



FAIRNESS AND VALIDITY OF THE WEST AFRICAN SENIOR SCHOOL CERTIFICATE EXAMINATION IN SIERRA LEONE: A DOCUMENTARY ANALYSIS OF POLICY, MEDIA AND EXAMINATION REPORTS

ISSA JOHN GBLA ¹

¹ FREETOWN POLYTECHNIC, FREETOWN, SIERRA LEONE (ORCID: 0009-0007-3625-0158).

ABSTRACT:

High-stakes examinations such as the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) play a decisive role in shaping access to tertiary education, employment and social mobility in Sierra Leone. In recent years, public debates about withheld results, examination malpractice and unequal learning conditions have raised fresh questions about how fair and valid WASSCE is perceived to be. This article explores these questions through a qualitative documentary analysis of publicly available policy and curriculum documents, examination regulations and chief examiners' reports, ministerial press releases and national media coverage relating to WASSCE between 2015 and 2025. Guided by a multi-dimensional framework that links procedural, distributive, interactional and substantive fairness to perceived validity, the analysis identifies five interrelated themes. The documents portray WASSCE as a highly valued but anxiety-inducing credential; point to procedural fairness concerns around registration processes, malpractice investigations and withheld results; highlight tensions between curriculum intentions, constrained classroom conditions and demanding examination requirements; and show how limited feedback and restricted participation in standard-setting and moderation may weaken stakeholders' sense of voice. At the same time, emerging reforms are framed as attempts to strengthen credibility, security and fairness. Overall, the findings suggest that perceptions of fairness and validity are shaped not only by test scores and technical quality, but also by how rules are applied, communicated and experienced by candidates, schools and communities.

KEYWORDS:

WASSCE, EXAMINATION FAIRNESS, VALIDITY, SIERRA LEONE, WAEC, HIGH-STAKES ASSESSMENT.

PAPER ACCEPTED DATE:

3rd December 2025

PAPER PUBLISHED DATE:

8th December 2025

PAPER DOI NO:

10.5281/zenodo.17856355

PAPER DOI LINK:

<https://zenodo.org/records/17856355>

1. INTRODUCTION

Across Anglophone West Africa, the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) is the primary credential used to select candidates for university, teacher education, nursing programmes and many entry-level jobs. In Sierra Leone, WASSCE represents the culmination of twelve years of schooling and carries enormous symbolic and material weight for young people and their families (MBSSE, 2020; WAEC, n.d.). A handful of examination grades can open or close pathways to tertiary education, formal employment and social mobility.

Because of these high stakes, questions about whether WASSCE is fair and valid are not merely technical matters for psychometricians. They are everyday concerns for students who worry about leaked papers or withheld results, for teachers who organise extra classes and 'mock exams' to prepare their candidates and for policy-makers who must defend the credibility of national results (Rossiter, 2023; Supartini et al., 2025). Perceived unfairness whether rooted in registration problems,

suspensions of malpractice, inconsistent communication or the difficulty level of papers can erode trust in both the examination council and the wider education system (Forum News Sierra Leone, 2025; Sierraloaded, 2024, 2025).

In measurement theory, fairness is now recognised as a foundational component of validity rather than an optional add-on. Contemporary frameworks conceptualise fairness as encompassing the absence of bias, equitable treatment of candidates, appropriate accommodations, transparency of procedures and the just distribution of assessment-related benefits and burdens (Baniasadi et al., 2021; Herman & Cook, 2019; Language Testing in Asia, 2022; Rasooli et al., 2019). Validity, in turn, concerns the degree to which interpretations and uses of test scores are supported by evidence and are appropriate for their intended purposes. When students and teachers experience examination processes as opaque or inequitable, the perceived validity of the scores can be

compromised even when technical quality is high.

Recent developments in Sierra Leone have brought these issues into sharp focus. Public debate has intensified around the withholding of large numbers of WASSCE results due to alleged malpractice or unpaid fees and around new ministerial rules intended to curb examination fraud and strengthen admission procedures (Forum News Sierra Leone, 2025; MBSSE, 2024; Sierraloaded, 2024, 2025). At the same time, WASSCE chief examiners' reports continue to highlight chronic weaknesses in candidates' performance that reflect misalignments between curriculum intentions, classroom practices and examination demands (MBSSE, 2019, 2020).

Despite the centrality of WASSCE to life chances in Sierra Leone, there is still limited scholarly work that brings together the lived perceptions of students and teachers with contemporary theories of fairness and validity. Existing empirical studies on fairness tend to focus on classroom assessment or higher education contexts, often outside Africa (Bazvand & Rasooli, 2022; Rezai, 2022; Supartini et al., 2025), leaving a gap in understanding how high-stakes regional examinations such as WASSCE are experienced on the ground.

This article responds to that gap by synthesising diverse documentary sources related to WASSCE in Sierra Leone including policy texts, examination reports and media accounts through the lens of fairness and validity. It asks: How do students, teachers and other stakeholders, as represented in available documents, appear to perceive the fairness and validity of WASSCE processes and outcomes in Sierra Leone? What themes emerge about the relationship between examination procedures and the broader goals of equitable, learning-oriented education? As shown in Figure 1, the analysis is guided by a conceptual framework that links WASSCE structures and processes, key dimensions of fairness and resulting perceptions of exam validity.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Given the limited availability of systematically collected perception data on WASSCE in Sierra Leone, this study adopted a qualitative documentary analysis and narrative review design. Rather than administering new surveys or interviews, it brought together and interpreted existing texts in which students, teachers, policy-makers and other actors express views or make decisions that touch on the fairness and validity of WASSCE (Forum News Sierra Leone, 2025; MBSSE, 2019, 2024; Sierraloaded, 2024, 2025; WAEC, various years). This design is appropriate when the aim is to illuminate how a high-stakes examination is framed, justified and contested across different public arenas, rather than to estimate population-level perception rates (Baniyadi et al., 2021; Language Testing in Asia, 2022).

The documentary corpus comprised four main types of sources covering approximately 2015–2025: (1) WASSCE chief examiners' reports and official analyses disseminated by the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education

(MBSSE) and the West African Examinations Council (WAEC); (2) national curriculum and policy documents that locate WASSCE within Sierra Leone's assessment system; (3) ministerial press releases, speeches and regulations relating to examination security, registration, admission rules and the handling of withheld results; and (4) media reports and opinion pieces from major Sierra Leonean news outlets that amplify the voices and experiences of students, parents and teachers in relation to WASSCE (Forum News Sierra Leone, 2025; MBSSE, 2019, 2020, 2024; Sierraloaded, 2024, 2025; WAEC, various years).

Documents were identified through manual searches of the MBSSE and WAEC websites, targeted keyword searches of online news platforms, and consultation of bibliographies from relevant academic publications. Inclusion criteria were that a document (a) explicitly referenced WASSCE in Sierra Leone and (b) contained description, commentary or data relating to at least one of the following: registration processes, examination conduct and security, malpractice investigations and sanctions, result release and withholding, curriculum or syllabus alignment, or interpretations of candidate performance and standards. Where multiple versions of similar documents existed, preference was given to the most recent versions. In total, around 25 documents, including 8 chief examiners' reports, 6 policy texts, 5 ministerial press releases and 6 media articles, were reviewed.

To frame the analysis, the study drew on fairness as a multi-dimensional construct embedded within validity arguments. Organisational-justice perspectives informed the focus on procedural fairness (consistency and transparency of rules and processes), distributive fairness (perceived justice in the allocation of outcomes and opportunities), and interactional fairness (respectful, informative communication with candidates and schools) (Baniyadi et al., 2021; Rasooli, Zandi, & DeLuca, 2019). In addition, substantive fairness alignment between test demands, curriculum expectations and students' opportunities to learn was treated as a key aspect of validity (Herman & Cook, 2019; MBSSE, 2020). These dimensions guided both the coding scheme and the interpretation of themes.

All included documents were read iteratively and coded manually for references to the above dimensions of fairness and validity. Text segments describing stakeholder reactions, perceived problems, commendations or reform proposals were first assigned open codes. Through constant comparison within and across source types, these initial codes were gradually grouped into broader categories, which were then refined into a set of cross-cutting themes presented in the Results section. Throughout this process, attention was paid to convergences and tensions between official policy narratives, technical reports and media portrayals, recognising that each genre highlights particular aspects of the examination system (Bazvand & Rasooli, 2022; Language Testing in Asia, 2022).

To enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis, sources were compared across policy, examination and media domains, and attention was paid to both converging and diverging accounts. Coding decisions and developing interpretations were documented so that links between particular documents, codes and the final themes remained as transparent as possible. Although the analysis necessarily reflects the researcher's interpretive stance, returning repeatedly to the full texts and checking emerging themes against raw excerpts helped to ensure that claims stayed grounded in what the documents actually say.

Because the study relied exclusively on publicly available documents and did not involve direct contact with human participants, formal ethics committee approval was not required. Nonetheless, care was taken to represent quoted views accurately, attribute all sources appropriately and avoid sensationalising individual experiences. The aim of the analysis is not to judge specific schools or individuals, but to draw attention to systemic patterns that may influence how the fairness and validity of WASSCE are perceived in Sierra Leone.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework that guided the analysis. It organises the discussion into three linked domains: (a) the broader WASSCE context and structures, (b) key dimensions of assessment fairness, and (c) perceived validity and consequences for learners, teachers and the education system.

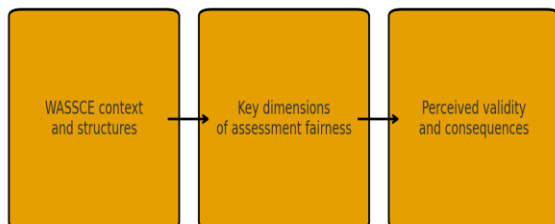


FIGURE 1: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR FAIRNESS AND VALIDITY OF WASSCE IN SIERRA LEONE, LINKING EXAMINATION CONTEXT AND STRUCTURES TO KEY DIMENSIONS OF ASSESSMENT FAIRNESS AND TO PERCEIVED VALIDITY AND CONSEQUENCES FOR LEARNERS, TEACHERS AND THE EDUCATION SYSTEM.

4. RESULTS

The documentary analysis yielded five interrelated themes concerning how students, teachers and other stakeholders are likely to perceive the fairness and validity of WASSCE in Sierra Leone. These themes cut across different types of sources and reflect both long-standing concerns and more recent developments in policy and practice (Forum News Sierra Leone, 2025; MBSSE, 2019, 2024; Sierraloaded,

2024, 2025; WAEC, various years).

4.1. WASSCE AS A HIGHLY VALUED BUT ANXIETY-INDUCING CREDENTIAL

Across policy texts and media reports, WASSCE is consistently portrayed as a life-defining examination. Official statements from MBSSE emphasise its role as the principal credential for entry into universities, professional training and many public-sector careers (MBSSE, 2020; WAEC, various years). News stories covering the release of results highlight scenes of celebration when students achieve required grades alongside distress, shame and uncertainty for those who fall short (Forum News Sierra Leone, 2025). This dual image positions WASSCE simultaneously as a symbol of academic achievement and as a major source of psychological pressure for young people and their families.

Documents also suggest that schools and teachers respond to this high-stakes environment by intensifying examination preparation, with references to extra classes, practice tests and holiday coaching being common. While such efforts can be interpreted as signs of commitment to pupil success, they also reinforce perceptions that much depends on navigating the specific demands of WASSCE rather than on broader learning outcomes. In fairness terms, this theme underscores the powerful gatekeeping function of the examination and the emotional burden it places on candidates, even when its technical quality is not in question (Rossiter, 2023; Supartini et al., 2025).

4.2. PROCEDURAL FAIRNESS CONCERNS AROUND REGISTRATION, MALPRACTICE AND WITHHELD RESULTS

A prominent theme, particularly in recent media coverage, concerns frustration over procedures relating to registration, malpractice investigations and the withholding of results. Reports of candidates discovering that their entire set of grades has been marked as "withheld" without a timely, detailed explanation appear frequently in news stories and social-media commentary (Forum News Sierra Leone, 2025; Sierraloaded, 2024). Parents and school leaders question whether rules are applied consistently across schools and districts, and whether affected candidates have accessible avenues to appeal decisions or seek clarification.

Official communiqués from MBSSE and WAEC emphasise that strict regulations are required to deter and penalise examination malpractice, and they describe mechanisms such as national examination committees to review irregularities (MBSSE, 2019, 2024; WAEC, various years). However, the documents rarely provide granular detail about how evidence is evaluated in specific cases or how long investigations will take. From a fairness perspective, this combination of strong sanctions and limited transparency can erode perceptions of procedural justice, even when authorities act in good faith to protect examination integrity (Bazvand & Rasooli, 2022; Rasooli et al., 2019).

4.3. TENSIONS BETWEEN CURRICULUM, TEACHING CONDITIONS AND EXAMINATION DEMANDS

Curriculum documents and WASSCE chief examiners' reports reveal ongoing tensions between the intended senior secondary curriculum and the realities of classroom teaching. Recurrent comments note gaps in coverage of certain topics, limited time for higher-order problem-solving tasks and uneven access to qualified teachers and learning resources across schools (MBSSE, 2019, 2020). These structural constraints mean that some candidates may face examination items for which they have had fewer opportunities to learn or practise during regular instruction.

From the standpoint of substantive fairness and validity, such misalignments raise questions about the extent to which WASSCE results reflect differences in student ability versus differences in exposure to curriculum content and instructional quality (Baniyadi et al., 2021; Herman & Cook, 2019). When students encounter item formats, contexts or cognitive demands that were not emphasised in classroom teaching, they may perceive the examination as "unfair", even if items meet technical specifications. Documents in the corpus point to this tension indirectly through repeated calls for better curriculum implementation, remedial programmes and strengthened teacher support.

4.4. LIMITED FEEDBACK AND RESTRICTED PARTICIPATION IN STANDARD-SETTING AND MODERATION

Another recurrent theme is the limited access that most classroom teachers and candidates have to detailed feedback on WASSCE performance and to processes of standard-setting or moderation. Chief examiners' reports contain valuable information about common errors, strengths and weaknesses, yet the documents suggest that these reports are not systematically disseminated or used in school-level professional development. Many teachers may only encounter them informally or not at all (MBSSE, 2019; Language Testing in Asia, 2022).

Moreover, participation in formal moderation or standard-setting activities appears restricted to a small group of examiners and officials. While this may be necessary for security reasons, it can contribute to perceptions among frontline teachers that they are excluded from important decisions about performance standards and grade boundaries. In organisational-justice terms, such limited opportunities for voice and dialogue can weaken feelings of interactional fairness, even if the resulting standards are technically robust (Bazvand & Rasooli, 2022; Rasooli et al., 2019).

4.5. EMERGING REFORMS THAT FOREGROUND CREDIBILITY, SECURITY AND FAIRNESS

At the same time, the documents reveal signs of positive change. MBSSE has introduced new admission and registration rules for WAEC classes, explicitly framed as measures to curb examination malpractice and strengthen fairness and credibility (MBSSE, 2024; Sierraloaded,

2025). Public communication from the ministry increasingly emphasises zero tolerance for exam fraud, the importance of accurate documentation and the need for schools to meet clear criteria before presenting candidates for WASSCE.

Joint statements by MBSSE, the Council of Principals of Secondary Schools and WAEC stress collaborative approaches to safeguarding examination integrity and rebuilding public trust. These reforms suggest that fairness and validity concerns are recognised at system level and that authorities are taking steps to address them. However, the extent to which these initiatives will translate into improved perceptions among students and teachers remains an open empirical question that warrants further monitoring and research (Baniyadi et al., 2021; Rossiter, 2023).

5. DISCUSSION

The themes identified in this documentary analysis show that perceptions of WASSCE fairness and validity in Sierra Leone arise from the combined influence of technical, procedural and socio-political factors. Consistent with contemporary fairness frameworks, stakeholders are concerned not only with the statistical soundness of test items but also with how clearly rules are communicated and applied, how consequences are distributed, and whether examinations acknowledge candidates' actual opportunities to learn (Baniyadi et al., 2021; Herman & Cook, 2019; Rasooli et al., 2019).

Procedural fairness is especially salient. For candidates whose results are withheld because of suspected malpractice or administrative problems, the immediate problem is the delay, but the deeper grievance is often the absence of transparent information and timely redress (Forum News Sierra Leone, 2025; Sierraloaded, 2024, 2025). From an organisational-justice perspective, perceptions of unfairness are intensified when people feel excluded from decisions and when explanations for adverse outcomes are vague or inaccessible. Addressing this dimension of fairness therefore means pairing rigorous investigation of malpractice with clear communication protocols, accessible appeals mechanisms and proactive engagement with schools and communities (Bazvand & Rasooli, 2022; Supartini et al., 2025).

Substantive fairness and validity are also implicated where there are misalignments between curriculum intentions, classroom practices and examination demands. When senior secondary schooling is dominated by narrow examination coaching, teaching can drift towards test-taking strategies rather than deeper conceptual understanding. At the same time, when WASSCE tasks require forms of reasoning or content coverage that many schools especially under-resourced or rural ones struggle to provide, poor performance is easily interpreted as evidence of systemic inequity rather than individual ability (MBSSE, 2019, 2020; Rossiter, 2023).

The limited dissemination and use of chief examiners' reports illustrate how the assessment system

under-utilises existing feedback loops. These reports contain rich information about common misconceptions, gaps in syllabus coverage and areas of relative strength in candidates' responses (MBSSE, 2019). Integrated into regular professional development, school self-review and subject-association activities, they could help teachers feel more connected to the assessment system and better equipped to prepare students in fair and intentional ways (Herman & Cook, 2019; Language Testing in Asia, 2022).

International literature suggests that many of these fairness concerns are not unique to WASSCE. Studies of summative assessment elsewhere report similar unease about opaque grading criteria, perceived bias and limited opportunities to challenge results (Bazvand & Rasooli, 2022; Rezai, 2022; Supartini et al., 2025). What distinguishes WASSCE is the combination of extremely high stakes, regional governance by a multi-country examinations council and long-standing inequalities in school resourcing and access (MBSSE, 2020; WAEC, various years).

These patterns add a distinct West African perspective to wider debates on fairness in high-stakes testing. Much of the existing literature concentrates on large-scale assessments in North America, Europe or parts of Asia, whereas this analysis brings together policy, examination and media voices from Sierra Leone in a single framework. In doing so, it shows how a multi-dimensional fairness lens can be applied to documentary sources, offering a bridge between conceptual discussions of fairness and the everyday politics of a regional school-leaving examination that shapes young people's futures.

Taken together, the findings point to the need for a more explicit fairness agenda for WASSCE in Sierra Leone. Such an agenda would move beyond a narrow focus on security to include greater transparency in rules and procedures, structured opportunities for teacher participation in item development and standard-setting, wider dissemination and use of examiner feedback, and targeted support for schools whose candidates consistently under-perform in ways that indicate constrained opportunities to learn (Baniyadi et al., 2021; Herman & Cook, 2019; Rasooli et al., 2019).

Finally, there is a clear need for systematic empirical research that directly captures the voices of students and teachers through surveys, focus groups and interviews. Documentary analysis provides an important starting point, but it cannot substitute fully for perception studies that quantify and compare fairness and validity judgements across groups and regions. Future work could adapt and validate existing fairness questionnaires for the West African context and link perception data with examination performance and school-level characteristics (Language Testing in Asia, 2022; Rezai, 2022; Supartini et al., 2025).

6. CONCLUSION

This article has explored how the fairness and validity of WASSCE in Sierra Leone are portrayed and experienced in

recent policy documents, examination reports and media accounts. The analysis suggests that while WASSCE remains a highly valued credential that many stakeholders see as essential for national development and individual advancement, its legitimacy is periodically strained by controversies over registration, malpractice allegations, withheld results and perceived misalignments between teaching and testing (Forum News Sierra Leone, 2025; MBSSE, 2019, 2024; Sierraloaded, 2024, 2025).

From a fairness-and-validity perspective, three broad messages emerge. First, technical quality alone is not enough; students and teachers also need to see procedures as transparent, consistent and responsive (Baniyadi et al., 2021; Herman & Cook, 2019). Second, examinations must be anchored in realistic opportunities to learn, which requires close alignment between curriculum, instruction and assessment, especially in under-resourced schools (MBSSE, 2020; WAEC, various years). Third, communication and feedback channels should be widened so that stakeholders can understand how standards are set, how results are interpreted and how concerns can be addressed (Bazvand & Rasooli, 2022; Language Testing in Asia, 2022).

For policy-makers and examination authorities, strengthening the fairness validity nexus of WASSCE in Sierra Leone will involve sustained collaboration with schools, teacher educators, civil society and candidates themselves. Practical steps may include simplifying and publicising registration and malpractice-handling procedures; providing user-friendly summaries of chief examiners' reports; offering targeted professional development on assessment literacy; and investing in research that links examination outcomes to broader indicators of educational quality and equity (Herman & Cook, 2019; Rasooli et al., 2019; Supartini et al., 2025).

By taking fairness seriously conceptually, procedurally and substantively Sierra Leone can enhance public trust in WASSCE and move closer to an assessment system that not only certifies learning but also promotes it. The reflections in this paper are intended as a starting point for ongoing dialogue and evidence-informed reform, rather than as a final verdict on the examination's quality. Ultimately, any durable solution must be grounded in the voices and experiences of the students/candidates and teachers whose futures are most directly shaped by WASSCE.

FUNDING: This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST: The author declares that there are no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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