



PERFORMANCE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE AT WASSCE IN THE WESTERN DISTRICT OF SIERRA LEONE (2019-2023)

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Abstract:

This study examined the trends in student and school performance in English Language at the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) in Sierra Leone's western district from 2019 to 2023. Despite English Language being the official medium of instruction and a core subject in schools, students' WASSCE performance in the subject has remained consistently low in recent years. The study used a quantitative approach to analyse trends in the performance of selected schools and students from 2019 to 2023. Data were obtained from the West African Examinations Council and from questionnaires distributed to previous WASSCE students. The study's findings revealed that many students attempted the WASSCE two or three times and generally performed better on the second or third attempt, and that there is a consistent pattern of poor performance in English Language across all school types and locations. The study concluded that the findings have implications for effective English Language teaching and learning in senior secondary schools, school infrastructure and resources, and district-wide policies and practices. It suggests a multifaceted approach to improve learning outcomes, teaching quality, resource allocation, and policies.

Keywords: English Language performance; Senior secondary schools; WASSCE candidates; Western Sierra Leone

1. Introduction

Entrance to Higher Education in Sierra Leone and other countries in the sub-region is determined by the performance of students in senior secondary or high school, and/or the scores obtained in External Examinations. These "external" examinations, sometimes called "public" or "national" occupy a central role in the assessment of individual students (Kellaghan & Madaus, 2003). Kivilu (2004) noted that public examinations have played a

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major role throughout the history of modern education in Africa. They serve a number of functions, the most important being not only to select students for limited places in successive levels in the education system, but also to serve an accountability function for teachers and schools. Abonyi (2014) viewed public examinations as an evaluation tool. He defined it as an examination that is processed and administered by a public examination board based on an approved curriculum. They are organized at all levels, consistent with national policies and goals, and are in line with emerging international trends.

The West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) is a public examination in operation in English-speaking West Africa. It is conducted by the West African Examinations Council (WAEC), which has Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and The Gambia as its member countries. After spending three years in senior secondary school (SSS), students are expected to take the WASSCE, and a credit (C4 - C6) or better in five subjects, including English Language or Mathematics, would guarantee a candidate a place in the university.

The performance in English at WASSCE in the Western District of Sierra Leone for the past years has been a cause for concern for all stakeholders in education. Recent statistics reveal that very few candidates have at least one credit (A1 – C6) in the English Language – 6.6% in 2019; 14.1% in 2020; 27.6% in 2021; 28.9% in 2022; and 19.7% in 2023. Alternatively, a high percentage of candidates have a mere pass or fail, scoring between D7 and F9: 93.4% in 2019; 85.9% in 2020; 72.4% in 2021; 71.1% in 2022; and 80.3% in 2023 (WAEC, 2023). This means that many do not meet the requirements to enter a university. Poor performance in public examinations, however, is not a new phenomenon and is not unique to Sierra Leone. The WASSCE is considered a high-stakes examination, and over the years, there has been a growing concern about the general poor performance of students in this examination. A number of studies have been conducted on the mass and/or massive failure in WASSCE on the whole and at a subject-specific level –Egede (2014); Ononye and Obiakeor (2020); Kenni (2020); Amankwah (2020); and Lavalie (2021), among others. Similarly, some researchers have investigated the factors responsible for poor performance, specifically in the English Language at WASSCE – Sa’ad and Usman (2014); Oribabor (2014); Badu *et al.* (2022), among others.

English plays a vital role in the development of individuals and accounts for both personal and professional growth. For students, English Language education serves as the key to academic achievement and effective communication. Language shapes their future and helps them develop critical thinking, creativity, and communication skills. It enhances their ability to comprehend and engage with a wide range of educational materials, both inside and outside the classroom. Additionally, it fosters collaboration and cultural understanding as English is a global language that connects people from diverse backgrounds.

In Sierra Leone, English plays a distinctive role, one that is common with other former British West African colonies, where English is used for educational, official, and administrative purposes against a background of indigenous languages (Bangura, 2015).

Freetown, the economic, political, social, academic, and cultural centre of Sierra Leone, was the first English-speaking West African city to witness the introduction of Western education and civilization (the Church Missionary Society's introduction of education and Christianity through Fourah Bay College in 1827, the Church Missionary Society Grammar School for Boys in 1845, the Annie Walsh Memorial Secondary School in 1849, among others), (Alie, 1990).

A study of the linguistic landscape of colonial and post-colonial Sierra Leone presents a picture of the status of English in Sierra Leone. At the formal level in Sierra Leone, English is used for governmental and media purposes and for formal businesses. It is a medium of instruction and engagement in schools and colleges. However, despite the dominant role played by English in the educational system of Sierra Leone, the performance of learners in schools is considerably declining. This cuts across the entire spectrum of the educational system (Tamba, 2017)

According to the Secondary Grade Learning Assessment (SGLA I) conducted by 'Leh Wi Lan' in 2018, learning outcomes in English are far behind national curriculum expectations. The Leh wi Lan/Sierra Leone Secondary Education Improvement Programme (SSEIP) was a five-year (2016-2021) UK aid-funded programme aimed at improving English and Mathematics learning achievement in all secondary schools of Sierra Leone. The report revealed that only 60 per cent of JSS 2 students, and 40 per cent of SSS 2 students could demonstrate the level of English language skills that would be expected from a primary-grade pupil. In effect, JSS 2 students have fallen behind curriculum expectations by two years, and SSS 2 students by five years. Furthermore, just 10 per cent of JSS 2 students show the English language skills that are expected at their stage, only 2 per cent exceed their expected level, and almost no SSS 2 students can show skills expected at the end of SSS1.

In the same report, it was also observed that there was minimal progress in students' learning outcomes as they moved up grades. Students starting with a weak foundation in JSS have little knowledge to build on as they progress to SSS grades, so the progression in learning is minimal. Despite 8-11 years of schooling and having officially passed the NPSE, a large proportion of students in both grades demonstrated no more than some very basic English skills and will most likely struggle to respond to the pace of the BECE or WASSCE curriculum, which creates much more ambitious demands from candidates.

2. Statement of the Problem

Although English Language is the official medium of instruction and a core subject in schools, students' performance in the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) has remained consistently poor in recent years. The Western District of Sierra Leone houses the capital city, Freetown, and the largest number of senior secondary schools in the country. Recent statistics from the West African Examination Council for the Western District of Sierra Leone reveal that very few candidates have a credit (A1 and

C6) in English Language at WASSCE and can secure entrance to a university. Alternatively, a higher percentage has a mere pass or fail, scoring between D7 and F9. Implications for personal and national development are significant. This persistent poor performance raises concerns about the quality of teaching and learning of the English Language in schools, the infrastructure and resource base of schools in the district, the attitude of students towards the subject, and their level of engagement with it, among others. However, there seems to be limited empirical analysis of the patterns and trends of the performance of students in the English Language at WASSCE and insufficient focus on specific school types and their performance. It is hoped that an in-depth analysis of the performance of students and schools in the English Language at WASSCE would be crucial for identifying gaps and proposing actionable solutions.

3. Research Objectives

- 1) To examine the performance of **students** in English Language at WASSCE in the Western District of Sierra Leone (2019-2023).
- 2) To analyze the performance of **schools** in English Language at WASSCE in the Western District of Sierra Leone (2019-2023).

3.1 Research Questions

- 1) What are the trends in the performance of **students** in English Language at WASSCE in the Western District of Sierra Leone (2019-2023)?
- 2) What are the trends in the performance of **schools** in English Language at WASSCE in the Western District of Sierra Leone (2019-2023)?

4. Literature Review

4.1 Public Examinations in English Language

English plays a major role in education systems in which it is a second language. The main objective of teaching and learning English is to develop students' communicative competency. Ediger (2010) cited four major objectives: skills, cognitive, attitudinal, and creative.

- **Skill Objectives:** This involves developing the ability to read literature, write and express thoughts, speak clearly, and listen to others effectively. This also emphasizes the importance of grammar and sentence structure in language acquisition.
- **Cognitive Objectives:** These focus on enhancing knowledge and application of grammar, awareness of phonemes and their pronunciation, understanding morphemes, and the ability to appreciate and critique literary works, including poetry and drama.

- **Attitudinal Objectives:** These are related to fostering a positive attitude towards language learning, encouraging interest in supplementary reading, library use, and active participation in discussions and debates.
- **Creative Objectives:** These encourage students to engage in creative writing, self-study, original thinking, and development of a unique writing style that reflects their ideas and experiences.

Ediger concludes that assessments, such as examinations, play a vital role in the learning process. They not only evaluate students' knowledge and understanding, but also aid them in recognizing their strengths and weaknesses, leading to a deeper comprehension of the subject matter.

The objective of examining English language at WASSCE is not only to test the basic skills in communicating in English using the mediums of speech and writing, but also to test the receptive and productive abilities of candidates. These abilities are expected to be demonstrated in reading, comprehension, summary, vocabulary, lexis and structure, listening comprehension, and recognition of different aspects of spoken English. In the examination, candidates are expected to use English correctly; write about incidents in English that are appropriate to specific audiences and situations; organize material in paragraphs that are chronologically, spatially, and logically coherent; exhibit variety in the use of sentence patterns; comply with the use of grammar; pick out and summarize relevant information from a given passage; and recognize implied meaning, tones, and attitudes. The English examination is thus formatted in three papers: Paper 1 – Objectives (80 compulsory multiple-choice questions); Paper 2 – Essay (candidates are to answer one out of five questions), Comprehension and Summary passages (candidates are to read the passages and answer the questions set on them); Paper 3 – Oral (60 listening comprehension multiple-choice questions).

Recent trends in national performance reports in many countries in West Africa and beyond reveal that many students struggle to pass English Language in public examinations. According to Sa'ad and Usman (2014), the poor performance of students in English Language in public examinations was explained as a major cause of the decline in the general academic performance and standard of education in Nigeria. They cited students' weaknesses in English Language (the medium of instruction) as having negative consequences on their overall performance. As a result, *"seventy-five percent of candidates who sat for May/June WAEC 2010 examinations failed to meet the minimum entry requirement into tertiary institutions"* (p.41).

Badu *et al.* (2022) wrote that the public outcry about the falling standard of the English Language as spoken and written by students of Senior High Schools, and even in tertiary institutions, led them to investigate why Senior High School Candidates performed poorly in the essay writing component of the English Language Paper at the WASSCE in Ghana. They found that insufficient time allocated to the teaching of composition, the inability of teachers to mark students' exercises and guide them through the necessary corrections and interventions, the trend of large class sizes, the overburdened extra-curricular activities, and a high level of apathy among students in

reading books and writing compositions, coupled with inadequate reading materials, were the key factors responsible.

In Tanzania, Nade (2015) noted that although English is the medium of instruction, students lack proficiency in expressing themselves and, therefore, limit their participation in the general learning process. He lists competency-based limitations such as grammar, fluency in speaking, presentations, in writings and the overall mastery/competency relationship in other subjects measured in terms of examination performance at the individual level as not being clearly addressed.

Oribabor (2014) wrote that, as second language learners, most Nigerians face major problems in speaking and writing English. Most of the factors responsible for this are the sociological, psychological, environmental (homes), political, and psychosocial influences of peer groups in schools. As a result, the performance of students at various levels is affected.

4.2 Challenges in Teaching and Learning English as a Second Language (ESL)

Makhathini and Mncwango (2020) suggest that *“the language of education is arguably a very powerful obstacle to the educational achievement of bilingual learners in their quest to learn through the medium of English in a bilingual classroom”* (p. 71). According to their findings, teachers highlighted learner motivation, reading and writing problems, teaching style and method, lack of resources to teach and assess language, and the use of English as the language of teaching and learning, among others, as challenges they experience during teaching and learning in English classes. While teachers lack an appropriate pedagogic approach to teaching writing, students face numerous challenges, such as the effects of L1 transfer and a lack of reading, motivation and practice. The authors pointed out that the teachers expressed a desire to be better equipped with the linguistic and communicative approach to language teaching, and the students wished there was a balance in the teaching of the four language skills – there was heavy reliance on the teaching of Literature and Writing (the main focus being on content).

According to Nnyigide and Anyaegbu (2020), some students of English in a second-language situation encounter problems because they study it against the background of their mother tongue, in which they have attained a reasonable degree of competence; and some teachers contribute to the problem owing to their pedagogical incompetence, lack of instructional materials and language interference, among others. They listed five categories of problems that affect the teaching and learning of English in ESL classrooms. These are: interference, pedagogical, sociological/environmental, psychological and motivational. Their study concluded that L1 interference can be experienced at the phonological, grammatical, orthographic, lexical and dialectical levels. The lack of instructional materials and poor teaching methods account for the pedagogical factors. In addition to hearing and using English in the classroom, learners interact in social groups or in an environment in which L1 or other local languages are predominantly spoken. When the learning atmosphere is conducive, the learner is

motivated to learn; if the learner is bored, tired or hungry, and the teacher lacks incentive, little or no teaching or learning is effective.

Akujobi and Chuku (2012) claimed that learners of English as a second language experience overwhelming challenges, mainly because of the difference between the forms and meanings of English and those of their L1. They maintain that one of the causes of such difficulties when learning a second language is hindrances, also known as interlingual errors, which arise from the native language. Errors typically affect learners' pronunciation, spelling, grammar, and vocabulary. Their findings list interference, inadequate use or non-use of teaching aids, and the qualifications and experience of English language teachers as major factors that affect the effective study of the English Language. Other factors included: the quality and types of textbooks, students' attitudes toward the subject, large classes, and the methodology of teaching the subject.

Ng and Ng (2015) cited both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation as keys to success for learners at every stage of their education. In a learning and teaching environment, both students and teachers or parents play an important role in providing and encouraging motivation. When this motivation is absent, the teaching and learning processes become challenging. A learner can be intrinsically motivated when he or she works or strives to learn the language because of the desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity, but it is the teacher who provides extrinsic motivation.

4.3 Theoretical Framework

The continued poor performance of students in English Language at WASSCE has become a troublesome phenomenon and requires some theoretical foundation to explain its existence and persistence. This study uses two underlying theories: Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory [Lev Semenovich Vygotsky (1934)] and Elger's Theory of Academic Performance [Don Elger (2007)].

Vygotsky believed that human development relies on social interactions: parents, caregivers, peers, and culture are responsible for developing the child's brain. The theory suggests that human learning is largely a social process, and that our cognitive functions are formed based on our interactions with those around us who are "more skilled" (Cherry, 2022). According to the sociocultural perspective, a child's psychological growth is guided, in part, by people in their lives who are in mentor-type roles, such as teachers and parents (scaffolding and reciprocal teaching). At other times, the child develops values and beliefs through interactions within social groups or by participating in cultural events (collaborative and cooperative learning) (Macleod, 2024).

In terms of language learning, the socio-cultural theorist Vygotsky believes that language comes from cultural and social activity and only later becomes reconstructed as an individual, psychological phenomenon (Ozfidan *et al.*, 2014, p. 185). This means that psycholinguistic and learning processes are inseparable from social contexts. In other words, social contexts might influence or constrain the performance of learning a second language.

The relevance of this theory to the present study is the socio-cultural contexts, namely the social practices of the schools, such as teacher efficiency and professionalism, availability of teaching and learning resources, the use of the English language in the classroom, and the socio-economic status of the students' parents.

Don Elger's Theory of Performance (ToP) (2007) views performance as a journey, with "level of performance" describing an individual's location in that journey. The theory provides a framework for understanding and improving performance, viewing it as a journey involving six core components that can be used to define and analyze performance: Identity, Learning Skills, Level of Knowledge, Context (of performance), and personal and fixed factors.

Building on Elger's theory, Apple and Ellis (2015) argue that learning is a skill and performance that can be intentionally improved. They outlined 13 interconnected components across five areas—identity, knowledge, learning skills, context, and personal factors—that strengthen learning-to-learn performance. These include developing learner confidence and responsibility; deepening awareness of learning processes; applying appropriate strategies to different types of knowledge; enhancing cognitive, social, and emotional skills; engaging in high-quality and collaborative learning experiences; and transforming personal challenges into growth opportunities. Overall, they emphasized that students perform better when they recognize learning as a deliberate process that prepares them for future performance.

In Sierra Leone, applying the learning theories of social interaction, collaboration, scaffolding and positive modelling (Vygotsky's theory) can enhance students' engagement, skills and self-efficacy (Elger's theory). Educators can boost motivation by providing constructive feedback, setting achievable goals and showcasing role models. These approaches can improve English learning and performance at WASSCE. However, challenges, such as inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, staffing shortages and weak educational foundations, hinder the creation of supportive learning environments and students' confidence in their abilities.

5. Research Methodology

This study used a descriptive design. Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources between the months of June and September, 2024. Questionnaires were issued to past WASSCE students in rural and urban Freetown. In the opening paragraphs of the questionnaire, consent was sought from all participants and anonymity was assured after they were provided with clear information about the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Secondary data were obtained from the West African Examination Council (WAEC) records.

The snowball sampling method was used to select past students (those who sat the WASSCE from 2019 to 2023). A stratified sampling technique was used to select

Senior Secondary Schools in the selected constituencies based on the following criteria: boys-only, girls-only, co-education; government-assisted, and private schools.

Prior to the commencement of data collection, questionnaires were developed and validated, and a pre-test was conducted to test the reliability of the research instrument. After data collection, clean-up, coding and removal of errors and inconsistencies were undertaken.

Quantitative data were analyzed using Excel and Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22.0. Excel was used for downloading, cleaning, exploration, manipulation, and data analysis. SPSS version 22.0 was used to analyze the data in the form of descriptive statistics. The use of simple frequencies and percentages were produced as a result of the analyzed data, and the results are presented in tables, graphs and charts.

6. Research Findings

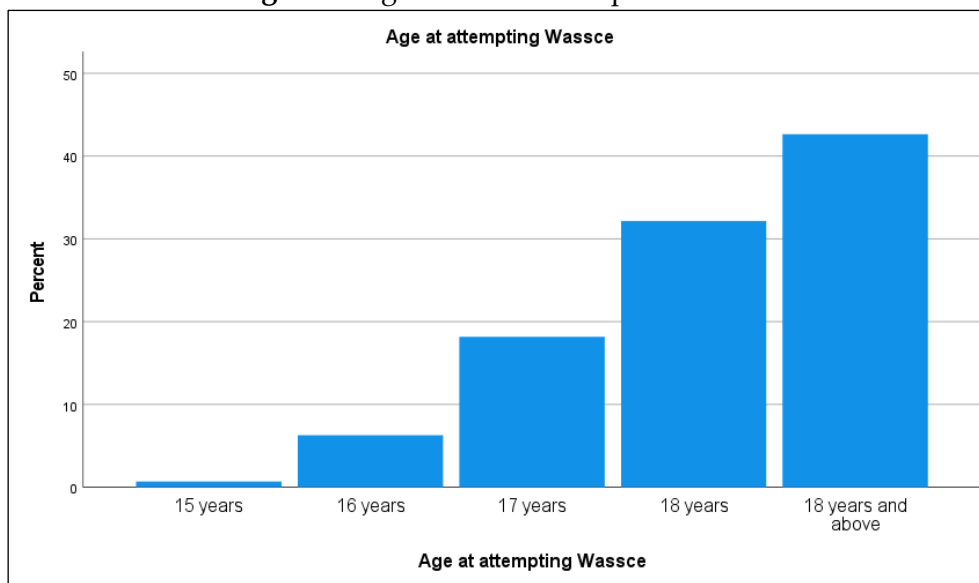
The target population for this study was past WASSCE students who completed an English Language examination between 2019 and 2023. The respondents were selected from the Western Urban and Rural Districts of Sierra Leone. This district houses the greatest number of schools in the country and, by extension, a greater percentage of candidates who attempted the WASSCE (North: 126 SSS; East: 148 SSS; South: 100 SSS; North West: 129 SSS; and West: 321 SSS). A total of 239 questionnaires were distributed, and 145 (60%) were analyzed. The results of this study are presented in accordance with the objectives of the study.

6.1 The Performance of Students in English Language at WASSCE in the Western District of Sierra Leone (2019 to 2023)

6.1.1 The Demographics of the Primary Respondents - The Past Students

A total of 145 questionnaires were completed by past students who had taken the WASSCE between 2019 and 2023.

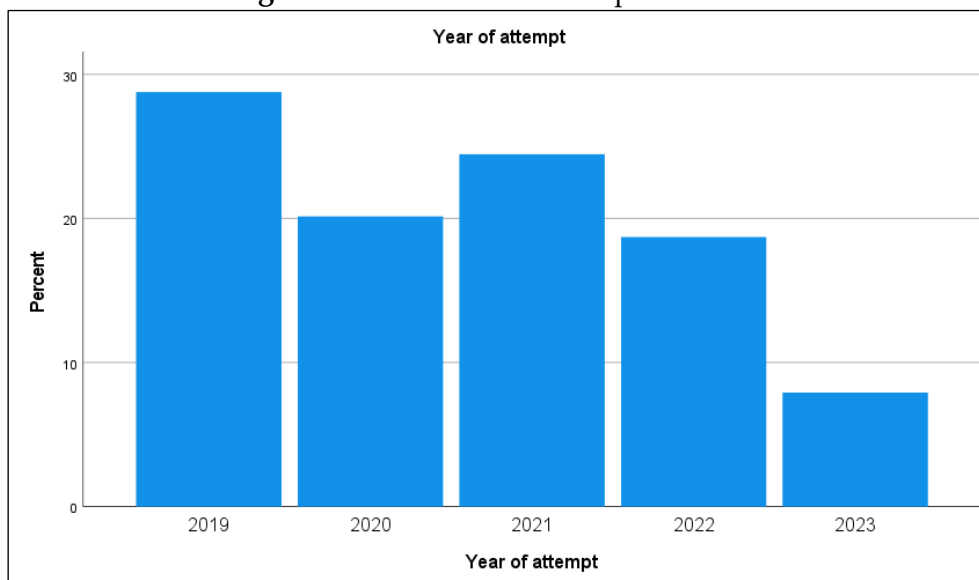
Figure 1: Age students attempt WASSCE



Source: Field Data 2024.

Figure 1 shows the age at which the respondents completed the WASSCE. Out of a sample of 145 past students, only one (0.7%) took the exams at age 15, nine (6.2%) took the exams at age 16, 26 (17.9%) took the exams at age 17, 46 (31.7%) took the exams at age 18 and 61 (42.1%) took the exams above age 18. These numbers indicate that a greater number and, by extension, a greater percentage of students took the exams after age 18.

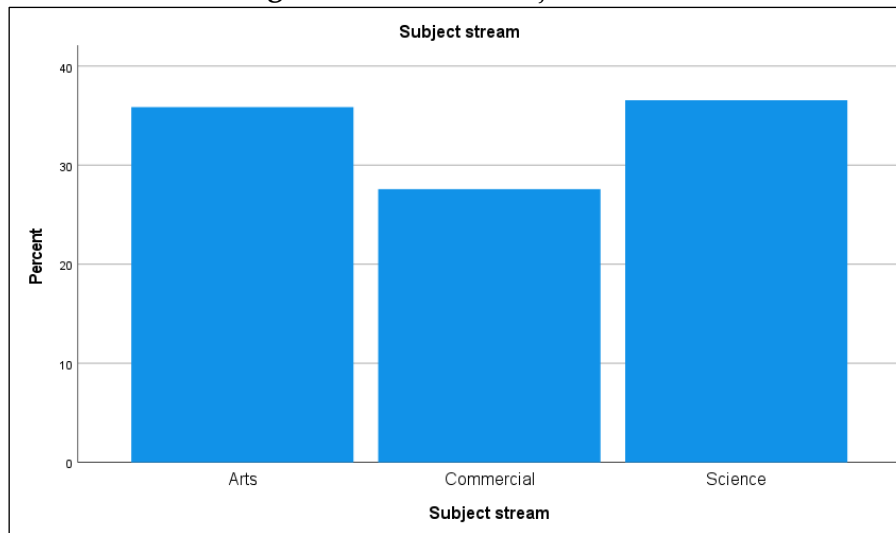
Figure 2: Year students attempt WASSCE



Source: Field Data 2024.

Figure 2 shows the year the students in the sample took the exams. The highest number of students was recorded in 2019 (40 students, 27.6%), followed by 2021 (34 students, 23.4%). 28 students (19.3%) attempted the exams in 2020, 26 (17.9%) in 2022 and 11 (7.6%) in 2023.

Figure 3: Students' subject stream



Source: Field Data 2024.

The data in Figure 3 revealed that 53 respondents (36.6%) were in the science stream, 52 (35.9%) were in the arts stream, and 40 (27.6%) were in the commercial stream, indicating an almost even spread of streams among respondents.

6.2 The Performance of Students in English Language at WASSCE

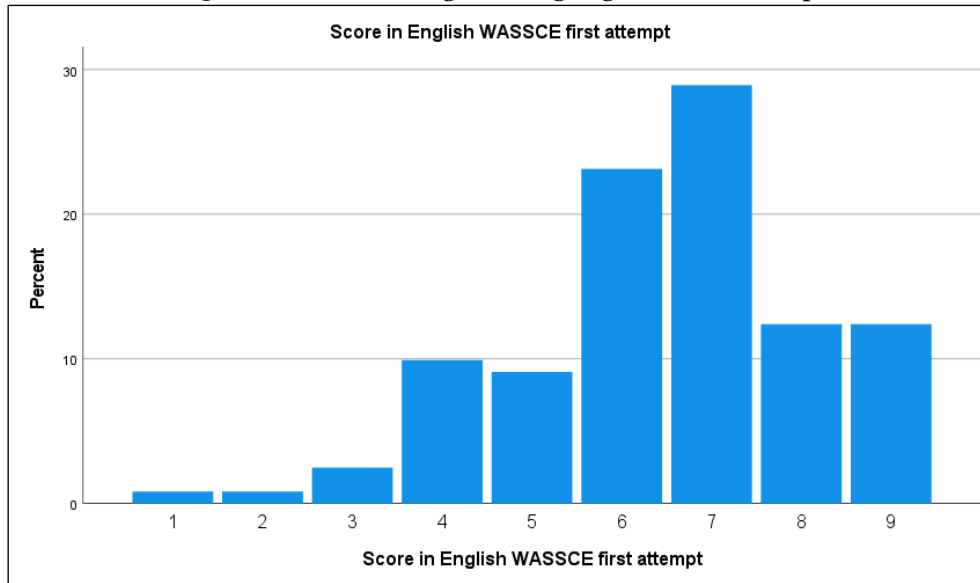
Past students admitted that they had to attempt the English Language examination three times in three different sittings. Statistics for the first, second and third examinations were also collected.

Table 1: Score in English at WASSCE first attempt

Scores	Frequency	Percent
A1	1	0.7
B2	1	0.7
B3	3	2.1
C4	12	8.3
C5	11	7.6
C6	28	19.3
D7	35	24.1
E8	15	10.3
F9	15	10.3
Total	121	83.4
Missing	24	16.6
Total	145	100.0

Source: Field Data 2024.

Figure 4: Score in English language at first attempt



Source: Field Data 2024.

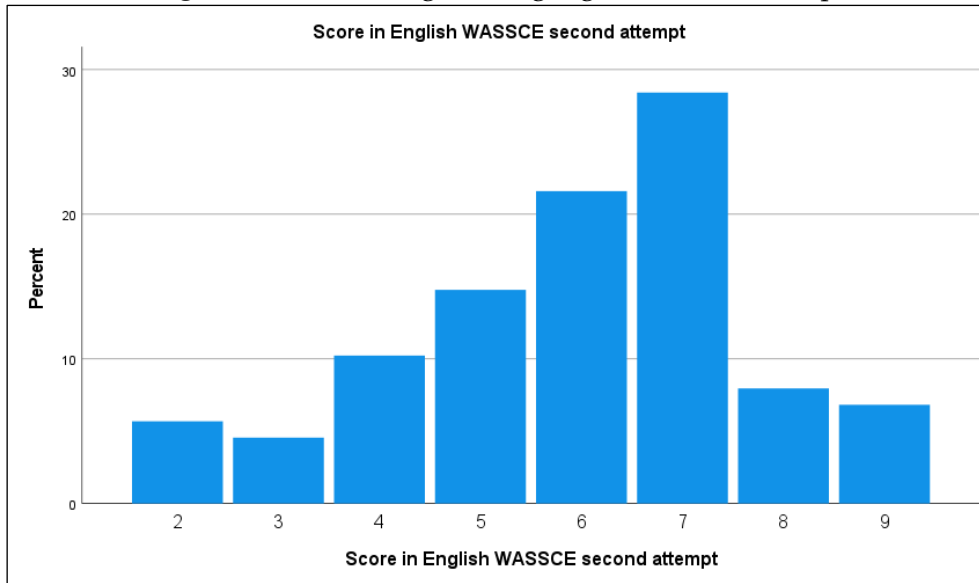
Table 1 provides data on the scores past students obtained in English Language at WASSCE on their first attempt. Figure 4 contains the distribution of students' scores in English at WASSCE on the first attempt, illustrating that the highest percentage of students scored 7 (D7) in English at WASSCE on the first attempt.

Table 2: Score in English at WASSCE second attempt

Scores	Frequency	Percent
B2	5	3.4
B3	4	2.8
C4	9	6.2
C5	13	9.0
C6	19	13.1
D7	25	17.2
E8	7	4.8
F9	6	4.1
Total	88	60.7
Missing	57	39.3
Total	145	100

Source: Field Data 2024.

Figure 5: Score in English language at second attempt



Source: Field Data 2024.

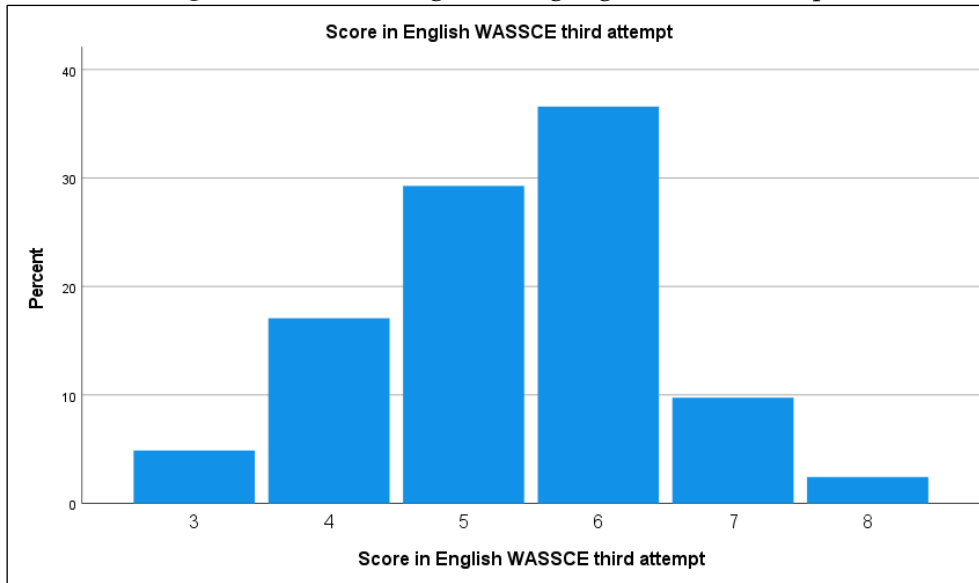
Table 2 provides data on the scores past students obtained in English Language at WASSCE on their second attempt. Figure 5 contains the distribution of students' scores in English at WASSCE on the second attempt, illustrating that the highest percentage of students scored 7 (D7) in English at WASSCE on the second attempt.

Table 3: Score in English WASSCE third attempt

Scores	Frequency	Percent
B3	2	1.4
C4	7	4.8
C5	12	8.3
C6	15	10.3
D7	4	2.8
E8	1	0.7
Total	41	28.3
Missing	104	71.7
Total	145	100.0

Source: Field Data 2024.

Figure 6: Score in English Language at third attempt



Source: Field Data 2024.

Table 3 provides data on the scores past students obtained in English Language at WASSCE on their third attempt. Figure 6 contains the distribution of students' scores in English at WASSCE on the third attempt, illustrating that the highest percentage of students scored 6 (C6) in English at WASSCE on the third attempt.

Table 4: Analysis of 1st, 2nd and 3rd attempts

		Score in English WASSCE first attempt	Score in English WASSCE second attempt	Score in English WASSCE third attempt
Mean		6.47	5.93	5.37
Median		7.00	6.00	5.00
Mode		7	7	6
Std. Deviation		1.659	1.767	1.113
Variance		2.751	3.122	1.238
Range		8	7	5
Percentiles	25	6.00	5.00	5.00
	50	7.00	6.00	5.00
	75	7.50	7.00	6.00

Source: Field Data 2024.

Table 4 provides an analysis of the scores in English at WASSCE for first, second and third attempts.

7. Results

This study examined the performance of students in English across various assessments: the first, second, and third attempts of the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE). Descriptive statistics were calculated for each set of scores.

7.1 Descriptive Statistics

The sample sizes for each variable varied: the WASSCE first attempt included 121 valid cases, the second attempt had 88, and the third attempt had 41 valid responses. The **mean** score for the WASSCE first attempt was 6.47 (SD = 1.659), indicating a moderately high average performance, ranging from 1 to 8. The second WASSCE attempt had a mean score of 5.93 (SD = 1.767), whereas the third attempt had a lower mean score of 5.37 (SD = 1.113). The **median** scores were consistent across most of the variables, with the WASSCE first and second attempts having medians of 7 and 6, respectively. The third WASSCE attempt had a median score of five. The **mode**, which represented the most frequent score, was 7 for the first and second attempts and 6 for the third attempt.

7.2 Range and Variance

The range of scores was similar across the variables, with the WASSCE first attempt having a range of 8 and the other variables ranging from 5 to 8. The variance in scores for the first, second and third WASSCE attempts was 2.751, 3.122 and 1.238, respectively, suggesting that the second WASSCE attempt scores exhibited more variability than the other assessments.

7.3 Percentiles

The 25th, 50th, and 75th percentiles (also referred to as quartiles) were calculated to further understand the score distribution. For example, the 25th percentile score for the first WASSCE attempt was 6.00, and that for the second attempt was 5.00. For the first, second and third attempts, the 50th percentile (median) values were 7.00, 6.00 and 5.00. The 75th percentile for the first WASSCE attempt was 7.50, indicating that the top quartile of students performed slightly better on the first WASSCE attempt than on the second attempt (75th percentile = 7.00).

The analysis suggests that students generally performed better on the WASSCE third attempt compared to previous attempts. Overall, these results highlight the general trend of increasing performance across multiple attempts of the WASSCE. This improvement in performance notwithstanding, the results show that in all three sittings, the performance of students in the English Language examination, at its best, is an average of C6.

7.4 The Performance of Schools in English Language at WASSCE

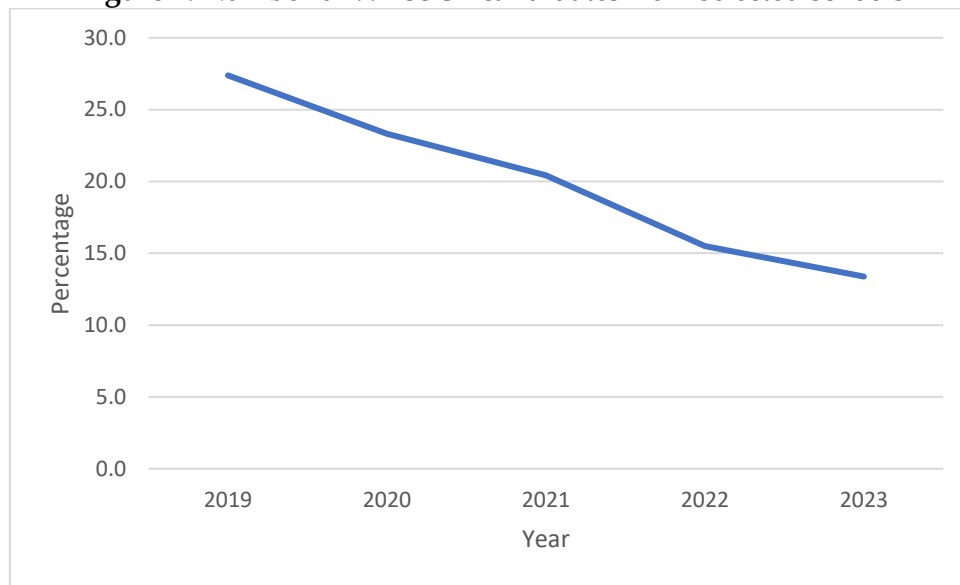
Similarly, this study sought to examine the performance of schools in English Language at WASSCE between 2019 and 2023. The data include five groups: All Schools, Boys Only, Girls Only, Mixed Schools and government and private schools. Six boys-only schools, four girls-only schools, and eleven co-educational schools were interviewed as a mixture of government, government-assisted and private schools across the Western Rural and Urban districts.

Table 5: Total number of WASSCE candidates from selected schools

Attempts	
Year	F
2019	9,013
2020	7,677
2021	6,721
2022	5,102
2023	4,404

Source: WAEC.

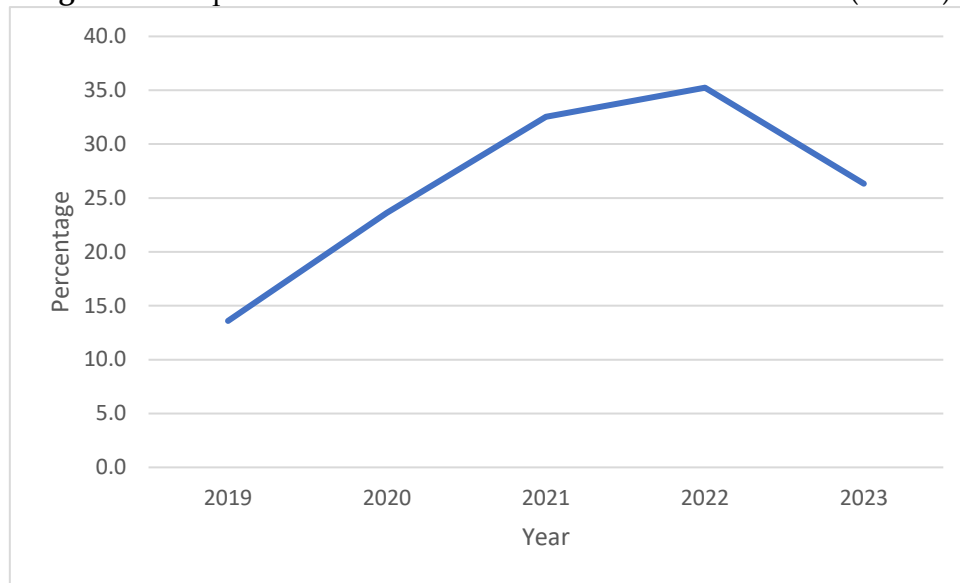
Figure 7: Number of WASSCE candidates from selected schools



Source: WAEC.

Table 5 and Figure 7 show that there has been a steady decline in the number of students attempting the WASSCE for all schools in the survey, dropping from 9,013 in 2019 to 4,404 in 2023.

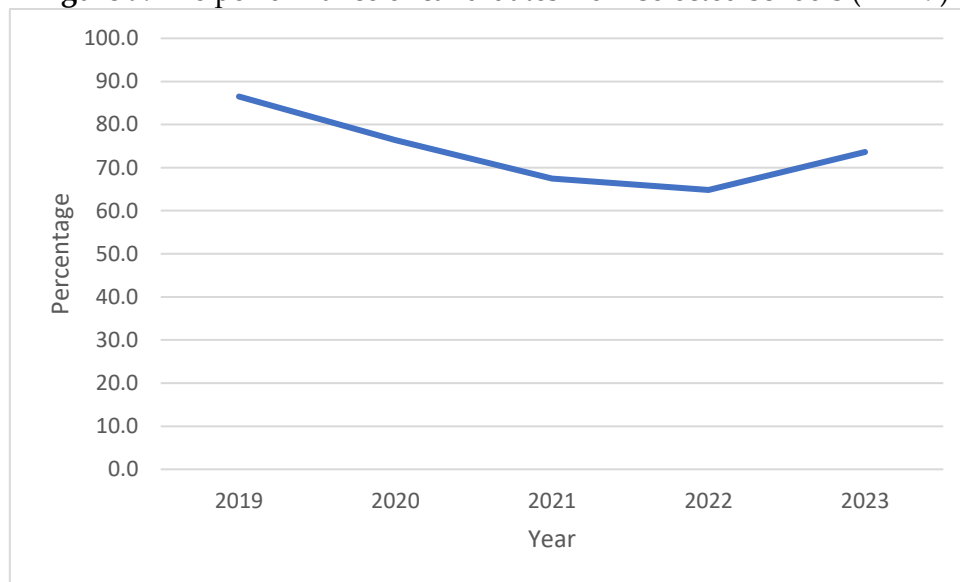
Figure 8: The performance of candidates from selected schools (A1-C6)



Source: WAEC.

Figure 8 shows that performance improved significantly from 13.6% in 2019 to 35.2% in 2022 but decreased to 26.3% in 2023. There was a notable improvement in the percentage of students achieving higher grades (A1-C6) until 2022, but performance dropped by 2023.

Figure 9: The performance of candidates from selected schools (D7-F9)



Source: WAEC.

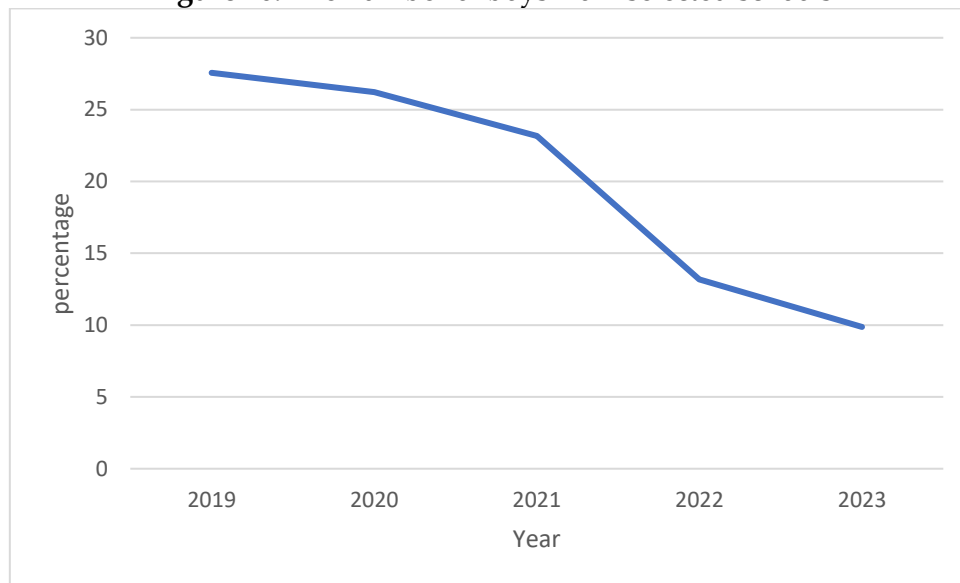
In Figure 9, it is seen that the percentage of students in this lower-grade range decreased from 86.5% in 2019 to 64.8% in 2022, but increased again to 73.7% by 2023. The percentage of students failing (grades D7-F9) showed a similar pattern of improvement until 2022, after which it rose again in 2023. It is worth noting that the percentages in these lower grades were high (above 60%).

Table 6: The number of boys from selected schools

Boys only (Attempts)	
Year	F
2019	2,510
2020	2,388
2021	2,109
2022	1,201
2023	899

Source: WAEC.

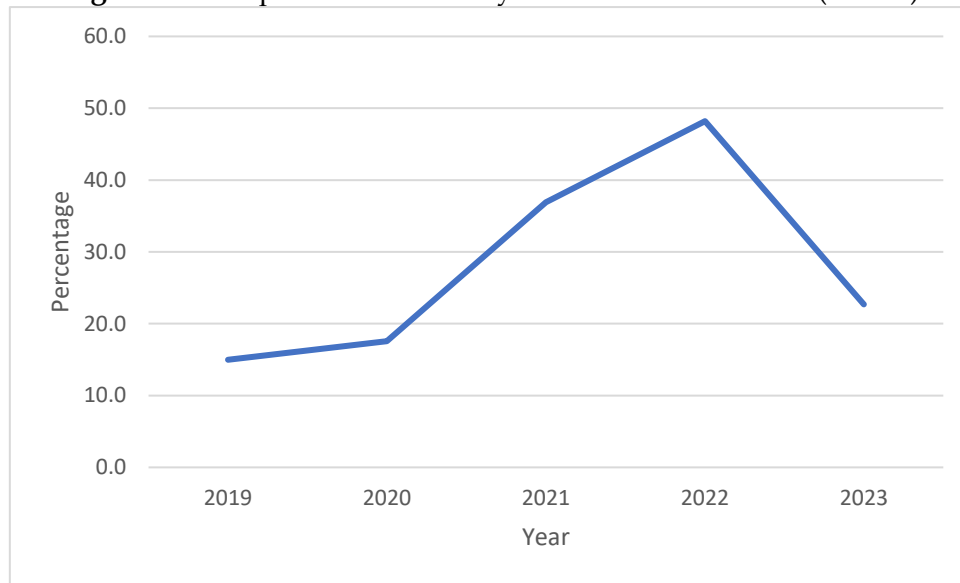
Figure 10: The number of boys from selected schools



Source: WAEC.

Table 6 provides data on the number of boys from selected schools who attempted the WASSCE between 2019 and 2023. In Figure 10, for Boys-Only schools, the number of boys attempting WASSCE consistently decreased from 2,510 in 2019 to 899 in 2023. The consistent decline in the number of boys attempting the examination may be an additional concern, suggesting lower engagement or enrolment.

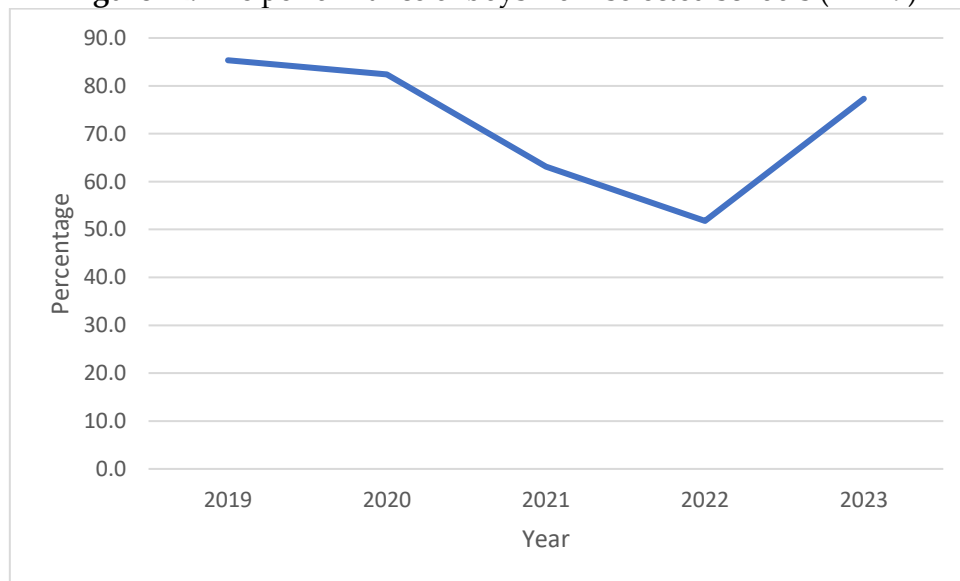
Figure 11: The performance of boys from selected schools (A1-C6)



Source: WAEC.

Figure 11 shows that the percentage of boys achieving A1-C6 increased substantially from 15.0% in 2019 to 48.2% in 2022, but dropped to 22.7% in 2023.

Figure 12: The performance of boys from selected schools (D7-F9)



Source: WAEC.

In Figure 12, it is observed that the percentage of boys in the D7-F9 range decreased from 85.3% in 2019 to 51.8% in 2022, but increased again to 77.3% in 2023.

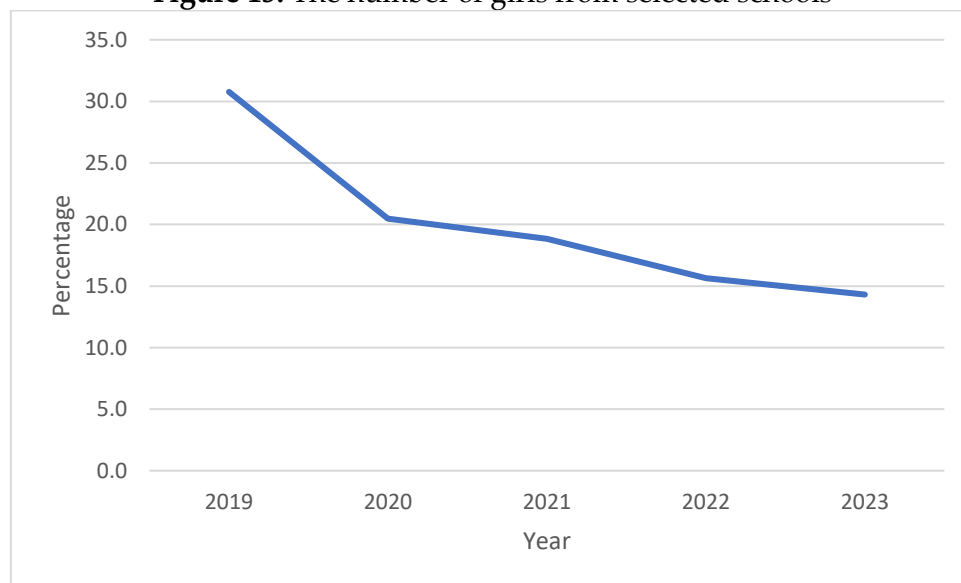
Boys showed the most significant improvement in performance from 2019 to 2022, with a peak in 2022, when nearly half of the boys scored A1-C6. However, their performance regressed sharply by 2023, with a significant increase in failure rates.

Table 7: The number of girls from selected schools

Girls only (Attempts)	
Year	F
2019	1,819
2020	1,210
2021	1,113
2022	924
2023	846

Source: WAEC.

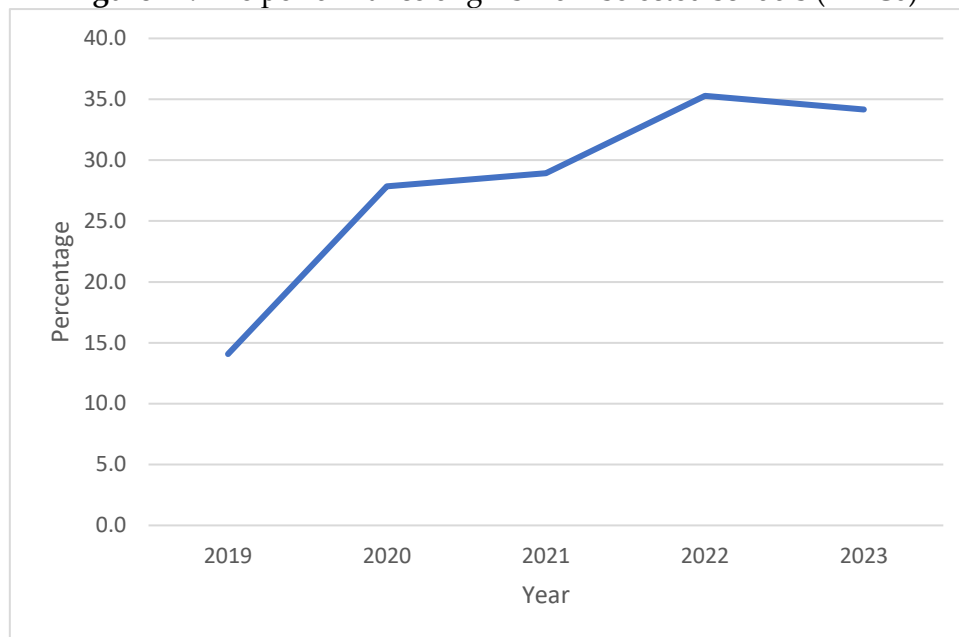
Figure 13: The number of girls from selected schools



Source: WAEC.

Table 7 provides data on the number of girls from selected schools who attempted the WASSCE between 2019 and 2023. In Figure 13, with Girls-Only schools, there was also a decline in the number of girls attempting the examination from 1,819 in 2019 to 846 in 2023.

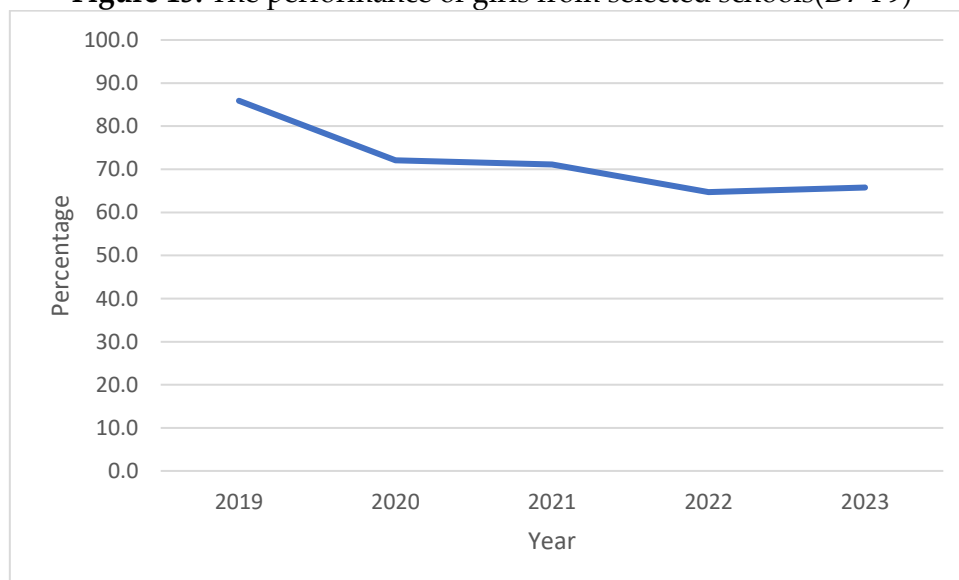
Figure 14: The performance of girls from selected schools (A1-C6)



Source: Field Data 2024.

In Figure 14, the percentage of girls achieving A1-C6 steadily improved from 14.1% in 2019 to 35.3% in 2022, but remained fairly stable in 2023 at 34.2%.

Figure 15: The performance of girls from selected schools(D7-F9)



Source: Field Data 2024.

Figure 15 shows that the percentage of girls in the D7-F9 range decreased from 85.9% in 2019 to 64.7% in 2022, with a slight increase to 65.8% by 2023. As with the boys only schools, the percentages in the D7 – F9 categories remained high (above 60%).

Girls have shown consistent improvements in performance over the years, with the percentage of girls achieving higher grades steadily rising until 2022. While their performance slightly declined in 2023, it remained relatively strong compared with that

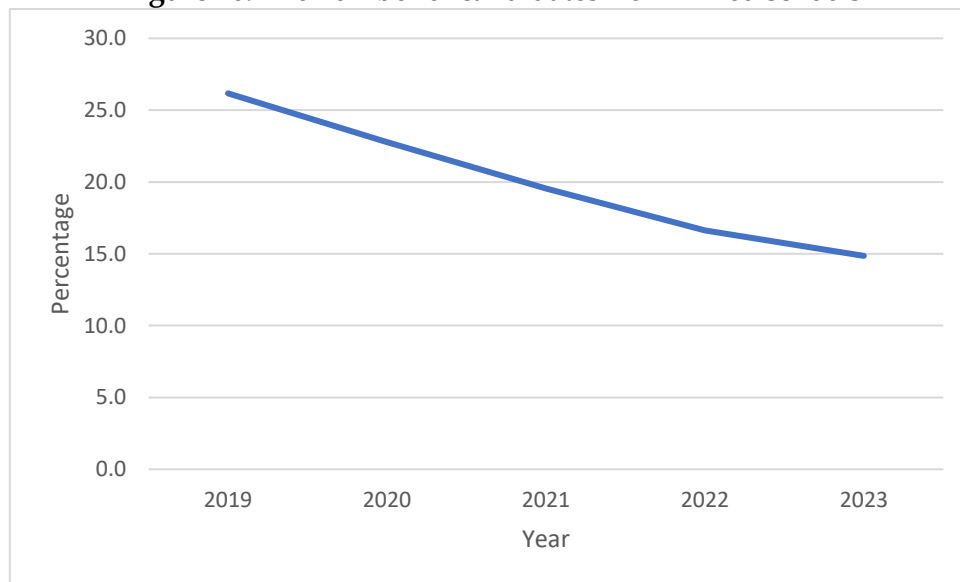
of boys. The decline in the number of girls attempting the examination is notable but not as severe as that for boys.

Table 8: The number of candidates from mixed schools

Mixed schools (Attempt)	
Year	F
2019	4,684
2020	4,079
2021	3,499
2022	2,977
2023	2,659

Source: WAEC.

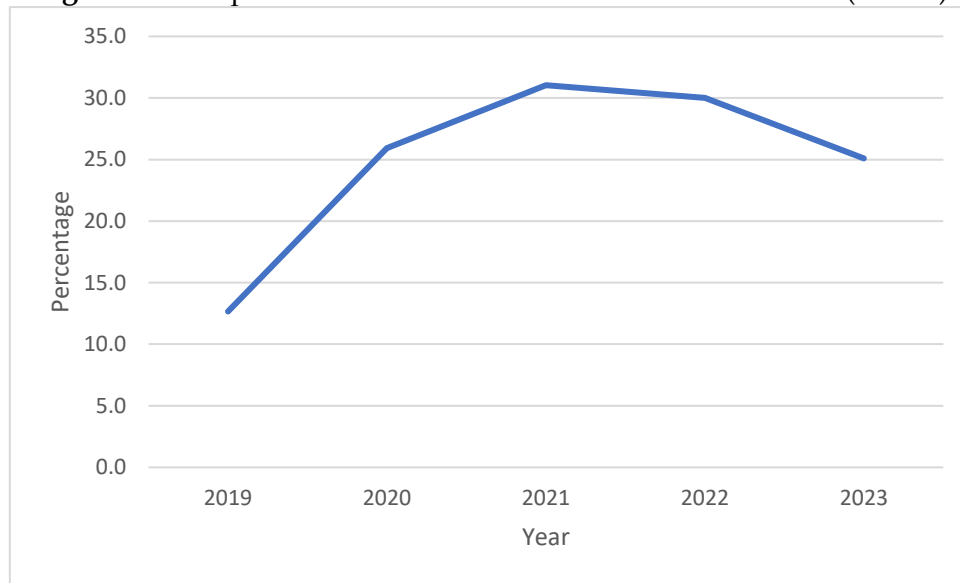
Figure 16: The number of candidates from mixed schools



Source: WAEC.

Table 8 provides data on the number of candidates from mixed schools who attempted the WASSCE between 2019 and 2023. Figure 16 shows that the number of students from mixed schools decreased from 4,684 in 2019 to 2,659 in 2023.

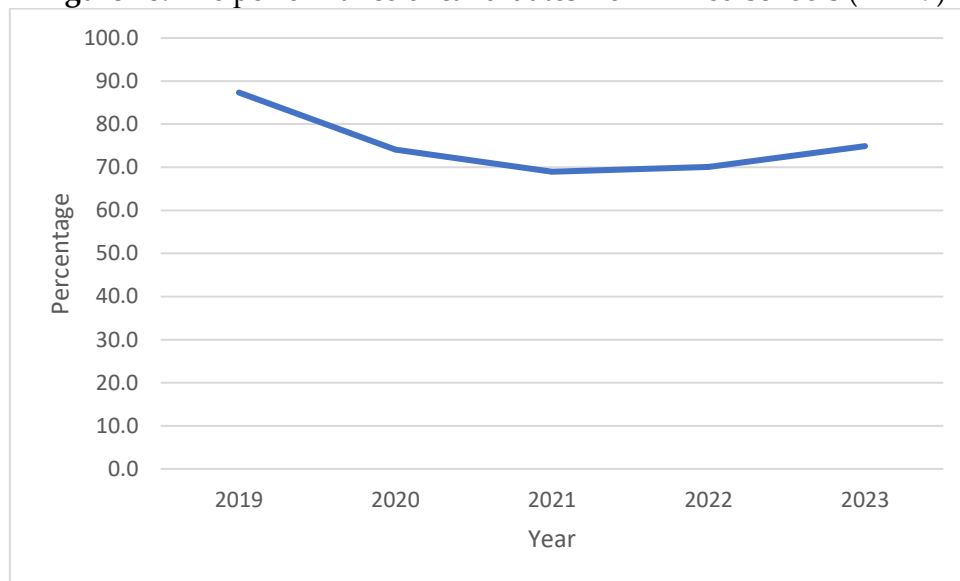
Figure 17: The performance of candidates from mixed schools (A1-C6)



Source: WAEC.

In Figure 17, it is seen that the percentage of students in mixed schools achieving A1-C6 increased from 12.7% in 2019 to 30.0% in 2022, but dropped to 25.1% by 2023.

Figure 18: The performance of candidates from mixed schools (D7-F9)



Source: WAEC.

Figure 18 shows that the percentage of students from mixed schools in the D7-F9 range decreased from 87.3% in 2019 to 70.1% in 2022, with an increase of 74.9% in 2023.

Mixed schools showed similar trends to those in all schools overall, with performance improving up to 2022, but then declining in 2023. This decline in attempts was also notable. However, mixed schools have seen less drastic shifts compared to boys-only and girls-only schools, with a more moderate decline in the number of students scoring A1-C6.

7.5 Comparison of Private and Government School Performance

Adjusting for private and government school performance requires adjusting for scale differences, as government schools generally enrol a significantly higher number of students than private schools. Direct visualization on a single graph would fail to represent these differences fairly.

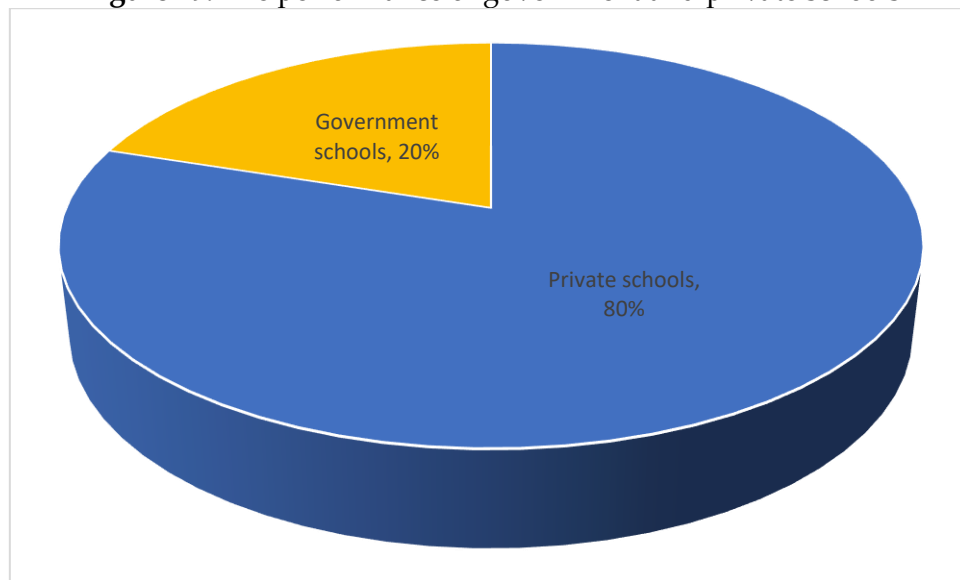
7.5.1 Private Schools Pass Rates

- 2019: 70% (7 out of 10)
 - 2020: 90% (9 out of 10)
 - 2021: 70% (7 out of 10)
 - 2022: 90% (9 out of 10)
 - 2023: 90% (9 out of 10)
- Average Pass Rate: Approximately 80%

7.5.2 Government Schools Pass Rates

- 2019: 10% (1 out of 10)
 - 2020: 20% (2 out of 10)
 - 2021: 30% (3 out of 10)
 - 2022: 30% (3 out of 10)
 - 2023: 30% (3 out of 10)
- Average Pass Rate: Approximately 20%

Figure 19: The performance of government and private schools



Source: WAEC.

Figure 19 illustrates that the percentage passes in English at WASSCE in private schools far outweighs the percentage passes in government schools.

8. Discussion of Findings

8.1 The Performance of Students

The analysis of the findings revealed that students generally performed better on the WASSCE third attempt compared to the previous two attempts, highlighting a general trend of increasing performance across multiple attempts of English Language at WASSCE. These findings are consistent with Don Elger's Theory of Academic Performance, which states that to perform is to produce valued results and that performance is a "*journey not a destination*" (Elger, 2007). He maintains that the location in the journey is labelled as "*level of performance*." Each level characterizes the effectiveness or quality of the performance. In the context of the study, students can perform better if they have learned well; that is, realizing that learning is a skill, and the act of learning is usually done preparatory to a performance; a student learns and then can perform on the basis of what has been learned (Apple & Ellis, 2015). The reasons for the improved performance of students during the third attempt could be that they may have learned to learn (Elger, 2007); gained more knowledge on the subject through education and experience; and embarked on self-motivation that influences performance.

8.2 The Performance of Schools

The analysis of the performance of schools by sex (boys, girls, and mixed schools) over the years 2019-2023 focuses on attempts (total number of students taking the exams) and performance (percentage of students obtaining grades A1-C6 and D7-F9). Across all groups (boys, girls, and mixed), the number of students attempting the exams steadily decreased over time. This might reflect broader trends, such as lower enrolment, fewer students opting for these exams, and higher dropout rates.

The most significant improvement in grades was observed in boys between 2019 and 2022. However, they experienced a sharp decline in performance by 2023, with a notable increase in failure rates. This suggests that, while boys had the most impressive progress up to 2022, their performance regressed in 2023. The performance in girls-only schools showed consistent improvement, with a slight dip in 2023. Their performance was relatively more stable than that of the boys. Although fewer girls have attempted the examination, their academic performance has generally improved over the years. The performance of students from mixed schools followed a trend similar to the overall pattern, with a steady improvement until 2022, followed by a decline in 2023.

In private schools, the probability of a randomly selected student scoring between A1 and C6 remained consistently high, ranging from 70% to 90% each year. Notably, 2020, 2022, and 2023 showed the highest success rates, with nine out of ten students achieving passing scores. Meanwhile, 2019 and 2021 recorded slightly lower success rates, with seven out of ten students passing. Conversely, government schools had significantly lower pass rates. The probability of a randomly selected government school student scoring between A1 and C6 was dramatically lower than that of a private school. In 2019, only one out of 10 students met the benchmark. The slight improvements in 2020

(2 out of 10) and 2021 (3 out of 10) remained marginal, and this trend continued in 2022 and 2023, when the ratio hovered between two or three successful students per 10 to 30 randomly selected candidates.

The findings as it pertains to the performance in English language at WASSCE reveal that irrespective of school type or location, the same pattern is common to all. Despite slight variations in performance between the years and among the sexes, there was a higher percentage and consistency in the failure range (D7 to F9) that dropped across all categories from 2019 to 2022, but increased in 2023. This suggests a possible overall decline in the quality of education or external factors (such as changes in education policies, teaching methods, the impact of the pandemic, or student engagement). These trends offer valuable insights into student performance over time and could help identify areas for intervention to improve educational outcomes in the future.

Vygotsky's constructivist theories, namely collaborative learning, scaffolding and language development, can support educational practices that aim to improve student performance in schools and at the WASSCE. **Collaborative learning** techniques, in which students work together on complex tasks and assist each other within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), can lead to better understanding and retention of material, which is essential for WASSCE.

Teachers can pay close attention to **scaffolding** student learning in English. This requires deep comprehension and critical thinking, which enables students to reach higher levels of understanding. **Language development** plays a vital role in the WASSCE, as communication and articulation of knowledge and experience are key components of English Language examinations. By applying Vygotsky's constructivist theory in the classroom and in schools, students can develop the necessary skills, knowledge, and cognitive strategies to perform effectively not only in English Language but also in all other subjects they offer at the WASSCE.

9. Conclusion

This study analyzed the trends in the performance of students and schools in English Language at the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) in the Western District of Sierra Leone between 2019 and 2023. The findings reveal that many students attempt English Language at WASSCE at least three times and tend to perform better on the third attempt. However, the results show that in all three sittings, the performance of students on the English Language examination at its best is an average of C6. There was also a consistent pattern of poor performance across the schools in the district. Irrespective of school type or location, the same pattern is common to all. These findings have implications for the teaching and learning of English Language in senior secondary schools (SSS), the infrastructure and resources available in schools in the district, the level of engagement of students with the subject and their attitude towards it, and policies and practices that may affect the effective teaching and learning of the

subject in SSS. To reverse this trend, strategic interventions— more robust methods of teaching English, policy reviews, and the promotion of language-rich learning environments—are imperative. Addressing these challenges holistically will not only improve examination outcomes, but also strengthen students’ communicative competence for academic and professional advancement.

9.1 Limitations of the Study

Acknowledging the limitations of this study, the findings may have limited generalizability. The sample size of 145 primary respondents (past WASSCE students) and 21 senior secondary schools was relatively small and may not fully represent the broader population of senior secondary school students and schools in the Western District of Sierra Leone.

10. Recommendations

To address these challenges effectively, a multi-pronged approach to learning outcomes, teaching quality, resource allocation, and school leadership is necessary.

The fact that students tend to perform better only on the third attempt at the WASSCE implies that earlier efforts do not yield optimal results. To address this, the following should be considered:

- a) **Targeted Remediation:** Focused interventions can be implemented after the first attempt, including extra classes, tutoring, and diagnostic testing, to identify gaps.
- b) **Mock Examinations:** Regular mock exams that simulate WASSCE conditions from the first attempt should be organized to reduce exam anxiety and increase familiarity.
- c) **Exam Preparation Skills:** Exam-taking strategies (e.g., time management and question analysis) should be taught earlier in the school year.

Consistent poor English performance in all school types in different locations shows a trend of underachievement in English. For this, the following recommendations are made:

- a) **National Literacy Campaigns:** There could be collaboration with MBSSE and NGOs to launch English literacy initiatives across both rural and urban schools.
- b) **Compulsory Reading Hours:** Dedicated reading periods should be introduced in school timetables.
- c) **Use of Technology:** School administrations could leverage mobile apps, radio lessons, and low-cost tablets to increase access to quality English Language content.

10.1 Future Research

The limitations and biases of this survey suggest potential areas for future research. The sample size was relatively small, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Future studies should involve larger and more diverse populations to better understand the

factors influencing performance in the English language at WASSCE across different student demographics and regions in Sierra Leone. Future studies could employ a more intensive mixed-method approach, combining questionnaires with interviews and focus-group discussions to better understand the underlying reasons for the observed trends in students' and schools' performance.

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Conflicts of Interest Statement

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Disclosure Statement

The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. No financial, professional, or personal relationships influenced the design, execution, analysis, or reporting of the study. The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, or publication of this article. The author conducted independent research. All the procedures followed the ethical standards of the relevant institutional and national research committees. Written permissions for data collection and reporting were obtained from the appropriate authorities and participants.

Data Availability Statement

The quantitative data supporting the findings of this study were obtained from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data collected from human participants are not publicly available due to ethical considerations and confidentiality requirements but may be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Secondary data used in this study are publicly available from the sources cited within the article.

Ethical considerations and Participant Well-being

Ethical considerations were integrated into the design and implementation of this study to safeguard the rights, dignity, and well-being of all participants. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the external examination board. Participation of past WASSCE students in the study was entirely voluntary, and written informed consent was secured from all participants prior to their inclusion in the study. Participants were provided with detailed information regarding the purpose of the research, the procedures involved, and the intended dissemination of the findings. They were made aware that their names, grades or schools would not appear in any publication, although some direct quotes and/or identifiable information may appear in academic publications and presentations. Participants were informed of their right to decline participation or

withdraw their consent prior to publication without penalty. Signed consent forms were collected and securely stored by the researcher.

To protect participant wellbeing, the research instruments were designed to minimize potential discomfort or harm. No intrusive or sensitive questions were included, and data collection procedures were conducted in a manner that respected participants' time and personal circumstances. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained; no identifying information was collected, and all responses were coded to prevent linkage to individual participants.

Data were stored securely in password-protected electronic files accessible only to the researcher, and all data were used solely for academic purposes. In cases where secondary data were utilised, these were obtained from publicly available and ethically approved sources, with appropriate acknowledgement and citation.

Overall, the study adhered to established ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice, ensuring that participants were not exposed to undue risk and that their contributions were treated with integrity and respect.

Author Contribution Statement

The author conceptualized the study, designed the methodology, collected and analyzed the data, and wrote and revised the manuscript. This paper is an extract from a recently concluded thesis for the award of a degree of Master of Philosophy (MPhil) in Education.

Ethical Approval Statement

Research was conducted in partial fulfillment for the award of an MPhil degree in education titled: "An analysis of students' performance in English language at the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) in the Western District of Sierra Leone (2019 to 2023)" This article submitted to your journal is an extract from this thesis. To conduct this research, no formal or written ethical approval statement from the University or an independent review board was received. Working with supervisors, questionnaires were drawn, validated, tested and administered. In the opening paragraphs of the questionnaire, written consent was sought, and anonymity was assured to all participants after they were provided with clear information about the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. To obtain data from the external examinations board, an official letter was written to the Head of the National Office (HNO) in Sierra Leone, and permission was granted to use the data, but no official letter was written.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Michaela Denison-George (Mrs.) is Head of the Writing, Learning and Foundation Studies Centre at the Institute of Public Administration and Management (IPAM), University of Sierra Leone (USL). She is the co-founder of the IPAM Writing Centre and the Foundations Studies Unit, which she has managed since their inception in 2017 and 2021, respectively. She holds a Master of Philosophy (MPhil) degree in Education, a Master's degree in Business Administration (MBA) from the Institute of Public Administration and Management, a Postgraduate Diploma in Education (DipEd) and a Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree from Fourah Bay College. She is currently a PhD student at the Division of Educational Studies, Fourah Bay College. She taught English Language, English Literature and French at her alma mater, Methodist Girls' High School for 23 years and was Vice Principal of the Senior Secondary Division between 2009 and 2016. She was appointed lecturer at IPAM in February, 2016. She teaches Communication Skills, Technical Writing, Ethics and Professionalism, Critical Thinking and Academic Success Skills. She serves in the Examinations Unit, the Academic & Career Advisory, Counselling and Student Complaints Unit (ACACS); in the current DVC's Debt Recovery Committee and the former DVC's 2023 Agenda Committee to promote student enrichment activities. She was a visiting scholar to the University of Tampa, Florida (USA) in 2019, where she delivered a paper on *Teaching in a Post-War, Post-Ebola Environment: Challenges, Opportunities and Solutions*. Her research interests are in the area of Education, particularly the teaching and learning process. She serves as an education and Learning assessment consultant in many education projects in the country. Her publications include:

1. English Language & Communication Skills – *A Reference Guide for First Year College Students*. Sierra Leone Writers Series (SLWS), 2020.
<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B08R4XP2K>
2. Multilingualism and Social well-being – The Sierra Leone 'wan pot': The official, the lingua franca and the indigenous. In D. Smakman, J. A. Anderson & G. N. Ansah (Eds.), *Multilingualism and Wellbeing* (pp. 149-161). Routledge, 2026.
<https://www.routledge.com/Multilingualism-and-Wellbeing/Smakman-Anderson-Ansah/p/book/9781032535425>

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