the safest method under pressure lecture and copying especially in examination classes (MBSSE, 2020; World Bank, 2021). Similarly, if high-stakes assessments continue to reward recall more than application, schools may resist learner-centred approaches despite policy commitments (MBSSE, 2020).

A further threat is "training fatigue" without a visible classroom impact. Large-scale training can raise expectations, but if materials and coaching are inconsistent, teachers may interpret reforms as shifting donor or ministry priorities rather than durable practice expectations (UNICEF Innocenti, 2025). Sustainment, therefore, depends on synchronizing training, materials, supervision, and assessment incentives (UNICEF Innocenti, 2025; TSC, 2020).

Finally, school health and well-being factors can indirectly threaten pedagogy. WHO guidance on creating health-promoting schools emphasizes that learning outcomes are linked to safe, accepting environments and pupil well-being, which in turn influence attention, attendance, and engagement (WHO, 2021). Where schools face health, nutrition, and psychosocial challenges, interactive pedagogies may be harder to implement without complementary support for learners' basic needs (WHO, 2021).

5.1 Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations
5.1.1 Summary

This study analyzed the implications of implementing transformative pedagogy in Sierra Leone's classrooms amid ongoing education reforms, teacher workforce challenges, and learning outcome gaps. The findings indicate that transformative pedagogy can enhance learner participation, critical thinking, and foundational skills by shifting classroom practice from rote memorization to learner-centred engagement. However, implementation remains limited by factors such as teacher qualification gaps, high pupil-qualified teacher ratios, insufficient learning materials, and exam-driven pressures that reinforce traditional instruction. While national policies and curriculum reforms offer a supportive framework, classroom realities ultimately determine pedagogical practice.

5.1.2 Conclusion

Transformative pedagogy is both necessary and feasible in Sierra Leone, especially for addressing persistent foundational learning gaps. Evidence shows that learner-centred approaches can improve engagement and learning when supported by structured routines, professional development, and adequate resources. However, transformative pedagogy cannot succeed as a stand-alone initiative; its sustainability requires alignment among curriculum design, teacher deployment, assessment systems, and ongoing professional support. Without these conditions, teachers are likely to revert to traditional methods despite policy intentions.

5.1.3 Recommendations

The Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) and the Curriculum and Research Directorate (CRD) should institutionalize structured pedagogy by ensuring the development and distribution of standardized teacher guides, aligned learner materials, and clear learner-centred lesson routines across all schools.

The Teaching Service Commission (TSC), District Education Offices, and school leadership should strengthen ongoing professional development through sustained coaching, mentoring, classroom supervision, and school-based professional learning communities, rather than relying on one-off training workshops.

The Teaching Service Commission (TSC), MBSSE, Ministry of Finance, and teacher training institutions should address teacher qualification and deployment gaps by improving recruitment, ensuring equitable deployment, and upgrading training programs, especially in education levels and districts with high pupil-qualified teacher ratios.

Universities, Teacher Training Colleges, Education Research Units, and Development Partners

Conduct further research using classroom observations and mixed-methods studies to evaluate the impact of transformative pedagogical practices on student learning outcomes in Sierra Leone.

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