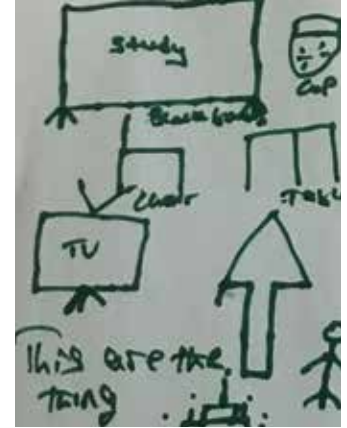




Leh Wi Lan
Sierra Leone
Back to School Study 2020



Source: JSS/SSS pupil drawings on their activities during school closure (BTS, 2020)

Back to School Study

Mixed Methods Technical Report – 2020





Acknowledgments

The Back to School (BTS) study is a unique research conducted in unique circumstances. It took place following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated school closures in an attempt to capture this shock through robust data. The study is also unique in that unlike previous rounds of learning assessments conducted in Sierra Leone, ongoing global travel restrictions meant that the BTS study training and fieldwork was managed and delivered almost entirely out of Freetown – this makes the successful completion of the BTS research all the more significant and serves as an accolade to their work and capability.

This report owes its deepest debt to the pupils, school and community representatives and education officials for their trust, time and patience in participating in the research in the context of the global pandemic and very recent reopening of schools.

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Several members of Leh wi Lan's monitoring, research and learning workstream ("Output 5") and Oxford Policy Management (OPM) contributed tirelessly at various stages of the design, implementation and analysis of this study: Sourovi De (Project Manager); Zara Durrani (BTS Study Lead); Diana Ofori-Owusu (M&E Coordinator); Reg Allen (Assessment Development Lead); David Megill (Sampling Lead); Ayesha Khurshid (Survey Manager and Quantitative Lead); Gloria Olisenekwu (Qualitative Analyst); and Ishleen Sethi (Quantitative Analyst). Sincere thanks as well to Sonu Shrestha and Lucy Parsons for unwavering operational support with contracts, budgets, and logistics.

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This report has been written by Zara Durrani, Ayesha Khurshid, Ishleen Sethi, Gloria Olisenekwu, Sourovi De, and designed by Terry Nightingale.



About the Back to School (BTS) Study

Leh wi Lan/Sierra Leone Secondary Education Improvement Programme (SSEIP) is a five-year (2016-2021) UK-aid funded programme aimed at improving English and mathematics learning achievement in all secondary schools of Sierra Leone, especially for girls. As part of MBSSE's recovery priorities following the COVID-19 crisis in Sierra Leone, the Back to School (BTS) study was designed to use quantitative and qualitative evidence to guide the recovery of the education sector following the outbreak. The BTS study was designed and implemented by Leh wi Lan's monitoring, evidence and research workstream in close collaboration with the Sierra Leone Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE). Any views and opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of Change to UK Foreign and Commonwealth Development Office (FCDO) or MBSSE.

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Note: This report is based on data collected in Oct-Nov 2020.



Preface: Message from the Minister's Desk

Education has been of paramount importance for MBSSE during this administration's response to the COVID-19 crisis. It is the cornerstone of the Sierra Leone National Development Plan 2019-2023. We have to do everything to ensure that children continue on the path they were on before schools closed.

Sierra Leonean children have been facing shocks to their education since Ebola, with COVID-19 being the latest disturbance to education in Sierra Leone. We hope that the FQSE not only encourages pupils to return to school but ensures that all children have equal access to free quality school education. The FQSE has already led to more schools and teachers getting approved; improved learning environment through distribution of teaching and learning materials; better school and classroom infrastructure; review of service conditions for teachers; and measures against examination malpractice. We must not allow school closures due to COVID-19 affect what we have already achieved. We hope that, through the FQSE, children in all parts of Sierra Leone continue to learn useful skills, whether they are girls, boys, poor, or rich.

Through this document, the Back to School Study, we have an assessment of what pupils in junior secondary and senior secondary schools across the country can do in English and mathematics after a long period of school closures. This will allow us to prepare them for the Basic Education Certificate Examination and the West African Senior Secondary Certificate Examination.

Further, we are able to state what pupils in our schools know and identify which groups of pupils are lagging behind. Not many countries have this kind of rich and robust data on the learning and well-being status of secondary grade pupils. It gives us pointers on the effectiveness of the radio teaching programme, and pupil handbooks and gives a clear picture of the challenges that pupils face when they are out of school. This will allow us to effectively manage the return of pupils to school.

While the report has outlined some successes, it has also pointed out deep challenges that my officials in the Ministry will work to address. Our utmost priority is the safe return of pupils to school. They have faced many challenges during the last few months. All of us as Sierra Leoneans have a role to play in addressing these challenges: as community members, teachers, principals, parents and pupils. Addressing them will help our children learn better and do well in public exams, and eventually contribute to nation-building.

I do thank the UK government's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office for their support with the Back to School Study and look forward to further productive collaboration.

Dr David Moinina Sengeh

Minister of Basic and Senior Secondary Education



Executive Summary

About the Leh wi Lan programme

Leh wi Lan, also called the Sierra Leone Secondary Education Improvement Programme (SSEIP), aims to help the government of Sierra Leone address challenges in secondary education. It is a five-year (2016-2021) FCDO funded programme aimed at supporting Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) to achieve sustained improvements in girls' education and secondary grade learning outcomes. Leh wi Lan provides support to learning conditions, MBSSE and district capacity to plan, monitor, and manage service delivery, and capacity for monitoring, learning and research. During the COVID-19 crisis, Leh wi Lan has supported MBSSE in its response and recovery efforts to improve learning conditions once children return to school.

As part of the monitoring, research, and learning work stream of Leh wi Lan, annual secondary grade learning assessments (SGLA) aim to provide an annual "health check of the secondary education system" in Sierra Leone. They track changes in the state of pupil learning achievement, teaching practices, and the school's learning environment. The SGLAs report at the national, regional and district level on an annual basis. The first SGLA I was conducted in 2017, with follow-ups in 2018 and 2019.

In light of the closure of schools and the resultant loss of the usual SGLA timeline, a mixed-methods 'Back to School' (BTS) study was conducted under the Leh wi Lan programme in consultation with the MBSSE immediately after schools re-opened in October 2020. The BTS study provides a unique opportunity to use evidence to guide MBSSE's and LWL's COVID response, recovery, and reform priorities by providing additional, rigorous, policy-relevant and, to our knowledge, previously unmeasured estimates of the impact of school closures on learning and child well-being.

Learning and child-wellbeing in the COVID-19 context

During the COVID-19 outbreak, schools were closed for six months on 31st March, and reopened on 5th October. During this time, nearly two million pre-primary and primary, 450,000 junior secondary and 300,000 senior secondary pupils were not attending school. However, this is not new to Sierra Leone – in 2014-15, schools shut for nearly nine months due to Ebola. Sierra Leone's own experience with Ebola cautions us that COVID-19 will have wide-reaching impacts on education, both in terms of children's learning as well as their general safety and well-being. To lessen the above adverse effects, MBSSE launched an immediate and proactive response to protect pupils and their education. This included:

- **Response:** school closure to prevent infection transmission; radio lessons were started within the week; community sensitisation programmes on girls' safety were organised, and dry take-home rations were distributed to the most vulnerable communities;
- **Recovery:** To promote learning recovery as schools reopen post-COVID, the three examinations classes (i.e. P6 for NPSE, JSS3 for BECE and SSS3 for WASSCE) returned to school; and
- **Reform:** Long-term reform and system resilience to make education systems stronger and more inclusive than in the pre-COVID period.

In addition, on the 30th of March 2020, the MBSSE formally overturned the ban on pregnant girls attending schools and sitting exams with immediate effect. This policy had been in place since 2015 following the spike in teen pregnancies following the Ebola outbreak. Its revocation, and replacement with two new policies focused on 'Radical Inclusion' and 'Comprehensive Safety' of all children in the education system, is a big step towards ensuring that no child would be excluded from resuming their education once schools reopened.

About the Back to School Study

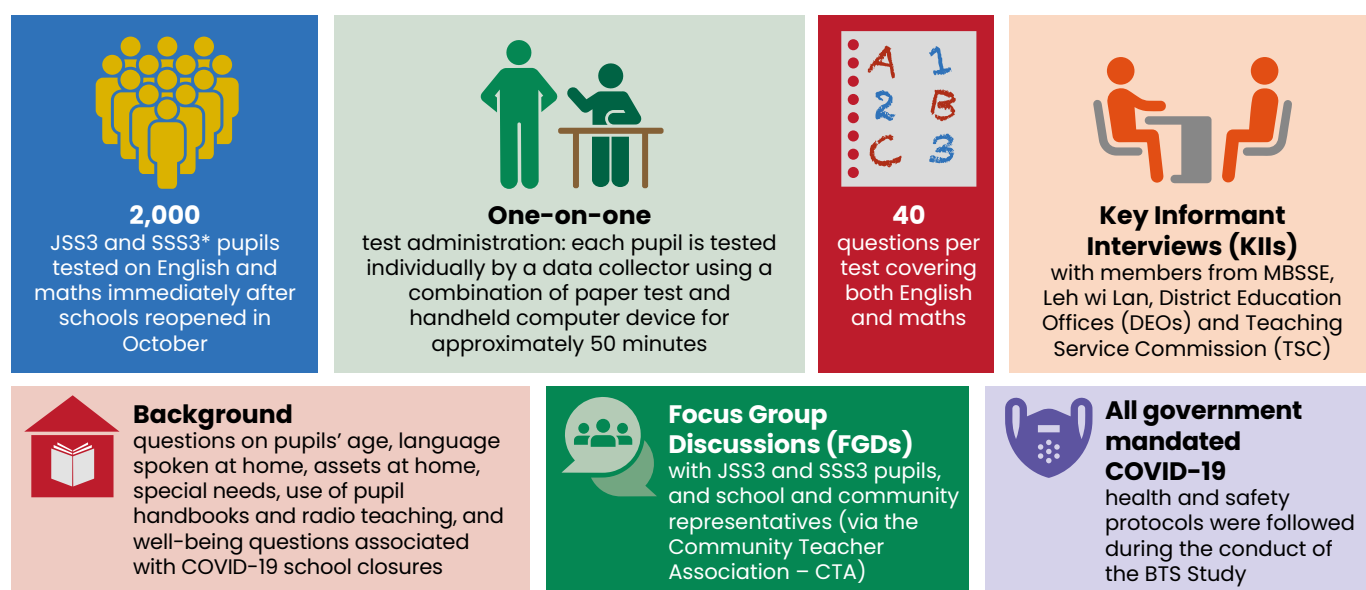
To assess learning outcomes among secondary school pupils after a long period of school closures due to COVID-19, the BTS study aims to provide MBSSE with robust nationally- and regional-level representative data on learning at the JSS3 and SSS3 levels in English and maths to constitute an input into developing Sierra Leone's education sector response to COVID-19.



In light of the overarching aim of the study, the key objectives of the Back to School study are to:

- Understand how school closure affected children's learning (including information on learning loss; resources used, equity and inclusion);
- Understand issues around child safety and wellbeing as well as available support mechanisms during school closure (and now that schools are open) particularly for girls and children with disabilities; and
- Guide MBSSE and other stakeholders' response and longer-term recovery priorities with the best data and evidence available.

Many of the questions that were the focus of this study (e.g. child well-being, girls' safety, parental support to learning during lockdown) lent themselves more suitably to qualitative research, while some questions (e.g. status of learning following school closures) required quantitative learning assessments. As such, a simultaneous mixed methods study was conducted with a quantitative and qualitative component. The key features are represented in the figure below



*JSS3 and SSS3 are examination grades for BECE and WASSCE, respectively.

More on the BTS Study

- Overview of the scope and design: **Sections 2.1 and 2.2**
- About the BTS timeline and the journey so far: **Section 2.6**

Pupil learning: What do pupils know and how has this been affected by school closure?

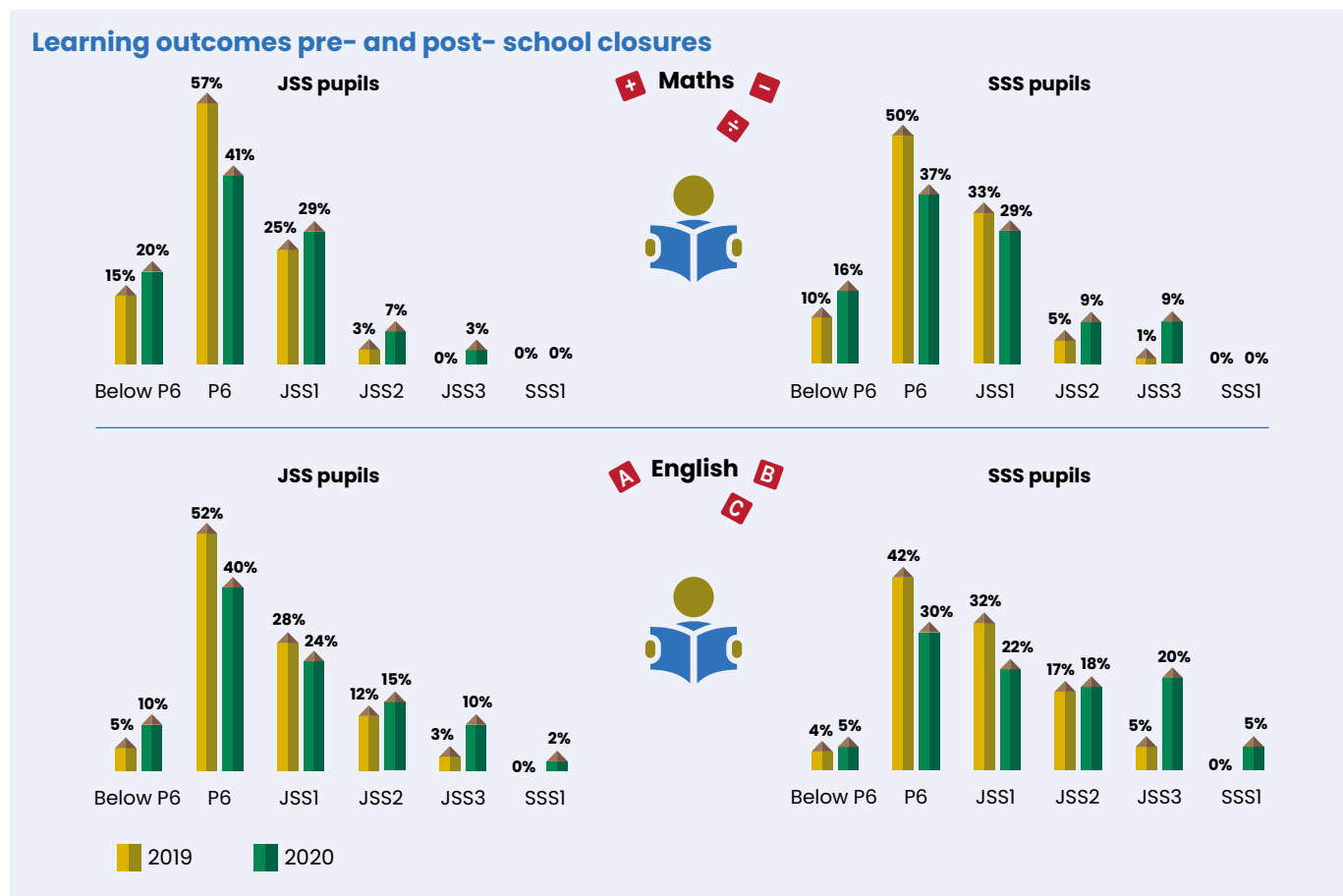
To see the impact of COVID-19 on learning levels requires a comparison of pupil performance for the same cohort of children before and after the school closure. The BTS study was designed in such a way that the SGLA 2019 cohort could serve as a close (but not perfect) 'pre-COVID' comparison to the 'post-COVID' results of the BTS study. Direct comparisons are difficult to make given that the tests were administered to different grades, and at different times of the academic year. Pupils' test scores were sorted into six grade specific performance bands or levels. To achieve a performance band or level means that pupils in the particular band are more likely than not to be able to demonstrate the skills linked to that particular grade (as per the national curriculum) but are very likely to struggle with skills demanded by the curriculum in any higher grade.

In general, pupil learning performance was better in the BTS (2020) study when seen in relation to SGLA (2019), although children are still significantly behind grade level expectations and school closure may indeed have exacerbated previous inequalities.



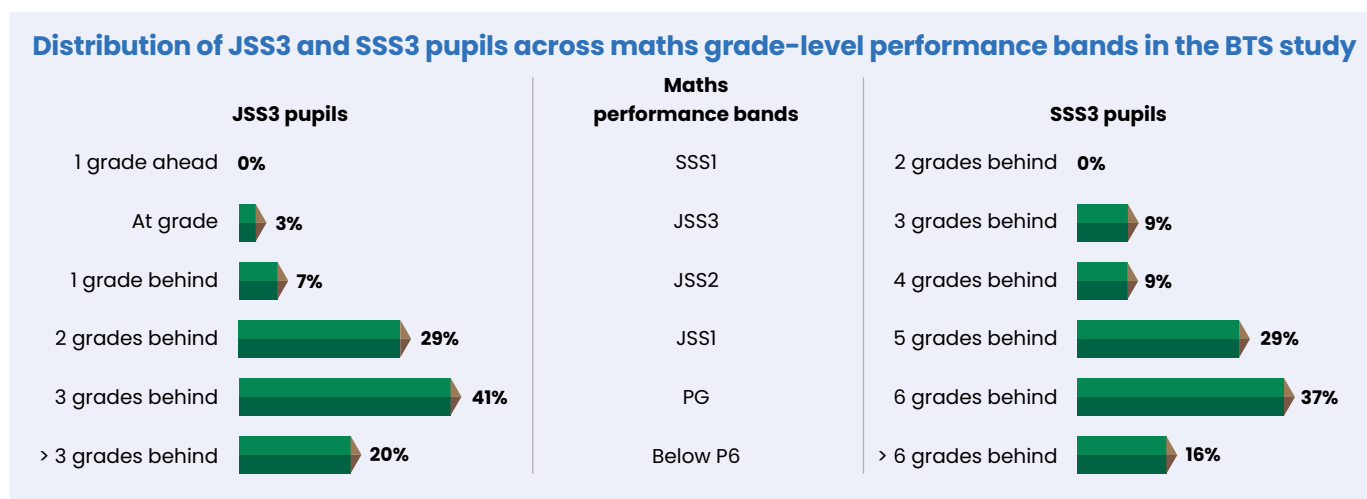
Major learning loss has been avoided following school closure

With the limitations of the comparison in mind, more pupils in 2020 achieved higher competency levels for both English and maths, and at both JSS3 and SSS3 levels compared to SGLA 2019. This is represented in the figure below. However, while Sierra Leone appears to have averted a large learning loss after COVID in this sense, learning performance as a whole remains poor and well below grade-level expectations. There still exists a wide gulf between pupils' actual skills and competencies compared to standard as per the national curriculum in English and maths, and the performance of girls and poorer pupils is particularly weak.



Learning performance is still poor and significantly below curriculum expectations

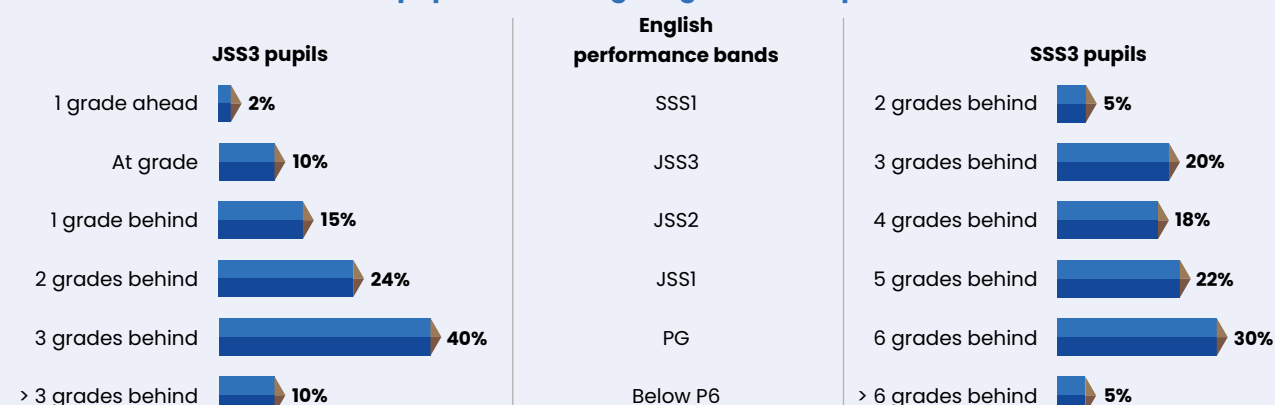
Pupil learning outcomes in maths continues to be low. As shown in the figure below, only 3 per cent of JSS3 pupils in the BTS study were able to demonstrate maths skills expected from a pupil in the JSS3 grade or higher, (that is, they are performing 'at grade' or higher), whereas no SSS3 pupils were able to demonstrate maths skills at senior secondary level. Only 9 per cent of SSS3 pupils demonstrated performance at JSS3 grade or higher in maths, which implies that even the best SSS pupils have fallen behind by 3 years.





Pupil performance in English is marginally better. More JSS3 pupils are performing close to their expected level in English than SSS3 pupils. 12 per cent of JSS3 pupils are performing at grade (JSS3) or higher in English, and a further 15 per cent have fallen behind by just one year. This means that one in four JSS3 pupils are at or within a year's gap of where they should be in English. Even though more SSS3 pupils are placed in higher performance bands in English than JSS3 pupils, the top 5 per cent have still fallen behind by two years.

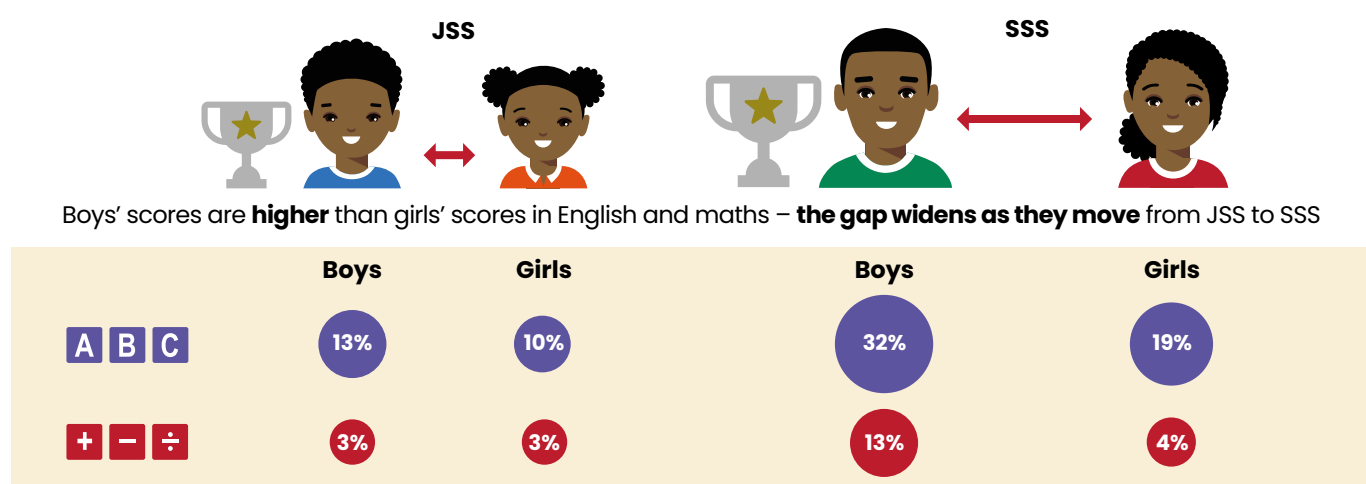
Distribution of JSS3 and SSS3 pupils across English grade-level performance bands in the BTS study



There are big differences in learning outcomes by pupil background

Across both grades, pupils from the richest households perform significantly better than pupils from the poorest quintile (20 per cent) of households. Boys' also generally scored higher than girls across both grades and subjects and this gap appears to widen as pupils move to higher grades from JSS3 to SSS3. There are also significant regional differences in pupils' performance. JSS3 and SSS3 pupils in the Western region score significantly higher than the national average while JSS3 and SSS3 pupils in the North-Western and Southern regions perform significantly worse than other regions.

Proportion of pupils performing at the JSS3 level or higher by gender

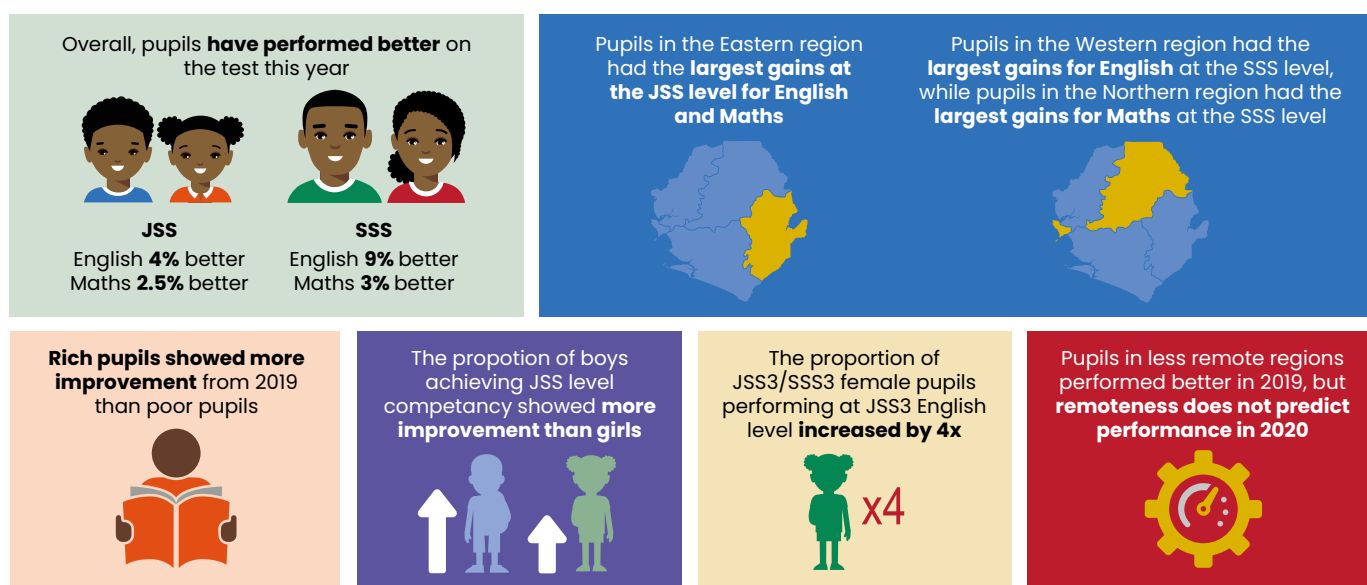


School closure may have exacerbated previous inequalities

In addition, looking at the numbers more closely suggest that school closure in Sierra Leone may actually have resulted in increasing learning inequalities. This is an area of concern. A sub-sample of pupils (boys, richer pupils and those in certain regions) are pulling up the BTS (2020) learning score, while the already disadvantaged pupils, probably fell further behind. This is represented in the figure below.



Key drivers of the BTS results compared to SGLA (2019)



More on pupil learning outcomes

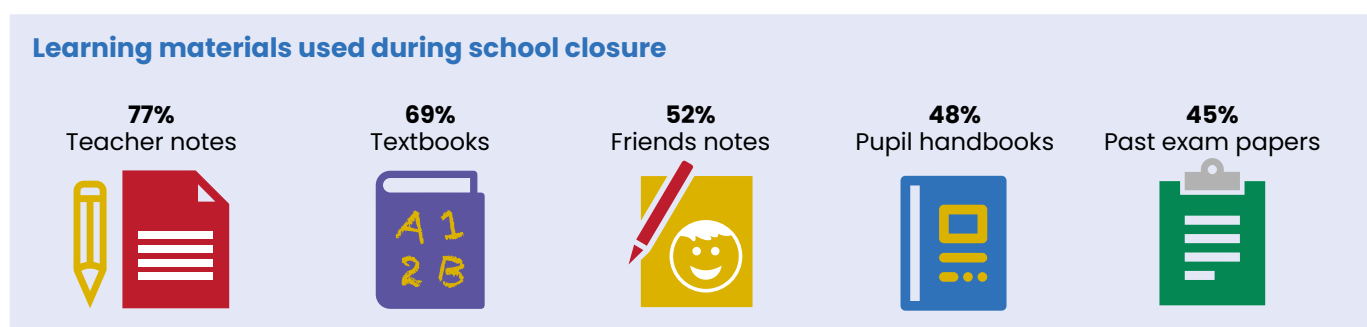
- Overview of learning outcomes in English and maths: **Section 3.1**
- Overview of learning outcomes across pupil backgrounds: **Sections 3.1, 3.5, 3.6 and 3.7**
- Overview of learning outcomes pre- and post- COVID-19: **Section 3.8**

Learning resources used by pupils during school closures

To better situate findings on pupil performance, it is important to understand the learning resources available to pupils, and the activities that pupils were engaged in and the challenges they faced when schools were closed.

Pupils prefer to use learning materials they know and are familiar with.

Learning materials that pupils had access to before schools closed were also the most commonly used during closures. These included lesson notes from teachers and friends, textbooks, and past examination papers. However, the evidence showed that most schools did not provide learning materials to pupils when schools were closed.



Pupil Handbooks: Handbooks facilitated ongoing learning during school closures, but equitable access and conditionalities associated with distribution remained a challenge.

In general, pupils who used the handbooks found them helpful and clear with a large majority of pupils reporting that the handbooks had helped them understand concepts that they previously struggled with, and a similar proportion mentioned that they find the handbooks work even better when used along with their school textbooks.

While pupil handbooks remain a key learning resource, its usage fell slightly during school closures compared to previous years, especially at the JSS level, with just under half of all pupils using pupil handbooks during school closures.



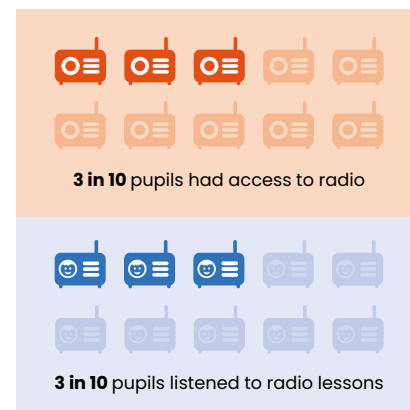
The limited use of pupil handbooks was driven by limited access to the handbooks as 90 per cent of pupils who did not use the handbooks mentioned that they did not use them because they did not have access to them when schools were closed. This was driven in part by the hesitation of parents to sign an undertaking to return the handbooks in the same condition; and partly because as per policy, most schools collected the second term pupil handbooks back from children before school closed.

Radio Teaching Programme: Limited and unequitable access to radios restricted impact of the radio programme on learning

Despite the rapid roll-out of radio teaching, nearly 70 per cent of children did not have access or were not listening to the programme for various reasons. Richer pupils and boys more likely to have listened to the programme compared to other pupils. Engagement was moderate (at least 2-3 times a week) but only a third of pupils listening had used the dial-in option.

Although pupils' use of the radio teaching programme was not correlated with learning outcomes, those pupils who did manage to listen to the programme found it useful. This was also confirmed in discussions where pupils reported the radio teaching had helped them understand concepts and catch-up where there were gaps.

Pupils and the radio teaching programme



Most pupils received some sort of support to study when schools were closed

This support for learning may have been in the form of provision of lights for studying, supervision and guidance from household member when pupils struggled with some topics, extra classes or paid tuitions and sometimes mere encouragement from parents and peers. Most pupils mentioned receiving additional help from someone in their household. 88 per cent of pupils who studied when schools were closed reported receiving help from someone in their family, while 13 per cent reported having private tutors to help them learn in the absence of schools.

More on learning resources

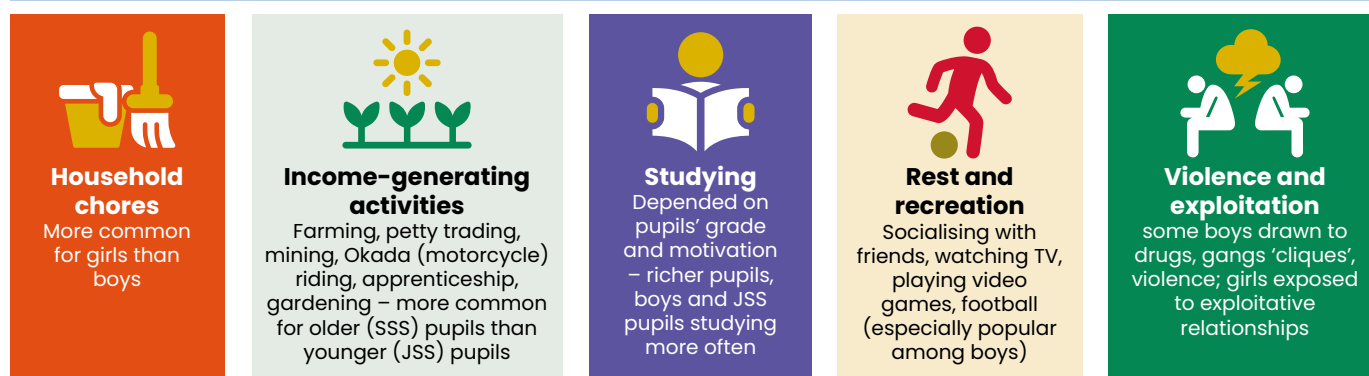
- Overview of self-study learning resources used: **Section 4.1**
- About the usage and uptake of Pupil Handbooks: **Section 4.2**
- About the usage and uptake of the Radio Teaching Programme: **Section 4.3**
- Overview of other support to study: **Section 4.4**

Pupil activities while schools were closed

Children spent their time in domestic chores, income-generation activities and rest, but still found time to study

Most pupils divided their time amongst household chores, supporting their families in income generating activities, and rest and recreation, but they still found time for study. However, the distribution itself varied significantly by gender and background characteristics.

Children's activities during school closure





Evidence from parents and school representatives was more mixed and suggested that children treated the school closure as a 'holiday' and did not use this time to learn. Instead they spent their time resting and socialising with friends, playing football (this was particularly popular with boys), watching TV and playing video games. In such cases, parents reported finding it difficult to motivate their children to study at home and struggled to discipline them.

Although the majority of pupils self-reported studying during school closure, the time and effort put in varied across children. Some children were able to manage time for study alongside their other activities, but others complained about being too tired to study after completing domestic chores or income generating activities. This meant that children only found time to study at the end of the day when it was dark, and they faced challenges with electricity.

More on pupil activities during school closures

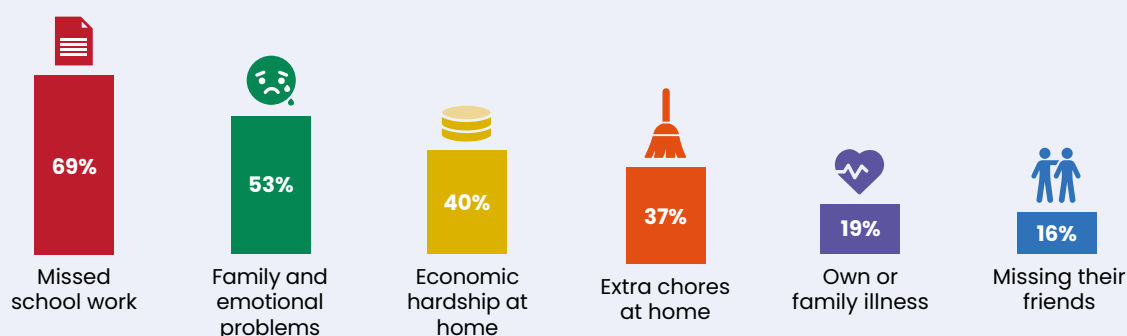
- Overview of pupil activities: **Section 5**
- Overview of study time: **Section 5.1**

Child well-being and safety in Sierra Leone post-school closure

Children faced a number of challenges while schools were closed

The key challenges self-reported by pupils included: violence and exploitation, emotional and social wellbeing, economic and financial difficulties, and physical health and hunger. Older pupils were significantly more likely to report these challenges, compared to JSS3 pupils. These challenges not only directly affected pupils' health and well-being, but also influenced their ability to learn during school closures. In some cases, they even have had more longer lasting impacts on school attendance and dropouts after schools resumed in October 2020. While some of these challenges may have existed even previously, the intensity was said to increase during the school closure period and schools were also no longer available to act as a 'safe space' for children during this time.

Types of challenges faced by children



Girls were significantly more likely than boys to report facing challenges

The lockdown and associated restrictions on movement, school closures, and economic shocks for families disrupted pupils' routine and social interactions while exposing them to the risk of abuse. Compared to boys, girls were twice as likely to report having extra work at home. Further, incidences of sexual harassment and exploitation of girls rose when schools closed as a result of COVID-19. There were also some instances where girls were reported to have engaged in transactional sex to earn some money to support personal or family needs. A small number of pregnant girls returned to school to sit the examination, however, some were said to not complete all their papers or return when schools resumed formally, following stigmatization and mockery from their peers.

Knowledge and ability to cope with challenges varied

Pupils ability to cope with physical, emotional, and financial challenges during school closures varied according to their background and knowledge of support facilities. More formal support mechanisms included Family Support Units (FSU) and Community Health Centres (CHC), while informal support was taken from peers, family members, and others in the community. Children were more likely to be aware of CHCs compared to FSUs to report instances of violence or to seek medical assistance.



Several other welfare support mechanisms were reported to being available at the community level. These included assistance from community chiefs and notable persons known for settling cases of abuse, as well as learning support to pupils in terms of organising space to study and study groups. In addition, the government and other agencies made efforts to support and sensitize pupils during lockdown through the Radio Teaching Programme and direct contributions such as the provision of radios and rations to certain groups.

More on challenges during COVID-19

- Overview of key challenges faced by pupils: **Section 6.1**
- About the impact of challenges on pupil learning: **Section 6.2**
- Overview of support mechanisms available to pupils: **Sections 6.3 and 6.4**

Preparedness of schools to reopen

Ensuring the safe reopening and return of pupils to schools is a clear priority across the chain of actors in the secondary school system of Sierra Leone.

Gap between intention and action

However, there exists a gap between intention and action. Detailed guidance material and protocols have been developed and shared with schools. However, there are challenges with implementation and compliance, especially in an education system where most schools are already struggling and under-resourced in a business as usual setting.

The study showed that schools now had more resources like veronica buckets, soap, sanitizers, and thermometers to ensure hand washing and management of COVID-19 symptoms. This was mentioned by pupils in all regions as there was an apparent emphasis by authorities on ensuring that all hygienic protocols are followed for the safety of pupils and teachers coming to schools.



Confusion surrounding syllabus changes

Syllabus changes and changes to textbooks at some JSS and SSS levels has also led to confusion amongst teachers and pupils. Schools and teachers were already facing a lot of pressure to cover many topics across the syllabus in a shorter amount of time as the schools have been shut for over six months. In addition, when the syllabus for some subjects was changed, it led to further confusion between pupils and teachers.

No major increase in out-of-school children

After schools reopened, it appears that the experience did not lead to a massive increase in the population of children out of school. MBSSE representatives also hinted that this was in line with the preliminary notions they had received from schools, but they were currently trying to establish more robust estimates via their field officers. School and community respondents confirmed that most children had returned school once they opened.

Significant teacher turnover

In contrast to pupil enrolment, qualitative discussions suggested that teacher turnover during the school closure period had decreased the number of teachers in several schools. Some teachers had moved on because they had been offered better jobs, while others left because of a lack of payment of salaries during the school closure period. In some cases, school respondents suggested that they had deliberately reduced teacher numbers when the number of pupils fell.

CTAs were the primary link between schools and communities

Much of the interaction between schools and parents/communities during the school closure period took place through community teacher associations (CTA). Although school board of governors (BOG) are increasingly prevalent in schools, they play a more school-centric role than CTAs.



More on preparedness of schools to reopen

- Overview of actions to make schools safer: **Section 7.1**
- Overview of additional actions taken due to COVID-19: **Section 7.2**
- Overview of pupil and teacher enrolment post-COVID: **Section 7.3**
- Overview of the role of CTAs: **Sections 7.4**

Conclusions and recommendations

This BTS Study offers robust evidence on what JSS3 and SSS3 pupils in Sierra Leonean schools know and can do in English and maths following school closures due to COVID-19, and how this has changed since before COVID-19. While the results are marginally better compared to SGLA 2019, the overarching observation is that secondary grade learning outcomes remain low and that the inequalities in learning outcomes between boys/girls, rural/urban pupils, richer/poorer pupils have widened compared to previous years.

The results of the study suggest that while there is much potential for remote learning, the current education system and home environment for most Sierra Leonean pupils is not entirely conducive for learning outside of school. Girls and poorer pupils are particularly disadvantaged in terms of remote learning as they not only lack access to learning resources and support at home, but also have many different competing demands for their time.

While it is difficult to change pupil background factors, it can be a much simpler task to facilitate pupils so that any time they dedicate to their studies outside of school is used more effectively. For pupils to be successful in their learning and examinations, it is important for them to not only be able to learn in school, but also to practice and consolidate their learning outside of school i.e. in-school and at-home (remote) learning should go hand in hand. Learning resources like radio lessons and pupil handbooks need to be mainstreamed as 'hybrid' rather than 'distance' learning solutions and teachers should integrate them into classroom practice to build pupils familiarity and comfort in engaging with them independently. Targeted interventions such as tutoring, peer-learning or community involvement, especially for the most disadvantaged, can accelerate pupil's learning. This is also important towards reform of Sierra Leone's education system to be more robust in case of future crises. The role of CTAs and BOGs can also be utilised to increase sensitization at the community level regarding the importance of at-home learning, including household support – and space- to allow more of this.

The BTS study, and the SGLAs previously, also indicate that not only do girls score less than boys in the learning assessment, but they face greater risk to their safety and well-being both in and outside of school. To support them to participate in education on an equal footing as boys requires some of these underlying biases to be addressed. Schools and communities should not only work towards providing girls with a safe space, but also to provide functional platforms prepared to deal with concerns that girls encounter at, and when they are away from, schools.

Based on the results discussed in this report, below are a list of recommendations for MBSSE's consideration.

- Align curriculum content with pupils' learning levels.
- Reassess remediation programmes.
- Urgently address issues of sexual harassment and girls' safety.
- Give pupils from poorer backgrounds a fair shot at success.
- Improve pupils' ability to learn outside of the classroom.
- Improve how digital media can support learning.
- Learn from success stories.

Each of these recommendations is discussed further in the concluding chapter of this report. The Ebola crises taught the country many useful (albeit difficult) lessons. The COVID-19 school closures should be used to consolidate and improve on these to safeguard the learning and future of the children of Sierra Leone.



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Abbreviations

BECE	Basic Education Certificate Examination
BOG	Board of Governors
ELA	Education/Language Arts
EMIS	Education Management Information System
ESA	Education Sector Analysis
ESP	Education Sector Plan
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office
GATE	UNICEF – Girl's Access to Education Programme
ICF	World Health Organisation's International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health
JSS	Junior Secondary School
LWL	Leh Wi Lan
MBSSE	Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education
N	Number of observations
NPSE	National Primary School Examination
OPM	Oxford Policy Management
P	Primary grade (e.g. primary grade 2 or P2)
PDIA	Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation
PGLA	Primary Grade Learning Assessment
PTA/CTA	Parent-teacher or Community-teacher Associations
PTR	Pupil-Teacher Ratio
SGLA	Secondary Grade Learning Assessment
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure
SSEIP	Sierra Leone Secondary Education Improvement Programme
SSS	Senior Secondary School
TSC	Teaching Service Commission
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WASSCE	West African Secondary School Certificate Examination
WGDS	Washington Group on Disability Statistics

1

Introduction





1 Introduction

Schools in Sierra Leone closed on 31st March 2020 after the country's first COVID-19 case was confirmed. Following the closure, on 19th April 2020, the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) created the Education Emergency Taskforce to support MBSSE's coordination, response, and planning during the COVID-19 pandemic through four key activities: communication, continuous distance learning, school reopening readiness, and policy (MBSSE, 2020). To encourage the utilization of continuous and safe distance learning, the MBSSE and Teacher Service Commission (TSC) immediately launched a radio teaching programme, distributed rations to pupils in the poorest communities, and conducted community sensitization to keep girls safe. The objective was to safeguard children and promote learning recovery when schools reopen. As part of MBSSE's reopening readiness priorities following the crisis, the Back to School (BTS) study was designed by the Leh wi Lan programme to use quantitative and qualitative evidence to guide the response of the education sector following school closures during the outbreak.

1.1 About the Leh wi Lan programme

Leh wi Lan, also called the Sierra Leone Secondary Education Improvement Programme (SSEIP), aims to help the government of Sierra Leone address some of these challenges in secondary education. It is a five-year (2016-2021) FCDO-funded programme aimed at supporting the MBSSE to achieve sustained improvements in girls' education and secondary grade learning outcomes. Leh wi Lan provides support to learning conditions, MBSSE and district capacity to plan, monitor, and manage service delivery, and capacity for monitoring, learning and research. During the COVID-19 crisis, Leh wi Lan has supported MBSSE in its response and recovery efforts to improve learning conditions once children return to school.

Underpinning Leh wi Lan's model is investment in addressing the problem of lack of data on the current state of learning achievement, teaching practices and school environment, what is working, and why. Through its monitoring, research and learning work stream, Leh wi Lan will:

- Inform MBSSE strategy, planning and policy development and ensure these are data-driven and informed by evidence;
- Improve understanding of learning outcomes at junior and senior secondary levels in maths and English, with data and evidence used for prioritisation of actions to improve teaching and learning;
- Develop long-lasting capacity at national and district levels to deliver strong monitoring, research and evidence in line with MBSSE's strategy and priorities;
- Identify existing pockets of best practice across districts, by establishing a system of sharing learning across the education system as a basis for performance improvements; and
- Establish a monitoring system to ascertain the effectiveness of Leh wi Lan's activities and provide a foundation for programme learning, improvement and adaptation.

Box 1: Secondary Grade Learning Assessments over the years

As part of the monitoring, research, and learning work stream of Leh wi Lan, the annual secondary grade learning assessments (SGLA) aim to provide an annual "health check of the secondary education system" in Sierra Leone. It tracks changes in the state of pupil learning achievement, teaching practices, and the school's learning environment. The SGLAs report at the national, regional and district level on an annual basis. The first SGLA I was conducted in 2017, with follow-ups in 2018 and 2019. In the SGLAs, pupils in JSS2 and SSS2 are tested on their abilities in English and mathematics. The results are complementary to the information already provided by the examination system so, by design, the focus is more on learning outcomes than curriculum content coverage. The results provide information about differences in learning outcomes by district, urban-rural location, and by school and learner characteristics (e.g. sex, age, household characteristics).

In light of the closure of schools and the resultant loss of the usual SGLA timeline, the BTS study provides a unique opportunity to use evidence to guide MBSSE's and Leh wi Lan's COVID response, recovery, and reform priorities by providing additional, rigorous, policy-relevant and, to our knowledge, previously unmeasured estimates of the impact of school closures on learning and child well-being.



1.2 The Free Quality School Education Programme and COVID-19

Findings from the SGLAs have shown that most pupils only show basic primary-level English and maths skills despite completing eight (JSS2) to 11 (SSS2) years of formal education and passing various exams like the NPSE and BECE. One explanation for why schools are not improving is that enrolment is increasing rapidly: on average, JSS were enrolling 43 per cent more pupils in 2019 compared to 2017, and SSS were enrolling 49 per cent more pupils. The jump in enrolment was extended by the introduction of the Free Quality School Education Programme (FQSE) in August 2018.

The FQSE has made significant strides in ensuring all Sierra Leonean children have equal access to free quality school education. FQSE has led to more schools and teachers getting approved; improved learning environment through distribution of teaching and learning materials; better school and classroom infrastructure; review of service conditions for teachers; and measures against examination malpractice.

The launch of a free universal basic education programme like FQSE will provide a further push to enrolment numbers, with many newly enrolled pupils being first-generation learners, from disadvantaged families, who need closer attention from teachers in order to learn and thrive. This is in addition to shocks borne by pupils since Ebola (2014-15), with COVID-19 being the latest disturbance to education in Sierra Leone. These contextual factors should be borne in mind when reading the results discussed below.

1.3 Learning and child-wellbeing in the COVID-19 context

During the COVID-19 outbreak, schools were closed for six months, and reopened on 5th October. During this time, nearly two million pre-primary and primary, 450,000 junior secondary and 300,000 senior secondary pupils were not attending school. However, this is not new to Sierra Leone – in 2014-15, schools shut for nearly nine months due to Ebola. Evidence suggests the cost of school closure for children's education and well-being was high, and more profound for girls and the poorest pupils. Girls were 10 percentage points less likely to return to school post-Ebola and were significantly more likely to spend more time with men resulting in pregnancies (Bandiera et al., 2018).

Sierra Leone's own experience with Ebola cautions us that COVID-19 will have wide-reaching impacts on education, both in terms of children's learning and well as their general safety and well-being. These effects are in action both while schools were closed, as well as now when they are gradually reopening:

- **Learning loss and inequality.** School closures lead to stark learning loss, even when these closures are planned, like summer holidays. Sierra Leone was in a learning crisis even before COVID-19. When the foundations of literacy and numeracy are weak (even for JSS and SSS pupils) long gaps in schooling can have harsh effects on learning, immediately and many years later. Girls and children from poorer families, rural schools and those with disabilities suffer more.

TSC and MBSSE did their best to maintain learning continuity through the radio instruction programmes. However, children's and parents' engagement with radio learning will vary significantly from home to home. For example, those in elite Freetown schools or richer pupils with more support and resources at home will probably advance just fine, while pupils from poorer families will fall further behind. As schools reopen, some disadvantaged children may drop out of school entirely, especially those at critical transitions between educational levels, like P6 to JSS1. It is possible that Free Quality Education (FQSE) – which didn't exist during Ebola – might reduce dropouts than would have been the case if children had to pay fees to return to school.

- **Child safety and well-being.** Keeping every Sierra Leonean child healthy and safe is important. School closures during Ebola triggered negative impacts on children's well-being. For girls, the cost was higher. Girls, especially older girls, often took on parental roles after the death of caregivers, thus dropping out of school even when schools reopened; physical and sexual violence against girls increased with a substantial rise in teenage pregnancy rates. This was often linked to transactional sex to secure basic goods and services. For poorer children, the adverse effects of school closure will be more than their peers. For example, 40,000 school children in Pujehun and Kambia depend on free school meals. Without these meals, poorer families will find it hard to cope and children will be at risk of child labour and exploitation.



To lessen the above adverse effects, **MBSSE launched an immediate and proactive response** to protect pupils and their education. This included:

- **Response:** school closure to prevent infection transmission; radio lessons were started within the week; community sensitisation programmes on girls' safety were organised, and dry take-home rations were distributed to the most vulnerable communities;
- **Recovery:** To promote learning recovery as schools reopen post-COVID, the three examinations classes (i.e. P6 for NPSE, JSS3 for BECE and SSS3 for WASSCE) returned to school. Also, as discussed above, the MBSSE's Education Emergency Taskforce (EET) has one of its four working groups on School Reopening Readiness. This working group has outlined the following as recovery priorities: school safety protocol, supplies and logistics, psychosocial support, construction/refurbishment including WASH, distribution of hygiene kits, safe spaces for children at risk, referral networks; and
- **Reform:** Long-term reform and system resilience to make education systems stronger and more inclusive than in the pre-COVID period.

In addition, on the 30th of March 2020, the MBSSE formally overturned the ban on pregnant girls attending schools and sitting exams with immediate effect. This policy had been in place since 2015 following the spike in teen pregnancies following the Ebola outbreak. Its revocation, and replacement with two new policies focused on 'Radical Inclusion' and 'Comprehensive Safety' of all children in the education system, is a big step towards ensuring that no child would be excluded from resuming their education once schools reopened.

2

The Back to School Study overview and design



2 The Back to School Study overview and design

To assess learning outcomes among secondary school pupils after a long period of school closures due to COVID-19, the BTS study aims to provide MBSSE with robust nationally- and regional-level representative data on learning at the JSS3 and SSS3 levels in English and maths to constitute an input into developing MBSSE's response to Sierra Leone's education sector post COVID-19 by supporting the Ministry in undertaking data- and evidence-driven adaptations to its response COVID-19.

2.1 Scope of the BTS study

In light of the overarching aim of the study, the key objectives of the Back to School study are to:

- Understand how school closure affected **children's learning** (including information on learning loss; resources used, equity and inclusion);
- Understand issues around **child safety and wellbeing as well as available** support mechanisms during school closure (and now that schools are open) particularly for girls and children with disabilities; and
- Guide MBSSE and other stakeholders' response and longer-term recovery **priorities** with the best data and evidence available.

In particular, the policy questions addressed by the BTS study are outlined in Box 2 below.

Box 2: What policy questions will be answered by the Back to School Study?

On measuring learning, and learning loss from shocks:

1. How have school closures affected secondary grade pupils learning levels in Sierra Leone? What (if any) is the degree of 'learning loss' while pupils were away from school? Which specific areas or skills need more focus and support when children return to school?
2. How do learning outcomes compare with results from the previous SGLAs as stated in the LWL logframe? How has the learning performance of select cohorts changed over time?

On child well-being, inclusion and safety, especially for girls and children with disabilities:

3. What is the impact of school closures on pupils' safety and wellbeing? How have these been safeguarded during the school closure and how can they be safeguarded in the post-COVID recovery period?
4. How have marginalised groups (specifically girls, children with disabilities and/or special needs, those from poorer backgrounds, rural schools) been affected by COVID-19? What information and support facilities are children able to access?

On informing MBSSE's immediate and longer-term response to shocks:

5. What type of distance learning initiatives has MBSSE introduced for secondary grades? What is the targeting, reach and effects of this instruction? How do pupils engage with these distance learning initiatives, i.e. Radio Teaching Programme?
6. What types of learning gaps and child wellbeing issues should MBSSE focus on in their COVID 19 recovery and longer-term reform planning, especially for girls and children with disabilities?

On teaching and leadership practices in secondary schools:

7. What are some of the conditions under which teaching, and learning takes place in secondary schools? How safe, ready and prepared are schools to reopen following COVID-19?
8. What classroom practices are being used by junior and senior secondary teachers?* What is the evidence on pupil-teacher contact time and subject specific pupil-teacher ratios?*
9. What are some of the school management and leadership practices employed by secondary school principals in Sierra Leone?* What (if any) additional demands has COVID-19 put on their work?
10. What is the prevalence, scope and functionality of school Boards of Governors (BoG)? What role do they play in school supervision and school safety measures?

Note: Questions marked with asterisks will not be addressed directly in the BTS but will be covered in other components of the Leh wi Lan Output 5 research.



2.2 Why a mixed methods approach was adopted?

Many of the questions that were the focus of this study (e.g. child well-being, girls' safety, parental support to learning during lockdown) lent themselves more suitably to qualitative research, while some questions (e.g. status of learning following school closures) required quantitative learning assessments. To provide evidence on Leh wi Lan's contribution to improving teaching and learning in secondary grades by answering the research questions outlined above, a simultaneous mixed methods study was conducted with the following two components:

- **Back to school quantitative component** consisting of a learning assessment and information on activities and challenges when schools were closed to measure pupil learning levels immediately after schools reopen and to also gauge the level of learning activity when pupils were away from schools; and
- **Back to school qualitative component** which comprised of school-level Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) at central MBSSE level to better understand child well-being, coping mechanisms, and support for learning during periods of school closure.

The instruments used for both components were designed in close collaboration with MBSSE and LWL stakeholders. The instruments used within the quantitative and qualitative components are outlined in Box 3.

Box 3: Instruments used in the BTS study

Quantitative component:

- Pupil learning assessments for JSS3 and SSS3 grades, in English and maths; and
- Pupil interview following the learning assessment for information on learning activities, challenges, and support during school closures.

Qualitative component:

- FGDs with pupils on their activities and experiences during school closure, distance education resources, wider physical and psychosocial well-being issues and coping mechanisms
- FGDs with members of school Community Teacher Association (CTA) including parents, community representatives and the school principal to discuss children's experiences, learning and well-being, as well as school readiness to respond to shocks
- KIIs with members from MBSSE, Leh wi Lan, District Education Offices (DEOs) and Teaching Service Commission (TSC) to contextualise school level findings on child learning and wellbeing, and get up-to-date information on the system level response and planning for shocks including roll-out of distance education resources (especially radio teaching programme)

2.3 Sample considerations

School sample

The BTS study sample consisted of 250 schools across Sierra Leone, with sampling precision at the regional level. Since the Annual School Census (ASC) for 2020 had not been published at the time when the sample was selected, schools were selected from the ASC 2019. To obtain precision at the regional level for the quantitative component, all 250 schools were evenly distributed across the five regions with 50 schools (25 JSS and 25 SSS) per region. The qualitative component was targeted at 20 schools (4 per region) which were a subset of the quantitative sample. These 'quant + qual schools' were purposively selected to cover at least two different districts in each region. In addition, the sample was balanced by gender, level (JSS/SSS), geographical location (urban rural) and school type. In every region there was one all-boys, one all-girls, and two mixed-gender schools as part of the selected 'quant + qual schools'. As such, the total number of schools visited was 250.



Respondent selection

The quantitative study aimed to sample 8 pupils from each school with a total target of 2,000 pupils. Each pupil was given a learning assessment in English and maths, followed by some interview style questions. The total number of pupils visited on the day of the visit to the school occasionally fell short of the target number of pupils.

The qualitative research at school level included a pupil FGD that was conducted with six to eight pupils selected from amongst the learning assessment (quantitative) sample in the first instance, with additional numbers completed at random from the attendance register(s) of the relevant grade (JSS3 or SSS3). Pupil FGDs were disaggregated by gender (i.e. single sex). A second school level FGD was conducted with five to six available members of the school CTA who had been active for at least the last one year. The CTA Chair and school Principal had to be included. Female and parent respondents were also prioritised.

Respondents for the qualitative KIIs at the central and district level were preselected in advance in collaboration with the central Leh wi Lan and MBSSE management and included,

- Director Inspectorate (Central)
- Assistant Director Secondary Schools (Central)
- TSC Chair¹ (Central)
- DDE Kambia (District 1)
- DDE Kenema (District 2)

The final sample size reached is displayed in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Final sample size for quantitative and qualitative components

	Schools	Pupils (1-on-1 testing)	Pupil FGD (sessions)	CTA FGD (sessions)	MBSSE/LwL/ TSC (KIIs)	Total
Quantitative	250	1,945	-	-	-	1,945
Qualitative	20		20 (144 participants)	20 (119 participants)	5	NA

2.4 Designing learning assessments and performance bands that are context and grade appropriate

In the quantitative component of the BTS study, each pupil was administered a test of 40 questions covering both English language and maths. This was followed by questions related to pupil's background (age, main language spoken at home and household assets) and questions related to the experience of pupils during school closures. The test took approximately 50 minutes per pupil and was administered on a one-on-one basis by enumerators to individual pupils.


The learning assessments focus on pupils' learning outcomes in JSS3 and SSS3 and are designed with reference to the national curriculum. While the test is referenced to the national curriculum in P4-6, JSS and SSS grades, it does not focus on curriculum content coverage per se, which is already the focus of the examination system. In other words, the learning assessments focus on knowledge and skills acquired by pupils in these grades and their "real life" applicability by assessing both school-based knowledge and everyday English language and maths skills.

Below are two examples – the first one from an English language item from the BTS study, which tests pupils' application of English comprehension skills through texts they are expected to encounter in everyday life by providing visual and textual information through an extract of non-continuous text (billboard) about a development project. It requires pupils to locate and extract explicitly stated information (such as title of the project) and infer meaning from simple short continuous and non-continuous texts. While a seemingly unconventional question at first glance, this question ultimately tests a common skill – reading comprehension – which pupils will be required to demonstrate in school, work and life.

¹ This eventually became a group interview with the Chair, Secretary to the Commission and Deputy Director, Teacher Development and Performance.



Box 4: Example of English language assessment question which tests pupils' ability to comprehend non-continuous texts from everyday life

	<p>There are often billboards for construction projects in villages in Sierra Leone. These show the name of the project, where the money for the project comes from, the name of the village, the organisation managing the project and the local business doing the actual work.</p> <p>Look at this example in the photograph. Use it to answer the next six questions.</p>
<p>Where is the project?</p> <p>A. Project Location B. Contractor C. Semabuh D. ELCSL</p>	<p>What is the name of the project?</p> <p>A. Semabuh B. Water to Thrive C. Evangelical Lutheran Church D. Provision of Safe Drinking Water</p>

Source: Back to School (BTS) Study Learning Assessment (2020).

This second example below shows a more familiar maths question, which seems more common to how questions are presented in school textbooks and examinations. The examples below provide illustrations of items that aligned more closely with school-based maths skills.

Box 5: Example of school-based maths assessment items

<p>Multiply</p> $\begin{array}{r} 437 \\ \times 74 \\ \hline \\ \hline \end{array}$	<p>What is $2/3 + 1/4$?</p> <p>A. $2/12$ B. $3/7$ C. $3/4$ D. $11/12$</p>
--	---

Source: Back to School (BTS) Study Learning Assessment (2020).

The process of aligning the learning assessment questions with curriculum expectations at various primary and secondary grades was carried out by a panel of experienced Sierra Leonean English and maths teachers, principals, examiners, curriculum specialists, and lesson plans developers. It was facilitated through technical assistance from the Leh wi Lan programme, under the auspices of the MBSSE Executive Secretary (Basic Education). The attending experts took each test question and discussed and debated the most important skills being tested by each question and its placement in the national curriculum, ranging from below P6, P6, JSS1, JSS2, JSS3 and SSS1. The experts provided a grade level allocation for each question in the BTS learning assessment.

The English performance bands are shown in Table 2 below. In the analysis and reporting stage, pupils are sorted into these five performance bands, each described by a set of skills appropriate for the specified grade in English language. This gives insights into the distribution of skills that pupils possess, and can help identify relative strengths and areas for development. Additionally, it indicates differences in learning outcomes, if any, between groups of pupils (boys and girls, poorer and richer, urban and rural).

**Table 2: Grade-appropriate performance bands for English assessment**

Performance band label	Band descriptor The typical pupil in this band shows the skills for lower bands and also:
Primary grade level	Names some common objects and understands a simple English sentence. Locates and extracts explicitly stated information and infers meaning from simple short continuous and non-continuous texts.
JSS1	Locates and extracts immediate and overall meaning and information from 1-6 sentences of continuous or short non-continuous texts; understands the immediate impact on meaning of quantifier words (e.g. some, most, all, only).
JSS2	Interprets and infers overall meaning of short continuous and non-continuous text; relates two sets of information; applies basic grammar conventions and uses names of grammatical elements correctly.
JSS3	Identifies meaning and locates and extracts information from various sources such as short continuous (2-3 paragraphs) and non-continuous texts including pictures and tables using, where necessary, inductive reasoning and lower-level inferences to reach an overall understanding; infers the meaning of unfamiliar words from their context; uses technical language for the function of a word in a sentence.
SSS1	Extracts information from non-continuous text and applies inductive reasoning; understands the impact on contextual meaning of quantifiers such as some, all, only.

As with English, maths skills tested in the assessment were also grouped into broad categories or performance bands with band 1 linked to basic skills (e.g. complete simple arithmetic tasks) and band 6 linked to more demanding skills expected at JSS3 grade, like understanding the concepts of fractions, decimals and percentages. The maths performance bands are shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Grade-appropriate performance bands for maths assessment

Performance band label	Band descriptor The typical pupil in this band shows the skills for lower bands and also:
Primary grade level	May complete simple arithmetic tasks successfully. Extracts values shown in a barplot and visualises changes shown graphically, recalls and applies learned procedures for addition and subtraction of numbers set out in column form, calculates an increase of 15% in a price, recalls basic shapes and applies to real objects.
JSS1	Recalls and applies learned procedures for procedures such as HCF of 2-digit numbers; extracts numerical information from text and barplots to make simple comparisons; applies conventions of place value; represents information in a text as a simple number sentence.
JSS2	Extracts information from textual and visual representations to apply a one or two step procedure using simple arithmetic, comparisons, estimations and approximations; applies addition operations on clock time; recalls and applies learned procedures for multiplication, addition and subtraction of multiple-digit numbers set out in column form.
JSS3	Extracts information from textual and visual representations to develop and apply a multi-step procedure using simple arithmetic, estimations and approximations; understands the concepts of fractions, decimals and percentages and applies basic operations to these correctly and appropriately; understands the basic properties of simple geometric figures.



2.5 Limitations of the study

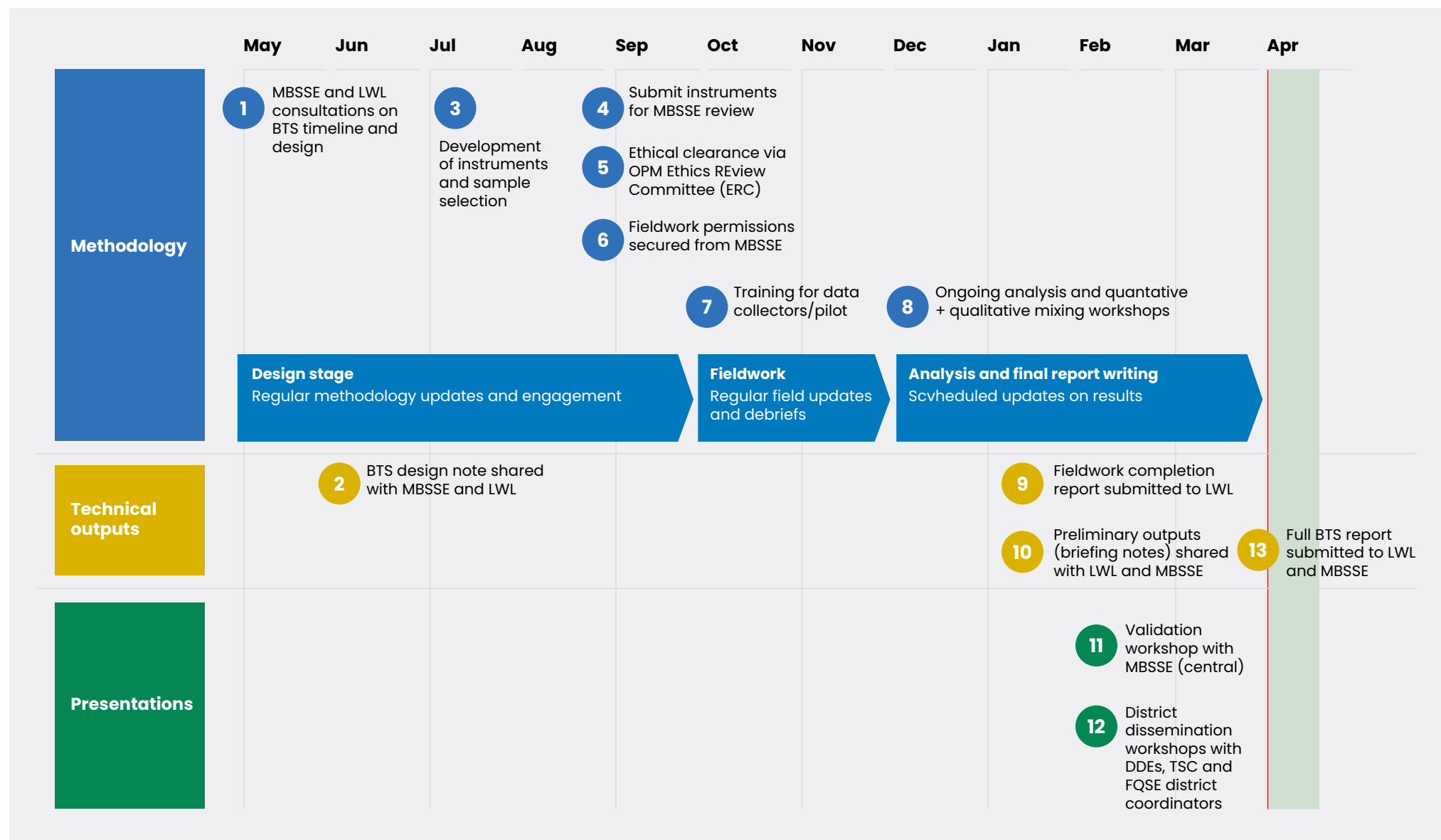
Despite best efforts to ensure robustness of the findings presented in this paper, there are certain limitations that need to be borne in mind when the results are interpreted:

- Given the limited scope of the study, a mixed-methods approach was best suited to understand the trends and the mechanism behind the change in learning outcomes. However, while we were able to gather robust trends in learning outcomes from the quantitative survey, given the smaller sample these results are only representative at the national and regional level, but they do not have district-level representativeness. This implies that district level comparisons are not possible with the BTS study due to sample size restrictions;
- To answer questions that were most critical to MBSSE following the return of pupils to school, the BTS study is narrower in scope and much more tailored to the specific questions on learning loss and associated coping mechanisms considering COVID-19 school closures compared to the usual SGLAs. This has meant that this study does not include a teacher and principal component in contrast to the SGLAs. While this does not affect response to the research questions, it limits the view of principals and teachers on the impact of school closures;
- The usual SGLAs regularly assess pupils in JSS2 and SSS2 in May-June each year while the BTS study took place in October-November 2020 because of school closures. While this limits the comparison of the BTS results to those of the previous SGLAs, the study was designed in such a way that the SGLA 2019 cohort would serve as a close 'pre-COVID' comparison to the 'post-COVID' results of the BTS study. The BTS study assessed pupils in JSS3 and SSS3 as these are the pupils who we would have otherwise tested as part of SGLA 4. These pupils are close comparatives to pupils that were tested in SGLA 3 (May-June 2019), and this comparison of learning outcomes will display any effects of COVID-19 related school closures on learning outcomes;
- As discussed above, the BTS study assesses pupils in JSS3 and SSS3 as opposed to the usual assessment of JSS2 and SSS2 grades in the SGLAs. This is to provide the closest pre and post COVID-19 comparisons. However, it should be noted that JSS3 and SSS3 grades are exam going grades with BECE and WASSCE exams at the end of the academic year, and this is likely to have an additional impact on learning outcomes as pupils might have studied in advance;
- The usual SGLAs have five test forms, with each form being assigned to pupils based on an initial assessment of their abilities using a Filter Form. However, due to design considerations and timing limitations for the BTS study, only two forms were used which were randomly assigned to pupils. Nonetheless, the findings presented in this study remain robust to changes in test administration; and
- The training for data collection was done remotely as opposed to the usual in-person training for the SGLAs. However, extensive preparation was done by all stakeholders to ensure that data of high quality was collected.



2.6 Back to School Study timeline

The calendar of events below shows how various activities were completed for the BTS study from design to fieldwork to the final analysis and reporting.





3

Pupil learning: What do pupils know and how has this been affected by school closure?



3 Pupil learning: What do pupils know and how has this been affected by school closure?

To see the impact of COVID-19 on learning levels requires a comparison of pupil performance for the same cohort of children before and after the school closure. The BTS study was designed in such a way that the SGLA 2019 cohort could serve as a close (but not perfect) 'pre-COVID' comparison to the 'post-COVID' results of the BTS study. Direct comparisons are difficult to make given that the tests were administered to different grades, and at different times of the academic year.

In general, pupil learning performance was better in the BTS (2020) study when seen in relation to SGLA (2019), although children are still significantly behind grade level expectations and school closure may indeed have exacerbated previous inequalities.

This section provides results from the BTS (2020) learning assessments that assessed JSS3 and SSS3 pupils in English and maths by indicating the extent to which pupils are performing at their expected grade level. The results are also disaggregated by background characteristics to understand if there are significant differences in performance across these groups. Finally, learning outcomes are compared to findings from previous rounds of the SGLAs, with SGLA 3 in particular.

Box 6: Background characteristics of pupils

- The average age of pupils in JSS3 and SSS3, at the start of the 2020-21 academic year, is 15 and 18 years respectively.
- In JSS3, 50% of the pupils were age-appropriate for their grade (14-15 years old) while 36% were overage (i.e. older than 15 years). There was a similar pattern of overage pupils in SSS3 (46% age-appropriate, i.e. 17-18 years; 40% overage).
- Pupils reported the main language they speak at home as Krio in the West; Krio and Mende in the East and South; and Krio and Temne in the North and North West.
- 75% of JSS3 and 80% of SSS3 pupils live within 20km of a district headquarter town.

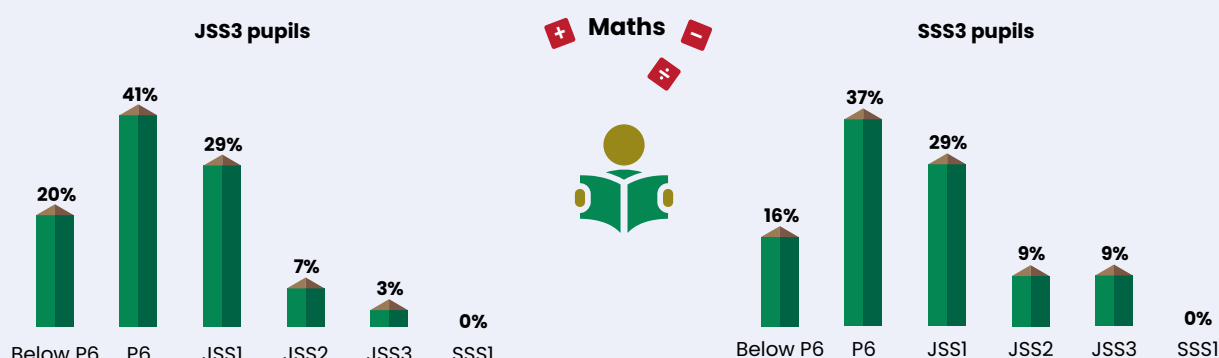
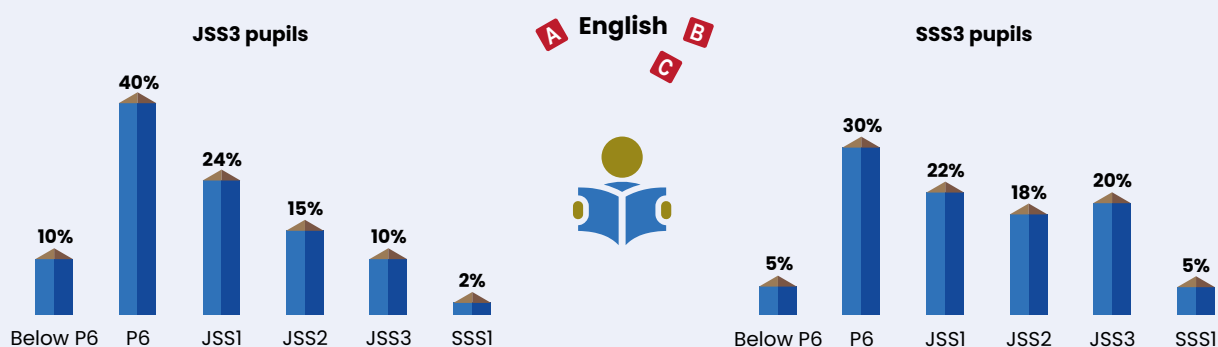
Source: Back to School Study (2020).

3.1 Results: Pupil learning outcomes in maths and English

This section discusses the levels of learning of JSS3 and SSS3 pupils in English and maths when schools reopened. To examine this, pupils test scores were sorted into the six grade-specific performance bands or levels discussed above (see section 2.4). To achieve a performance band or level means that pupils in the particular band are more likely than not to be able to demonstrate the skills linked to that particular grade (as per the national curriculum) but are very likely to struggle with skills demanded by the curriculum in any higher grade.

Pupil performance in maths continues to be low. As Figure 1 shows, in maths, only 3 per cent of JSS3 pupils are able to demonstrate skills expected from a pupil in the JSS3 grade or higher, (that is, they are performing 'at grade' or higher), whereas no SSS3 pupils are able to demonstrate maths skills at senior secondary level. Less than 10 per cent of SSS3 pupils (9 per cent) demonstrate performance at JSS3 grade or higher in maths, which implies that they have fallen behind by 3 years.

There is also very little progression in pupils' maths learning outcomes as they move up the grades. A majority of pupils - 61 per cent of JSS3 pupils and 53 per cent of SSS3 pupils - are performing at a level expected at Primary 6 (P6) or below in maths. Even though more SSS3 pupils achieve higher performance bands compared to JSS3 pupils, 80 per cent of SSS3 pupils have fallen behind by up to 5 years (i.e. they are at JSS1 level or below). In fact, none of the SSS3 pupils were able to demonstrate maths skills any higher than JSS3.


Figure 1: Distribution of JSS3 and SSS3 pupils across maths grade-level performance bands

Figure 2: Distribution of JSS3 and SSS3 pupils across English grade-level performance bands


Pupil performance in English is marginally better. More JSS3 pupils are performing close to their expected level than SSS3 pupils. As shown in Figure 2, In English, 12 per cent of JSS3 pupils are performing at grade (JSS3) or higher, and a further 15 per cent have fallen behind by one year. Even though more SSS3 pupils are placed in higher performance bands in English, the top 5 per cent have still fallen behind by two years

Despite this, as with the maths scores, there is a long 'tail' to the English results with a large proportion of JSS3 and SSS3 pupils bundled at the bottom. One in two JSS3 pupils (50 per cent) and just over one in three (35 per cent) of SSS3 pupils are still performing at primary levels (P6 or below) despite three and six additional years of schooling respectively.

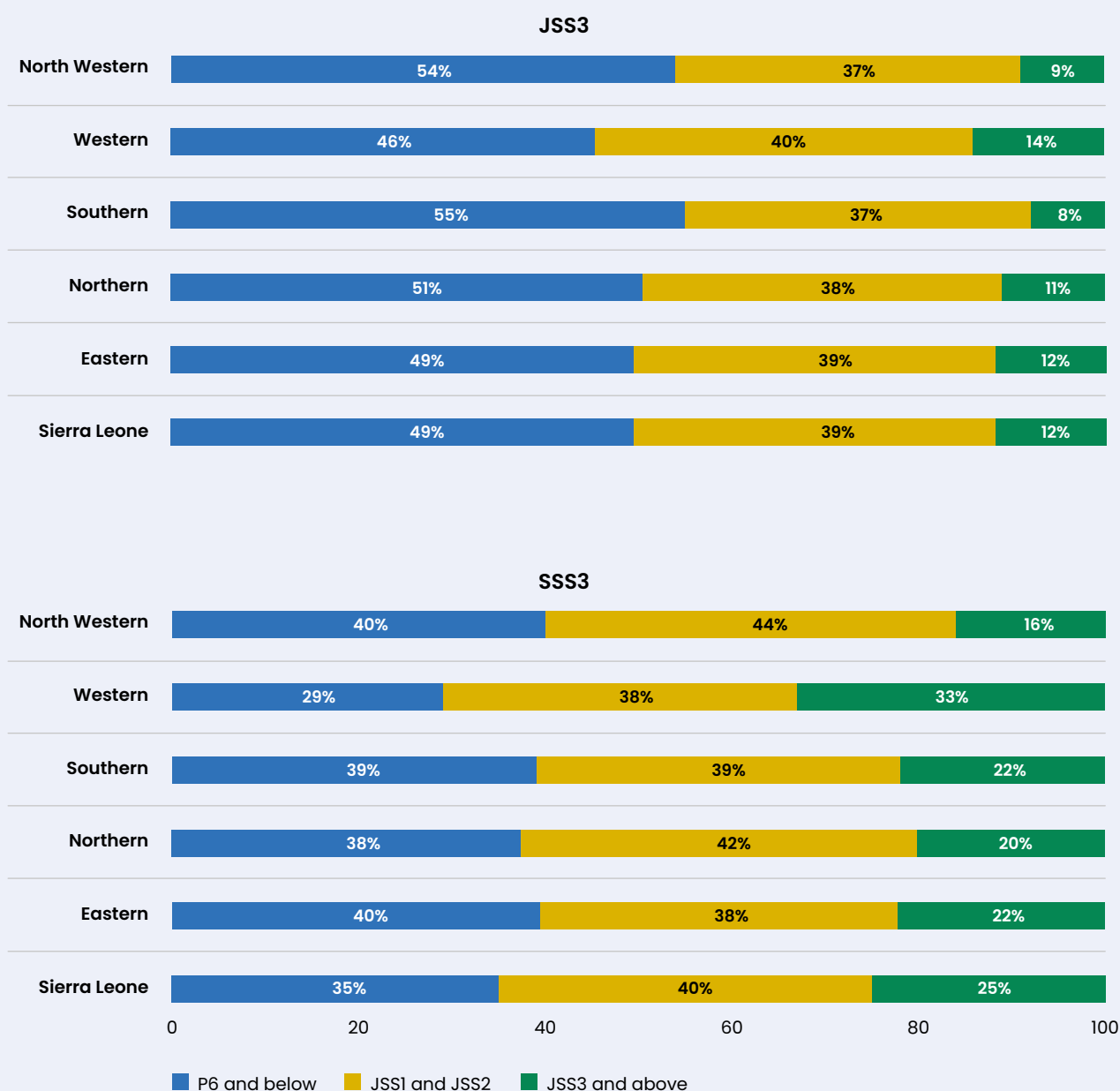
3.2 How does pupil learning vary across regions?

There are significant regional differences in pupils' performance. JSS3 and SSS3 pupils in the Western region score significantly higher than the national average while JSS3 and SSS3 pupils in the North-Western and Southern regions perform significantly worse than other regions. Comparisons in pupil performance across regions in English and maths are discussed in detail below.

In English, regional differences in pupils' performance are significant. Schools in the Western region have a higher proportion of JSS3 pupils performing 'at grade' or higher compared to the national average with 14 per cent compared to 12 per cent (see Figure 3 below). This difference is even more apparent at the SSS3 level where 33 per cent of pupils are performing at the JSS3 level or higher compared to the next best regions, Eastern and Southern, where only 22 per cent of pupils are performing at this level. However, only 16 per cent of pupils in North-Western region perform at the JSS3 level or higher, significantly lower than the national average of 25 percent.



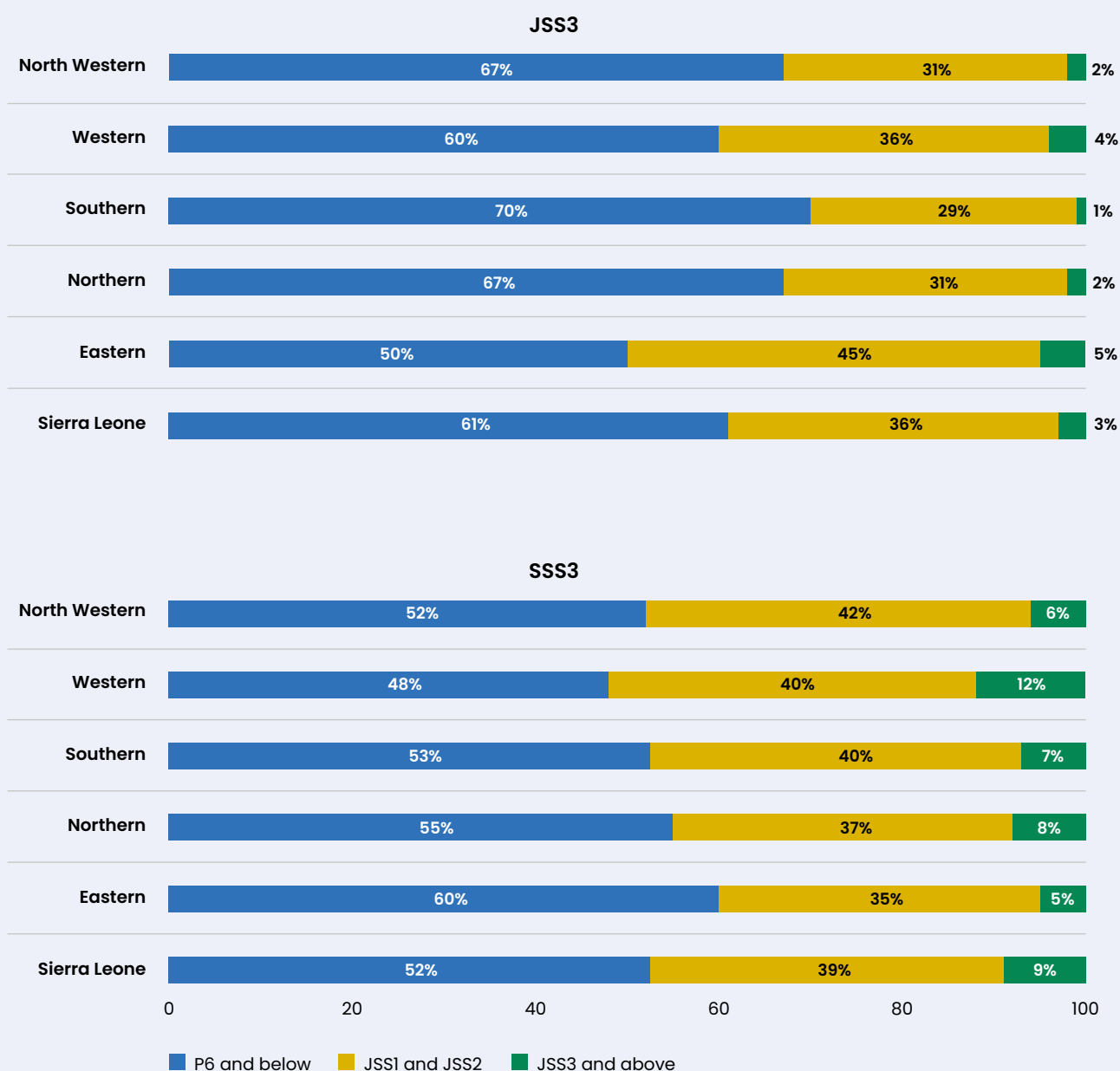
Figure 3: Regional disparities in English performance



In maths, JSS3 pupils in the Eastern region, and SSS3 pupils in the Western region perform significantly better than pupils in other regions. As Figure 4 shows below, 5 per cent of JSS3 pupils in the Eastern region performed 'at grade' or higher compared to the national average of 3 percent. At the SSS3 level, where 12 per cent of pupils in the Western region are performing at the JSS3 level or higher compared to the national average of 9 per cent of pupils. Whereas JSS3 pupils in the Eastern region perform significantly better than other regions, this lead does not remain at SSS3 level and only 5 per cent of SSS3 pupils are able to demonstrate JSS3 level or higher performance.



Figure 4: Regional disparities in maths performance



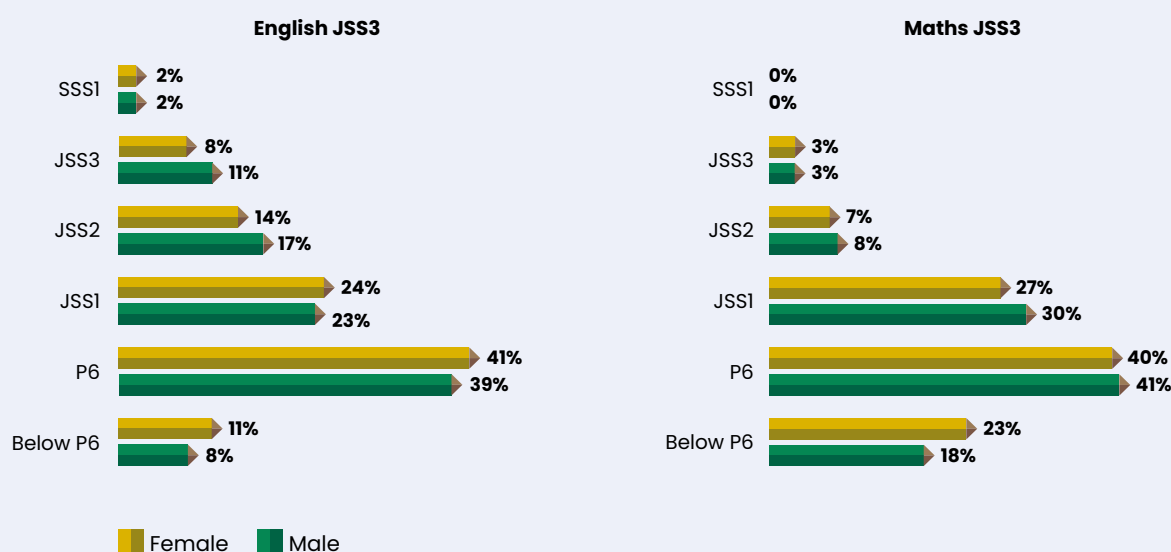
3.3 How does pupil learning vary by gender?

Boys perform better than girls on average across both grades and subjects covered in the BTS study. Girls are more likely to have skills limited to those expected at primary grade level, i.e. P6 or below, but struggle with skills demanded from higher grades. Compared to boys, significantly fewer girls performed the JSS3 level or above, for English and maths. For example, for English, 10 per cent of JSS3 girls performed at the JSS3 level or higher, compared to 13 per cent of boys.

Although gender differences in learning performance have previously also been established in the SGLAs, these differences were found to be more stark in the BTS study. Figure 5 below presents these findings.



Figure 5: Gender disparities in pupils' performance



The performance gap between the two genders also widens substantially from JSS3 to SSS3. As shown in Figure 5 above, 13 per cent of JSS3 boys performed at the JSS3 level or higher in English, compared to 10 per cent of JSS3 girls. A starker difference is seen for SSS3 pupils, where 32 per cent of boys are performing at the JSS3 level or higher, as compared to 19 per cent of girls. These results are very similar to gender differences seen in the third SGLA last year.

The large gaps in learning outcomes between the two genders are possibly driven by the different ways in which boys and girls were spending their time during school closures. Almost double the proportion of girls as boys (48 per cent vs 26 per cent respectively) reported having extra work at home. In discussion with respondents, it appears that girls were also more likely to be engaged in 'market selling' during the school closures, especially in poorer families which exacerbated the effect on girls' learning.

Girls were also more vulnerable and subject to sexual harassment and safety issues (see Section 6.1.1), and in some regions, parents spoke about being more concerned about girls' safety due to which they could not send them to private classes. Some CTA members claimed that boys had more opportunity to study because they were not confined to the house, like the girls were, because of safety issues. This meant they had access to tuitions, group classes, and often went out to study with friends.

Similarly, boys were required to do fewer chores at home compared to girls which meant that they could devote more time to studying. A significantly higher proportion of boys (81 per cent) reported studying at least 3 days a week during school closures compared to girls (70 per cent). Girls were twice as likely (48 per cent) to report having chores to do at home compared to boys (26 per cent). Many girls and CTA members agreed that boys generally had more time at hand to study and learn, perhaps explaining their better performance than girls.

"In my own observation girls have more tasks as compared to boys. I saw them doing most of the domestic work in the morning before coming to school every day while boys just dress up in the morning and come to school. You may also find that she [the girl pupil] is mature, she will also be responsible for cooking after school. This was the normal situation even before schools were closed [due to COVID-19] and the situation only got worse when schools were closed." (JSS School Principal, Southern Province)



"Another difference between boys and girls is that it is difficult for parents to release their girls to go out for classes and the parent too cannot afford the finance for a private teacher who will come and teach the child at home. This affects mostly the girls. I don't know for other places like Freetown, but for us in the provinces, we find it difficult to release our girls to out for private classes and yet some do not have the means to teach them or to hire private teachers to teach them. But in the case of boys, the parent will allow them to go out for classes." (SSS Teacher, North-Western province)



"The boys studied more than girls. The boys do not have more work to do. We the girls have more work to do at home." (Girl JSS pupil, Northern province)





3.4 How does pupil learning vary by type of school?

While measuring school-level indicators was not within the scope of the BTS study, some useful indicators were available from the EMIS 2019. Amongst these, the most important indicator was the pupil-teacher ratio (PTR), in addition to the status of the school i.e. mission, government, or private.

The PTR² serves as a broad indicator of teacher workload and the amount of individual attention a pupil is likely to receive from teachers. The numerator is the total number of pupils enrolled in a given JS or SS school, whereas the denominator is the total number of teachers teaching in that school. Schools that had both JSS and SSS sections were counted separately in each grade category, with the appropriate sampling weight. Evidence shows that the average PTR was relatively small and manageable for JS schools (26 pupils to a teacher), but much larger for SS schools (43 pupils to a teacher). Since there was a strong variation in PTRs across schools, we can understand whether pupil performance varies with PTRs. This is discussed next.

Pupil learning outcomes were shown to vary significantly between pupils in schools with large PTRs (greater than 30), and those with low PTRs, particularly for SSS3 pupils. The largest difference in scores was seen in English, with 36 per cent of SSS3 pupils in schools with low PTRs performing at the JSS3 level or higher, compared to 20 per cent of SSS3 pupils in schools with high PTRs.

Pupils in mission schools performed better in maths, compared to pupils in other types of schools, across both levels. 7 per cent of JSS3 pupils in mission schools performed 'at grade' or higher in maths, compared to 3 per cent of JSS3 pupils in non-mission schools. Similarly, 12 per cent of SSS3 pupils in mission schools performed at the JSS3 level or higher in maths, compared to 6 per cent of SSS3 pupils in non-mission schools.

Qualitative discussions also revealed that pupils attending certain types of schools had a much greater advantage during school closures compared to others. Children going to elite private schools were more likely to have studied as these schools used alternative methods of teaching, such as creating their own WhatsApp groups or online systems to teach their pupil, usually for a fee. Such avenues of learning were not available to government school pupils where most of the learning took place through a combination of ad-hoc measures (radio teaching, textbooks, notes).

“Yes, it varies and why I said it varies is because some private schools organised packages for their pupils. Some good private schools have online teachings. They prepared something for the children and engaged them online.” (SSS School Principal, Eastern province)



3.5 Can remoteness of school location predict pupil learning performance?

The BTS findings suggest that location was not a key predictor of pupil performance. There was no significant difference in performance between pupils in less and more remote schools for JSS3 pupils in English and maths, and for SSS3 pupils in maths. However, for SSS3 pupils in English, there was a significant relationship between remoteness of school and performance of SSS3 pupils only. In other words, SSS3 pupils' learning levels drop as we travel away from schools that are located near the district headquarter town, towards more remote schools. 26 per cent SSS3 pupils in less remote schools perform at JSS3 level or higher in English, compared to 17 per cent of pupils in more remote schools.

CTA members felt that schools in rural areas were not as well-resourced and prepared to support pupils during closures. They also felt that urban schools have better teachers and resources to help pupils in their learning. Children in remote areas are disadvantaged in the type of resources that are available to them. In addition to this, parental support is also said to be minimal in remote areas as parents are mostly preoccupied with sourcing for a livelihood for their household and do not have the motivation to make their children's education a priority. Other CTA members added that parents in the city usually value education more and are willing to pay extra money to see their children access quality education, which is in stark contrast to the financial constraints of households in remote areas.

² The average PTR counts teachers teaching both JSS and SSS grades once; while the PTR at JSS (SSS) counts all the teachers who teach in JSS-sampled schools (SSS-sampled schools), even if they also teach at the other levels. Information on numbers of teachers and pupil enrolment was collected from the EMIS 2019 dataset.



Some teachers also mentioned that there is a difference in mindset between the pupils studying in larger towns and those from rural areas. The former have the opportunity to be inspired by people who are role models in their area of practice, whereas this is usually not the case in rural areas.

“Well to me I do know that children in the urban communities have a lot of opportunities in terms of education and other aspect of lives as well. The reason is there are lots of well trained and qualify teachers in the urban communities who are well monitored by their authorities. That is the reason why most of the children in the urban communities sometimes perform very well than those in the rural communities.” (JSS Parent, Eastern province)



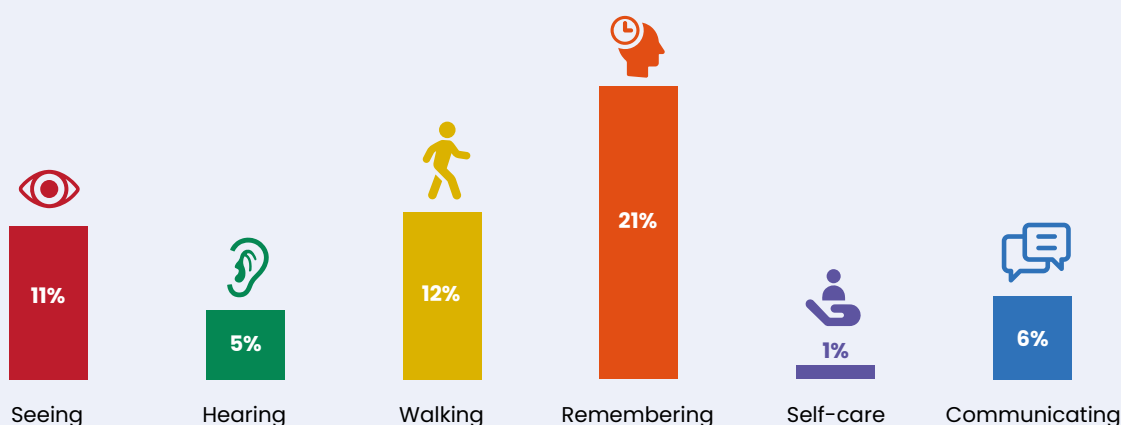
“The challenge is different from one town to the other towns, for instance if you are at Kambia town, a child will have influence to become somebody great in life because of the mentors that are available who serves as an inspiration. However, in the village, no mentors for the children to look up to, so they behave anyway.” (CTA Chairperson, JSS, North-Western province)



3.6 Learning outcomes of pupils with special needs

Pupils with special needs face multiple forms of discrimination, which leads to their exclusion from society and school. COVID-19 is likely to compound the challenges that pupils with special needs face in accessing education and performing well in school. Figure 6 shows the proportion of pupils that reported facing a special need as part of the BTS research. The type of difficulty most commonly reported was remembering and walking with 21 per cent and 12 per cent of pupils reporting these, respectively.

Figure 6: Types of special needs



Evidence suggests that difficulties³ in walking and remembering bear a slight negative correlation with JSS3 pupils' performance. 7 per cent of JSS3 pupils with difficulty walking were performing 'at grade' or higher in English compared to 12 per cent of pupils who did not report any difficulty in walking. Similarly, 10 per cent of JSS3 pupils who reported difficulty remembering were performing 'at grade' or higher, compared to 12 per cent of pupils who did not report any difficulty.

Difficulty in communicating is negatively correlated with SSS3 pupils' performance. Pupils that reported facing difficulty in communicating performed worse in maths with barely any pupils performing at the JSS3 level or higher compared to 9 percent of those that did not report facing any difficulty communicating.

³ This section presents findings from a subsample of 678 pupils from the BTS survey who reported some form of special need.

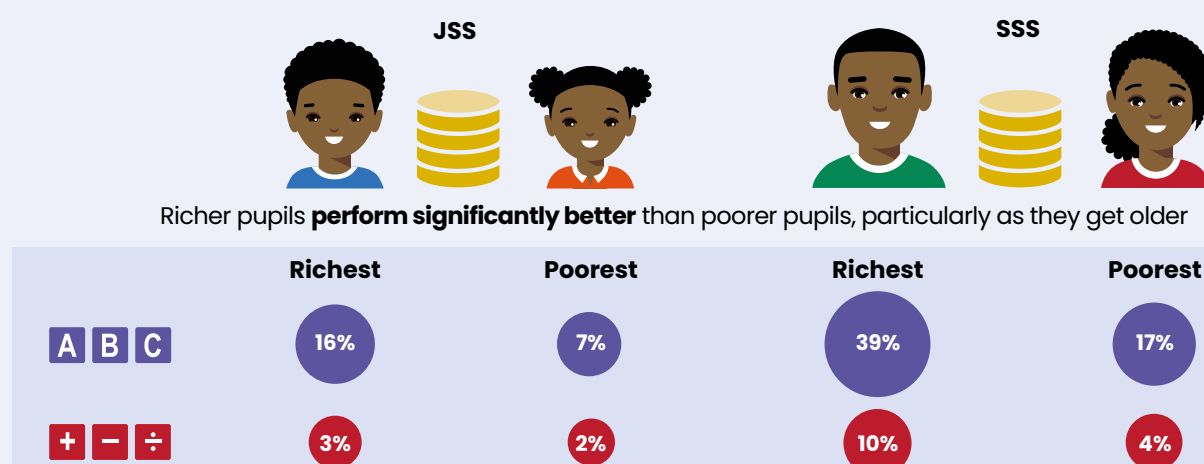


3.7 What is the relationship between pupils' test scores and family background?

Richer pupils perform significantly better than poorer pupils, particularly as they get older. The performance gap between pupils from the richest and the poorest households⁴ held across both grades and subjects, as shown in Figure 7 below. The largest performance gap between richest and poorest households was observed for SSS3 pupils in English. 39 per cent of richest SSS3 pupils were performing at the JSS3 level or higher in English, while 17 per cent of the poorest SSS3 pupils were performing at the same level in English. While this performance gap exists for JSS3 pupils, it is less pronounced. 16 per cent of richest JSS3 pupils were performing 'at grade' or higher in English, while 7 per cent of the poorest JSS3 pupils were performing at the same level in English.

Richer pupils were more likely to study and receive support to study compared to poorer pupils. A higher proportion of richer pupils reported studying during closures as well as studying daily. They were also more likely to have access to resources such as receiving support from a parent or sibling while studying, having a tutor, and a radio to listen to the radio teaching programme. On the other hand, pupils from the poorest households reported facing financial challenges, difficulties while studying when schools were closed, and a lack of access to necessities (electricity, required technology for learning, and washing and sanitation facilities), all of which disturbed the amount and quality of time spent studying.

Figure 7: Proportion of pupils performing at the JSS3 level or higher



Officials from the education system and CTA members emphasized the importance of family background on children's learning. Parents' education and wealth were mentioned as directly affecting how seriously children approached learning in the absence of schooling. Children belonging to families who were less wealthy had additional burdens of helping out in the household and with financial activities like farming, trading and selling. Many such parents were not always able to support their children by buying all the necessary learning materials due to limited financial resources at their disposal. As parents are usually busy in farming and selling, they are unable to take out the time to monitor their children's activities and ensure that they are spending time studying every day. On the other hand, parents who are highly educated themselves not only give more importance to their children's education but are also better placed to help their children while studying in their lessons.

“And the disadvantages part of it somehow affects the educational system because during [school closures] most children were not reading at home and some of their parents are not elite, the only time that child may have quality education is when schools are functioning. We also found out most parents are petty traders, so they don't have time to monitor their children.” (SSS School Teacher, Western province)



⁴ The richest and poorest households refer to the top 20 per cent and bottom 20 per cent of households in terms of assets.



In many cases, parents who were financially well-off chose to send their children to private schools instead of public ones, where children had access to more learning resources. Many respondents mentioned that private schools were able to conduct distance learning during school closures and are generally able to attract better teachers because of their financial resources. Especially during school closures, they were also able to hold extra classes for pupils as the rule of stopping extra classes only applied to public schools.

“For us that don't have the opportunity to take extra classes and buy more textbooks, it is very disappointing. Most of the time we have to go out there to our friends to borrow materials so that we can copy before we have the chance to read.”
(Girl pupil, JSS school, Western province)



“Well the fact is that a good number of people who attend private schools came from a strong financial background while those attending the public schools don't have a strong financial background. So private schools ensure some interventions to see the pupils continue to learn because they want to claim the fees because they depend on that for their living. So you may find out those children have the opportunity to learn more than people in public schools, although some of them benefitted.”
(Director of Inspectorate)



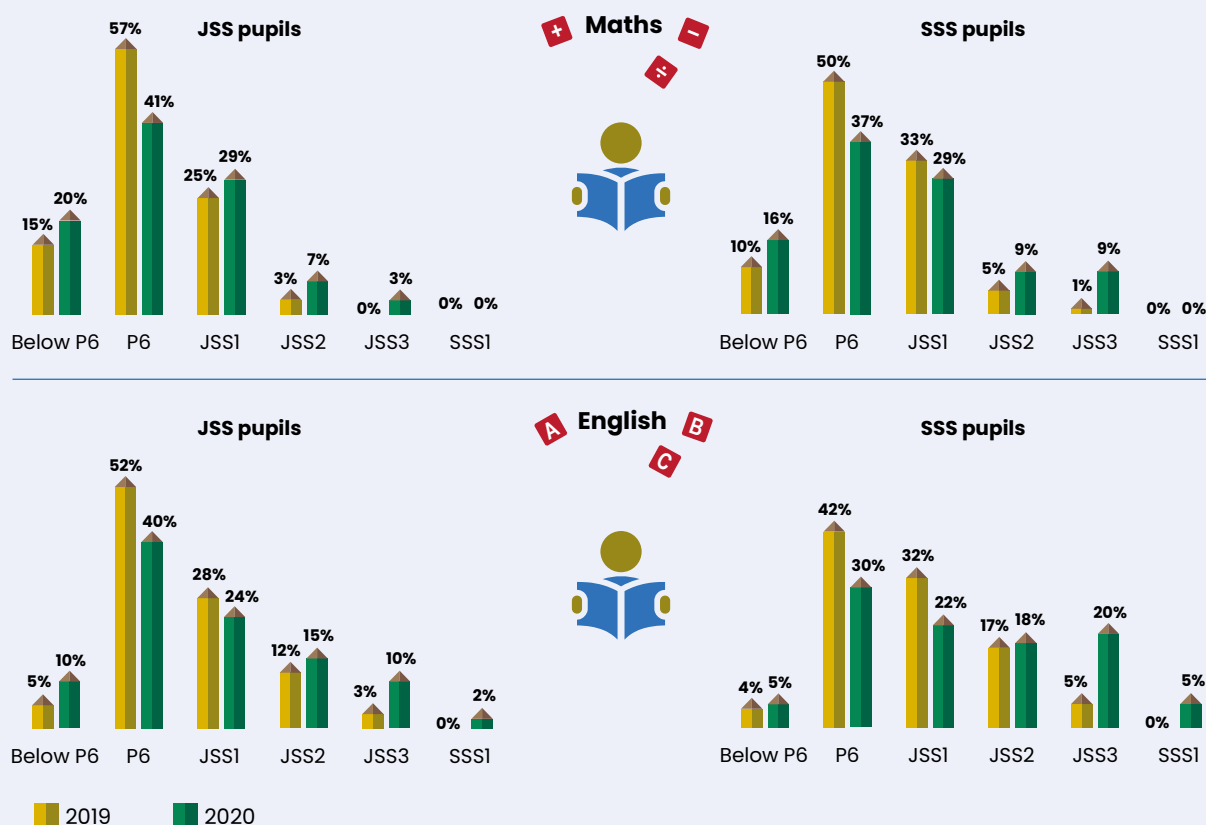
3.8 Comparing learning performance pre- and post- school closure

To see the impact of COVID-19 on learning levels essentially required a comparison of pupil performance for the same cohort of children (in this case JSS2/SSS2) before and after the school closure. The ex-ante (before COVID-19 school closure) was not possible because schools in Sierra Leone closed down in March 2020. However, learning levels from the May-June 2019 (JSS2/SSS2, end of academic year) cohort were a close proxy for this. For the ex-post (after COVID-19 school closure) the closest comparison group came from testing the JSS3/SSS3 cohort immediately after reopening (start of academic year) on the learning assessment tools. As such, despite the fact that the tests were administered to different grades and at different times of the academic year, the BTS study was designed in such a way that the SGLA 2019 cohort would serve as a close 'pre-COVID' comparison to the 'post-COVID' results of the BTS study.

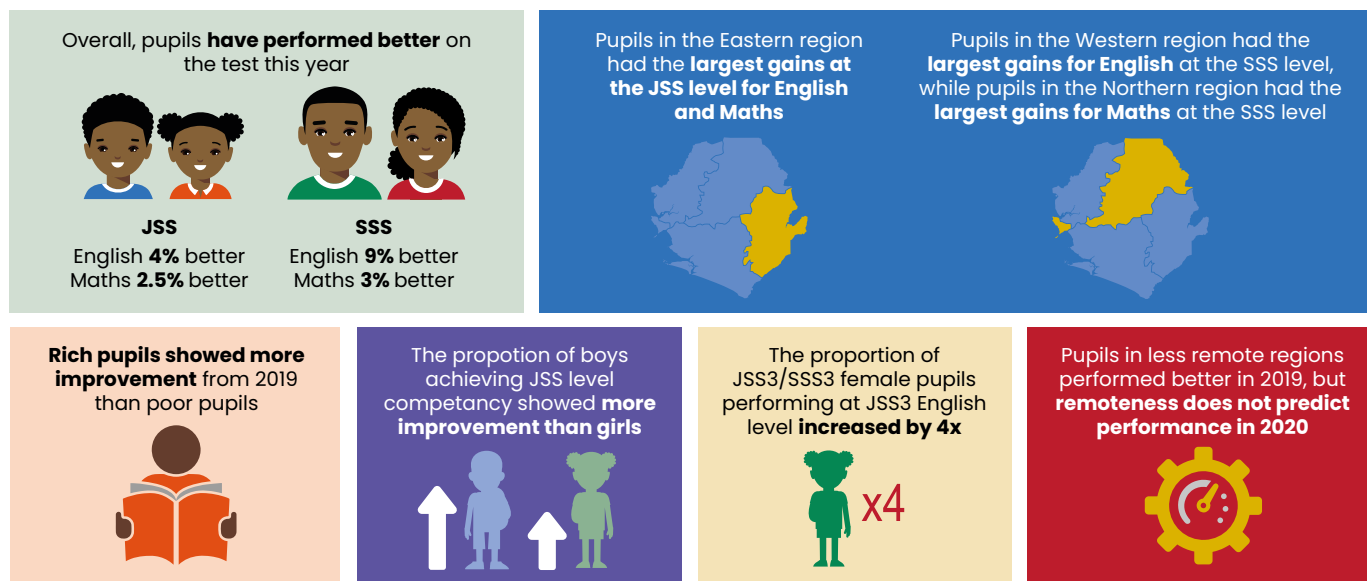
With the limitations of the comparison in mind, pupils learning performance was better in the BTS study compared to the SGLA (2019) with more pupils in 2020 performing at the JSS3 level or higher for both English and maths, and at both JSS3 and SSS3 levels. This is shown in Figure 8 below. 12 per cent of JSS3 pupils were performing at the JSS3 level or higher in 2020, compared to 3 per cent in 2019. Similarly, 25 per cent of JSS3 pupils were performing at the JSS3 level or higher in maths in 2020, compared to 5 per cent in 2019. However, even though more pupils are performing at higher levels in 2020 compared to 2019 and Sierra Leone seems to have averted a large learning loss after COVID, learning performance is still poor and well below expected standard as per the national curriculum.



Figure 8: Learning outcomes pre- and post- school closures



Furthermore, school closure may have resulted in increasing learning inequalities, as evidence suggests the improvements are driven mainly by boys, richer pupils, and pupils in certain regions. As depicted in the figure below, the performance of richer pupils improved more than that of poorer pupils since 2019 and also it was primarily boys who are pulling up the learning results. This is in line with other gender-effects observed in the BTS study. Similarly in terms of regional differences, pupils in the East showed biggest improvement at JSS level, while at SSS level the gain was driven primarily by pupils in the Western and Northern regions. As such, it is a sub-sample of pupils (boys, richer pupils, and those from certain regions) who pulled up the BTS (2020) learning score, while those who were already disadvantaged probably fell further behind.

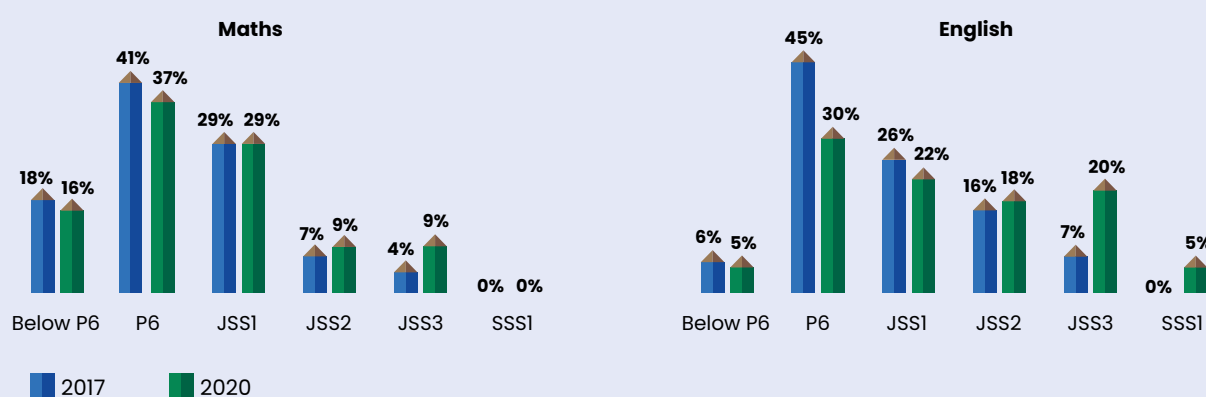




Box 7: Comparison of JSS2 pupils in SGLA 2017 with SSS3 pupils in BTS 2020

The Secondary Grade Learning Assessment Survey has been collecting information on pupil learning outcomes since 2017 by testing JSS2 and SSS2 grades each year. The significance of the BTS survey is that the SSS3 cohort in this study is the JSS2 cohort that was tested as part of the SGLA in 2017. This allows us to understand how the learning outcomes of the same cohort have changed over the course of 3 academic years, on average. The figure below compares the learning outcomes of JSS2 in 2017 with SSS3 in 2020.

Figure 9: Comparison of cohorts in maths and English



Pupil learning outcomes have significantly improved since 2017. 4 times the proportion of pupils are performing at the JSS3 level or higher in 2020 (25 per cent) compared to 2017 (7 per cent) in English, and twice the proportion in maths (9 per cent compared to 4 per cent). Despite the improvement in performance, SSS3 pupils are still far behind the expected performance at their level, with no pupils performing at the SSS level in maths.

The performance of boys has improved more when compared to girls, particularly in maths. In English and maths, 3 times the proportion of boys performed at the JSS3 level or higher in 2020 compared to 2017. However, twice the proportion of girls performed at the JSS3 level or higher in English in 2020 compared to 2017, with there being no significant improvement in maths.

Performance across all provinces has shown significant improvement in English and maths. Pupils in the Eastern region have shown the largest improvement in English from 2020, followed by pupils in the Southern region, with pupils in the Northern region showing the large improvement in maths.

4

**Learning resources:
What study materials
were available and
used by pupils during
school closure?**



4 Learning resources: What study materials were available and used by pupils during school closure?

To better situate findings on pupil performance, it is important to understand the learning resources available to pupils, and the activities that pupils were engaged in and the challenges they faced when schools were closed.

This section addresses the first of these themes and presents information on the learning materials used by pupils during school closures, and feedback from pupils on these materials. The key materials that are discussed in detail are Pupil Handbooks and the Radio Teaching Programme. Towards the end, the section discusses the level of support for learning that pupils received from various sources around them.

4.1 Self-study materials used

Learning materials that pupils had access to before schools closed were also the most commonly used during closures. These included lesson notes from teachers and friends, textbooks, and past examination papers. Figure 10 shows the most commonly used learning materials reported by pupils. Nearly 80 per cent of all pupils used notes from their teachers to study, while 70 per cent used textbooks, approximately 50 per cent of all pupils used notes from friends, and a similar percentage used past exam papers. However, the evidence showed that most schools did not provide learning materials to pupils when schools were closed, as only 20 per cent of pupils reported using material provided by their schools, with boys twice as likely to have reported using these materials.

Figure 10: Learning materials used during school closures



As will be detailed in Section 5, a majority of children spent some time studying during school closures, although the time spent varied widely depending on many factors like their grade, region, and family background. **While studying, children were heavily reliant on self-study materials like past notes and examination papers**, with a significantly larger proportion of pupils in SSS3, boys, and rich pupils reporting using past exam papers compared to others. Since many children did not receive any learning materials from their schools, pupils had to rely on their own notes and those of friends to be able to study during school closures. In some cases, schools provided pupils with extra materials and photocopies to aid them in their studying.

“I was using my notes and texts books to practice and study. I used them to solve assignments that were given to us during school hours before the outbreak of COVID-19. I used to solve those assignments again so that I did not forget them.” (Boy SSS pupil, Eastern Province)



However, **relying majorly on teachers', friends' and their own notes for learning became problematic in some cases.** Some pupils mentioned that relying on just their notes was a hindrance because their notes on certain subjects were not updated or complete as schools shut abruptly. Some SSS pupils were particularly affected because their syllabus changed once they returned to school. This made their notes from the time before schools closed redundant, but they had to use them anyway because most pupils were unable to purchase new learning materials.

“I was using the materials my parents bought for me in English language, literature. But the saddest part of it is that most of these have been changed, we are now using a new syllabus especially for literature.” (Boy SSS pupil, Western Province)





Overall, the study showed that pupils Eastern and Western provinces were the most likely to have access to textbooks with 70 per cent of pupils having used textbooks to study in these regions. Pupils in the North-Western province also mentioned using textbooks regularly in the qualitative discussions.

Pupils from richer backgrounds also had access to more learning resources and support compared to poorer pupils. They were more likely to be able to afford more traditional materials like textbooks, as well as the technologies (e.g. radio, television and phone) required for distance learning programmes. A quarter of poorer pupils (25 per cent vs 11 per cent of richer pupils) on the other hand even lacked access to basic necessities like light and electricity in their homes. In addition, 71 per cent of the richest pupils reported receiving help and support to study during the school closure, which is significantly higher than 54 per cent of the poorest pupils reporting this. In most cases the support came from members of the pupils immediate household including parents, elder siblings and relatives living with the child. Richer pupils in particular also reported access to external support from private tutors or lessons which is discussed in more detail in Section 4.4.1.

Significantly more children at the SSS level were also using their phones and the internet for studying. Children from rich backgrounds, those in the Western region, and children living in less remote regions were also the most likely to use material from the internet to study. However, using the internet to study was not very common, because not all parents could afford giving access to both a phone and internet to their children. Approximately all rich pupils had access to a phone, while only 50 per cent of poorer pupils had access to one.

“Before the coming of COVID19, my father compiled all the subjects that I am doing at school with questions and answer. I was using textbooks to study at home.”
(Boy JSS pupil, North-western Province)



“I did not have access to enough learning materials like textbooks except if I went to a friend then I would be able to get some of the books that I needed. I have a friend whom I think is struggling to study because every evening, he passes here to meet his friends to study. So, I think he does not have a convenient place to study at home that is why he is leaving his place to join his friends and the problem will be a light problem because his friends have light.”
(Boy, SSS3 pupil, Northern Province)



“Things vary just like what we were saying. A poor man will not be able to buy megabytes for his/her child all the time for the child to have access to the internet. But for the child of the rich man this is a common thing for them.”
(JSS Teacher, Northern province)



4.2 Pupil handbooks

The BTS study found that pupil handbooks facilitated ongoing learning during school closures, but equitable access and conditionalities associated with distribution remained a challenge.

4.2.1 Feedback on quality of pupil handbooks

Pupils who reported using the pupil handbooks were asked to share feedback on their experience of the handbooks. The questions to pupils on the handbooks were clustered around:

- Appropriateness of pupil handbooks.
- Structure and ease of use.
- Appropriateness of the level of difficulty of content.
- How handbook content and examples relate to pupil's lives.
- Whether parents are encouraging the use of pupil handbooks.



“Well, I think the handbooks are written in a simple language that is clear were someone to read it. The child can read it and try to understand because there are examples, illustrations and assignments. So, somebody can just read, and if there is a parent maybe they can guide the child. So, the book is pupil friendly I can say.” (CTA member, SSS School, Western province)



“The book is a very good material to read because it is very simple and it has a lot of exercises in it with questions and answers. It helps you to read on your own and understand everything so it is not like other materials that you can find very difficult to read.” (Girl, JSS3 pupil, Eastern Province)



In general, pupils who used the handbooks found them helpful and clear. Nearly 90 per cent of pupils said that the handbooks that helped them understand concepts that they previously struggled with, and a similar proportion mentioned that they find the handbooks work even better when used along with their school textbooks. 78 per cent of pupils reported they find the handbooks helpful when they are self-studying. Pupils said the handbooks explained concepts well and there were helpful practice exercises to clarify concepts.

Pupils' feedback on the handbooks is summarised in Table 4 Feedback on Pupil Handbooks below. It is useful to note that these are perceptions, self-reported by pupils themselves. Thus, the responses may contain an element of social desirability bias to answer in accordance with what pupils expect the interviewer wants to hear. This would bias results towards answering positively when questioned on pupil handbooks.

Table 4: Feedback on Pupil Handbooks

Pupils find that the handbooks are...	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
Useful for understanding difficult concepts	88	12
Best when used with school textbooks	89	11
Helpful during self-study	78	22
Difficult to use	55	45
Unclear on what they are asking me to do	57	43

Despite this, there were mixed reviews on the ease of understanding of pupil handbooks with over half the pupils (57 per cent) not being clear on the instruction. Similarly, 55 per cent of pupils reported the handbooks were difficult to use, and it took them a long time to study using them. Half the pupils also mentioned that they could not relate to the content of the handbooks and find it difficult. In addition, 47 per cent of pupils reported that they did not receive any help when using the handbooks and used to study them on their own. While this might be a consequence of reduced instruction time as a result of school closures, it might help explain why **there was no correlation of learning outcomes with the usage of pupil handbooks.**

“Pupils were having some challenges with how to use the pupil handbooks. Most of the examples were from textbooks, and we also have problem of marking because the class is too large, so we normally don't have the time to mark every pupil's work individually, so for that reason most pupils didn't treat their work seriously. Some pupils do not even open the [hand]books the bring them back brand new.” (Principal, SSS School, Western Province)



School and community respondents also suggested that even if children had access to pupil handbooks, some of them may still struggle to use them on their own at home. Children would need guidance and support with unfamiliar content and terminology in the handbooks. However not all parents were capable or educated to provide this.



“I believe that one of the possible challenges is that some of these [hand]books are new books and some pupils will face the challenge of following up on the sequences that is supposed to be followed [in the handbook] as they may not have someone to guide them.” (Teacher, SSS School, North Western Province)



“Yes, definitely pupils who can read and write can benefit from pupil handbooks, but those who can't read - some of them will have challenges especially in pronouncing some words in English and even in solving some maths problems.” (KII Asst. Director Secondary Schools)



In cases where support to use pupil handbooks was not directly available at home, **pupils reported working through the problem areas with a friend, or where available, with a tutor or teacher in the local community.** In other cases, pupils kept note of where they faced difficulty and shared these with their school teacher once schools resumed.

Therefore, while some children used the handbooks to cover material left as a result of school closure; others were restricted only to what had been taught to them in school. This is because they were most comfortable with this and could relate to it from their existing learning materials. However, this created gaps because the academic year ended earlier than routine due to COVID-19.

“The Pupil handbooks were very useful because you know we missed the third term so I was using those books to cover the topics that we should have covered in the third term.” (Boy, SSS3 pupil, North Western Province)



“I was having problems with mathematics, I had challenges in using these books. You know mathematics, you will need someone to introduce the topic to you. So, I would meet my friend that I told you about. He was helping me with all the problems that I had.” (Boy, SSS3 pupil, North Western Province)



“I was fortunate to take my pupil handbook home even though the principal told us to leave them in school when schools closed. I used to find it difficult to pronounce some words from the pupil handbook and I use to write these words in a note book. I brought the notebook to school when schools reopened for my teachers to teach me how to pronounce these words. I can pronounce all those difficult words now.” (Boy JSS3 pupil, Eastern Province)



4.2.2 Access, availability and usage

Just under 50 per cent of pupils used pupil handbooks during school closures. This suggests that while pupil handbooks remain a key learning resource, usage fell slightly during school closure compared to in previous years, especially at the JSS level.⁵ This is indicated in Table 5 below. Of the children using pupil handbooks during school closure, boys were significantly more likely to report doing so compared to girls (54 per cent compared to 41 per cent). Similarly, JSS pupils and pupils from richer households were also more likely to use pupil handbooks compared to SSS and poorer pupils, respectively.

Table 5: Use of pupil handbooks

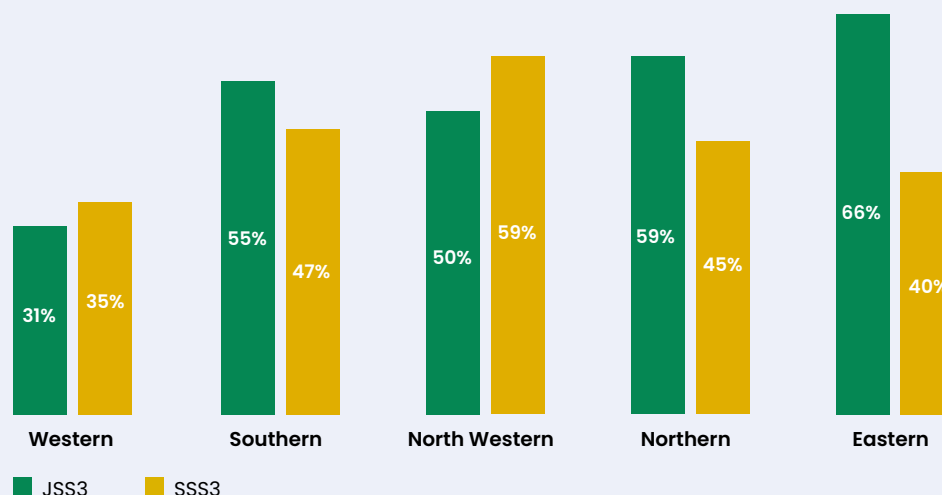
Percentage of pupils	JSS	SSS
Before school closures (2019)	63%	46%
During school closures (2020)	↓ 51%	↓ 42%

⁵ The usage of Pupil Handbooks during the BTS study is limited to at-home usage only. However, the usage during SGLA 2019 included both at-home and in-school usage.



The usage of the handbooks was also found to differ substantially across provinces and schools, as displayed in Figure 11 below. **Pupils in the Western region were the least likely to report using pupil handbooks in the BTS study.** Approximately a third of the JSS3 pupils in the Western region reported using the handbooks compared to two-thirds of JSS3 pupils in the Eastern region. While JSS3 pupils were more likely to use the handbooks in general, in the North- Western region, more SSS3 pupils reported using the handbooks compared to JSS3 pupils.

Figure 11: Use of Pupil Handbooks across regions



Limited use of pupil handbooks was driven by limited access to the handbooks. 90 per cent of pupils who did not use the handbooks mentioned that they did not use them because they did not have access to them when schools were closed. Qualitative findings suggest access challenges on both the demand and the supply side.

For instance, some children were not able to use pupil handbooks because of the fear and hesitation on part of their parents to comply with the conditionalities of usage. Pupil handbooks are provided by the MBSSE and parents are required to sign an undertaking to return the handbooks in the same condition at the end of the term. Pupils and community stakeholders referenced to the financial implications of non-compliance because of which they didn't agree to take onboard the handbooks. There appears to be an element of misunderstanding here, as the intention was to have people 'take care of the books' and not for any sort of financial reprimand. Despite this there was mention of extreme action, with one school in the Southern region, for instance, threatening to handover pupils who didn't return their handbooks to the police.

“It is not only in this community that parents are faced with challenges in terms of signing for the government text books [pupil handbooks]. How can you say that a parent has to sign for a book and if the book gets dirty the parents will have to pay a fine of 500,000 Leones when most parents cannot even earn much in a month? We want the government and the school authorities to revisit those conditions so that parents can have the chance to sign for the text books for their children because it will make no sense if the books are for children and they don't have access to it.” (CTA member, JSS School, Eastern Province)



“Some children are worried about the handbook because some of them are rough when it comes to handling of textbooks. They will not be able to take care of the handbooks given to them and if they are unable to return the handbooks to the school as instructed, then the parent will be the one to pay for the book.” (CTA member, SSS school, North Western Province)





In addition, it appears that as per policy, most schools collected the second term pupil handbooks back from children before school closed in March 2020. In some cases, the collection of results was made conditional on this return, so pupils had no choice but to hand them back. Since the next (third) term's handbooks had not yet been distributed, it meant many children did not have access to any type of handbooks during school closure in the first place. There was evidence of inconsistencies in application of the policy both across and within school with some teachers reportedly collecting the handbooks back while others did not. In some cases, children reported borrowing or sharing with friends, but the strict conditionalities around usage and return made this tricky.

It is unclear whether MBSSE had a particular plan around managing the transition of pupil handbooks across the school closure period. Some references suggest that pupils should have had handbooks at home with them, but others indicate that handbooks had been supplied specifically to (out-going) examination classes and not generally to all pupils since they were school property that had to be managed for reuse.

Finally, physical copies of the MBSSE pupil handbooks are provided first to government and government assisted schools. This meant that **some children in private and community schools did not have access to handbooks**. In schools where supply or quantities of the handbooks were short, groups of four to five pupils had been asked to share and, in these cases too, usually only the child with possession of the handbook was able to use the pupil handbook

“Well we collected the handbooks from them. We often give them those books by terms because of the laws given to us by government. So, before the commencement of the school exams we collected all those handbooks from them, they did not take them home.” (Teacher, SSS school, Northern Province)



“[Pupil 1] We were not using pupil handbooks since the school asked us to return them on the 31st of March... Some form masters allowed us to take them home, but others did not... [Pupil 2] Well I was not using the handbook because my father kept it aside, saying he didn't want to be involved in a government case, so I returned my at the time of collecting my result.” (Girls, SSS3 pupils, Western region)



“The pupil handbooks books were provided for examination classes only and at the end of the day pupils have to return the handbooks back to us because we have to resupply to the current handbooks for the next batch. Therefore, if you took the exams, you have to return the packages [handbooks] back to us because it belong to the school.” (KII Director Inspectorate, MBSSE)



4.3 Radio Teaching Programme

In early April 2020, the MBSSE and TSC launched a radio teaching programme for children and adolescents covering the core curriculum subjects for primary to senior secondary level education. This followed immediately in response to the closure of schools on the 31st of March 2020 and built off the country's experience with radio teaching following the Ebola outbreak in 2014. The timing of the BTS study provides an excellent opportunity to understand the effects of the radio teaching programme on the learning experience of children when schools were closed. The following sections look at this in more detail.

4.3.1 Access, availability and usage

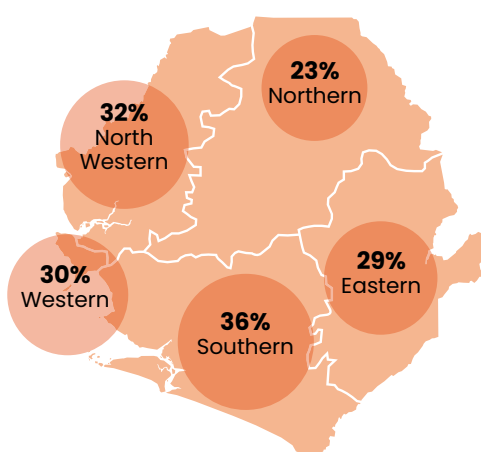
Despite the rapid roll-out of radio teaching, nearly 70 per cent of children did not have access or were not listening in to the programme for various reasons. Only 29 per cent of pupils reported using the radio teaching programme during school closures, and it was mentioned during discussions that this was not a regular activity. Amongst those who listened to the program, nearly 70 per cent reported that they listened to the programme at least 2-3 times a week, while only a third had used the dial-in option.

“Well the government did the right thing, but more preparation could be done to support the pupils during school closure. Let's take for instance the radio teaching program, the preparation for this was very poor as a lot of children in the rural communities didn't actually have access to listen to the program because some didn't have a radio and also the timing of the program was an issue.” (CTA member, JSS School, Eastern Province)





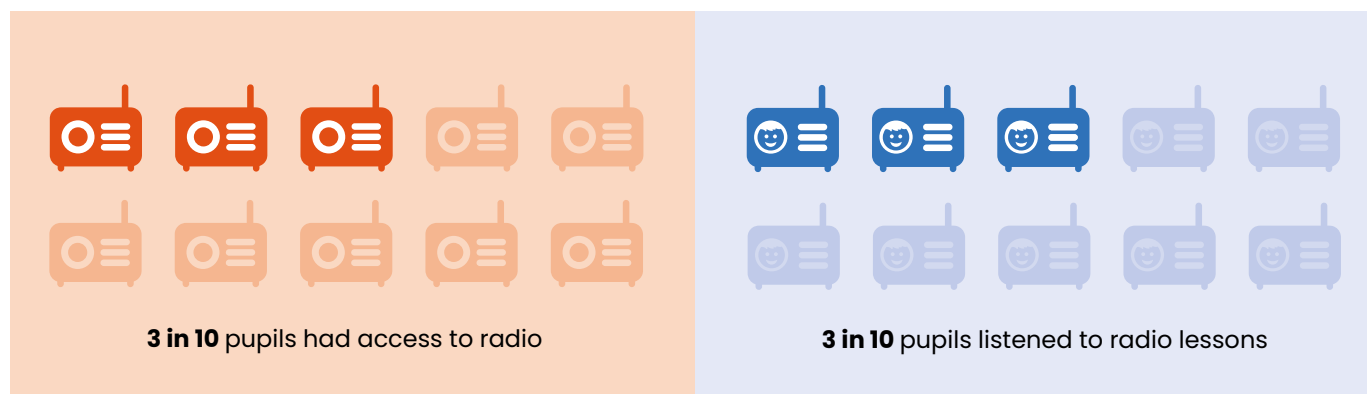
There was also variation in terms of who was listening to the radio teaching with **richer pupils and boys clearly more likely to have listened to the programme compared to other pupils**. Over 30 per cent of all boys reported having listened to the programme, compared to 23 per cent of all girls. Similarly, a significantly larger proportion of richer pupils reported listening to the programme than poorer pupils (41 per cent compared to 15 per cent). Region-wise, pupils in the East and North-West were the most likely to have listened to the programme, with pupils from the Northern and Western regions the least likely to have listened to the programme. These regional variations are not significant.



Looking deeper to understand the access challenges, the BTS survey found that access to radio sets⁶ was limited and only 29 per cent of pupils reported having one, with the regional distribution shown above. Pupils in the Southern and North-Western regions were most likely to have access to a radio. In addition, there were competing demands on the device in some cases with other members of the household using them for various reasons.

Respondents suggested that the radio programme during Ebola had gone in tandem with distribution of radio sets, however this time the roll-out was limited to airing of the lessons alone. This was said to be restrictive especially for poorer pupils without access to radio sets. In some cases, the community or notables got together to circumvent this by arranging a joint airing for all the local children in a public location, however this was not always so. There was also evidence of limited distribution of radio sets (government, partner and non-governmental) especially in the West and North West, and for marginalised pupils and girls.

Pupils and the radio teaching programme



“Most of the children attending this school come from poor backgrounds. So for the families to even provide a radio to listen to the programme is a serious challenge. The only children that had this opportunity were those whose parents are elite and also have the financial support to listen to the radio teaching. Some children may want to listen, but they don’t have the resources or someone to motivate them.” (Principal, SSS School, Western Province)



“Well I was not regular in listening to the radio teaching because I was not the owner of the radio. It belongs to my father and sometime when the radio teaching would be aired he might not be around. So, it was only on Mondays that I had the opportunity to listen to the programme... as for the television we don’t own that facility.” (Girl, SSS3 pupil, Western Province)



“The radio teaching program helped, but some children come from homes that cannot access radio and for them the learning process was slow because they come from homes without radio facility... My own younger brothers and sisters are down in the villages and they were not even getting the radio teaching program.” (CTA member, SSS School, Western Province)



⁶ Note that radio teaching could also be tuned in via television or mobile; however, this would not affect the proportion of pupils (29 per cent) who reported listening to radio lessons



Children also faced technological challenges with access including poor or no signal reception in some locations. Pupil and community respondents, especially in more remote schools reported that the quality of reception was very poor which made it difficult to follow the programme. It was positive to note that MBSSE and TSC representatives were aware of this feedback and had taken steps to improve it early on by involving partners and local radio stations to improve coverage and reception. While this had improved the situation in some cases, and a number of respondents confirmed that coverage of the current radio programme was much better than that of the previous Ebola programme, issues still remained in some locations.

Some parallel television lessons were also being aired by the SLBC and private partners and children at times preferred to listen in to those because the frequency was better and there was also visual. For instance, community representatives in the North and North West mentioned a free Gambian teaching channel that was available in their locality. Pupils also watched the SLBC Learning Garage.

In addition, a large number of respondents complained of a lack of resources to operate the radios. Problems with electricity and batteries were commonly reported. As discussed in Section 6.1.3 pupils and parents complained that they did not have the money to continue replacing batteries for their radio sets, and when faced with a choice they were likely to spend on other non-negotiables such as food.

“The radio frequency was very poor [in our area] and one could not learn because the voice cracks mostly and nothing was clearly heard during the teachings.” (Boy, JSS3 pupil, Eastern Province)



“Very few pupils were able to continue with their learning... Even the radio teaching program and the television program was not reaching most of the pupils in many communities... the radio teaching program was not effective in Bombali. The radio and television teaching program were reaching us here in Makeni, but not all the pupils had access to sit down and listen to the radio teaching program.” (Parent, JSS School, Northern Province)



“There was a free Gambian channel on television that was also having a teaching program, some pupils were able to follow that channel. They were teaching all subjects including accounting, physics, chemistry, integrated science, agriculture and the other subjects. They had a fixed timetable... and taught throughout the week with revision on Saturday and Sunday.” (CTA member, JSS School, Northern Province)



“When you talk about technology, we must consider electricity, because even if you want to use your phone to listen to the radio teaching if the phone is not charged you will not be able to do so. Even in Freetown we have challenges with electricity, so one can imagine in the rural areas - these challenges are all over and has a great impact on this radio teaching.” (CTA member, SSS School, Western Province)



“Most children whose parents were working at the mines are no longer working anymore. So the mother or father will prefer to use the money to feed their children instead of buying batteries for a radio device And as it is at this point, a battery is sold at Le 5000.” (CTA member, SSS School, North Western)



Finally, in some cases access was limited by a lack of knowledge regarding the schedule of lessons and timing clashes with other engagements of children. The radio programme for secondary grades went on air during the afternoon (JSS) and evening (SSS) hours and a timetable of sessions had been prepared and shared with parents and teachers and also published online and in the news. While some respondents, especially at the school level confirmed they had seen this, a number of pupils and their parents were not aware of the lesson schedule. In addition, children reported that they would often be in the farm, doing household chores or selling in the market when the lessons aired mid-day and this meant that they couldn't tune in. At times, children also went to play football with their friends rather than to sit and listen to radio lessons.

“I wasn't listening because we didn't have the sensitization that they are teaching on the radio and I didn't know the time they are doing it.” (Girl, SSS3 pupil, Northern Province)



“As for me, I was interested in listening to the radio teaching program, but anytime I would sit beside the radio to listen to the radio teaching my mother will always call me to help her with some domestic work.” (Boy, JSS3 pupil, Western Province)





4.3.2 Feedback on quality of radio teaching

Although pupils' use of the radio teaching programme was not correlated with learning outcomes, those pupils who did manage to listen to the programme found it useful. Pupil responses are summarised in Table 6 below. 97 per cent of SSS3 pupils and 92 per cent of JSS3 pupils who listened to the radio teaching programme mentioned that the programme helped them learn when schools were closed. This was also confirmed in discussion where pupils reported the radio teaching had helped them understand concepts and catch-up where there were gaps. TSC representatives appreciated this and reported receiving positive feedback on their lessons even from children in remote areas, though they were aware that not everyone was listening and benefiting from the radio programme.

“I was listening to the radio teaching program because it was helping me understand the topics that I was finding difficult initially... sometimes it refreshes my memory especially for topics that we have covered in school and at times the program gives me a clue of what the topic is about so if I read a book later, I will understand easily.” (Boy, SSS3, North Western Province)



“I did gain knowledge from the radio teaching program. I misplaced my books when I was in Form 1, but I was able to get back my lost notes by listening to the radio teaching program. I am thankful to them.” (Boy, JSS3 pupil, Southern Province)



Table 6: Feedback on the Radio Teaching Programme

Pupils find that the radio teaching programme ...	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
Helped them learn when schools were closed	94	6
Was easy to understand	78	22
Should continue even after schools reopen	92	6
Was difficult to follow	52	48

Radio lessons were well structured, and facilitators were said to cover the required parts of a lesson. The concept and outline of the session was first presented, before introducing content and then wrapping up with practice and exercise. MBSSE and TSC representatives confirmed that the lessons were carefully structured around the curriculum and were taught by experienced teachers who were familiar with the BECE and WASSCE system. Some pupils found the pace of delivery too fast, but others said the facilitators took their time to explain a concept well. At times, children complained that it was so slow that they became distracted and bored of listening.

“When they were teaching [in the radio lessons], they were teaching for every child to understand. Even if you are in a remote part of the country, once you had access to a radio and the child has listening ability, the child will understand; because they were really taking their time to explain. They explain a topic well, define all definitions in that topic before going to next topic.” (CTA member, JSS School, Western Province)



“The man that was teaching English was very good because he made references to text books and also solved past questions. To check his teaching, even though I was not writing but I looked at the textbook for comparison and he was teaching the right thing...I did follow up and solve the assignments, but the assignments are not presentable is just to help out yourself at home.” (Boy, SSS3 pupil, Western Province)





There are somewhat more mixed reports on how pupils engaged with radio lessons. 80 per cent of pupils listening to the lessons self-reported that they practised what they had learnt on their own once the lesson was over. However, qualitative discussions reveal that many children were not motivated to complete the practice exercises because no one would check them. Teachers were not around, and parents also struggled to monitor and support their wards closely during the lessons because they had to attend to chores as well as business outside the house. This is confirmed by the fact that 85 per cent of pupils reported listening to the lessons on their own, without support from parents or relatives although some of the initial motivation to listen in came from family members.

Although there was a dial-in option for pupils to call and ask questions, only 37 per cent of pupils listening to lessons said that they had ever used it. Teaching via radio was, somewhat understandably, more one-sided in this sense and pupils reported they missed the face-to-face interaction with their teachers and peers. The dial-in option was nonetheless a useful source of feedback for the MBSSE and TSC on their programme.

A quarter of the pupils who listened to the programme found it difficult to understand, while half (52 per cent) struggled to follow what was being taught. This could be due to a number of factors. Firstly, 15 per cent of pupils mentioned that they could not hear the programme clearly. All radio teaching was also delivered in English language and the lack of contextualisation into local languages became problematic for children who were not entirely fluent in English. In addition, pupils in the provinces reported that they could not understand the accent or pronunciation of the teachers, many of whom were Freetown based.

“I was not doing the homework simply because there was no way the teachers will be able to look at the homework.”
(Girl, SS3 pupil, North Western Province)



“Children are not interested to listen to the radio programme at all.... We the parents that supposed to monitor them, but we normally go out in the morning to find food for them, so it is very difficult. So, we are very happy that schools are now open so we now have some rest because there must a teacher that will monitor them in school.” (Parent, SSS School, Western Province)



“All they [the radio programme teachers] do is just teach and go, If the teacher is teaching for example and you left behind, you will not have any way to tell the teacher to go back. That was my problem.”
(Boy, SSS3 pupil, North Western Province)



“You know in teaching, the learning platform should be 50-50. If the teacher talks 50 per cent of the time, the pupils also should talk for 50 per cent. However, in this virtual program the pupils did not have the access to ask questions directly. After solving a particular problem some pupils might want to ask questions, but they never had that opportunity to ask questions directly. Nonetheless pupils were given a phone number where they can text their questions so that when the teacher comes for subsequent classes they can answer.” (Parent, JSS School, Western Region)



“Sometime the frequency was not very clear, and as a result of that you find it very difficult to follow the teaching or to understand the conversation.”
(Girl, SSS3 pupil, Eastern Province)



“For me the radio teaching program was given me two problems, first the frequency was not clear and secondly the kind of English that they were speaking... the English was too big and not all of us were brilliant enough to understand them.” (Girl, JSS3 pupil, North Western Province)





Pupils complained a lot of material was covered in the lesson, and often this was targeted at examination grades. Radio lessons were grouped by level (pre-school, primary, junior secondary and senior secondary) with much of the focus was on examination grade content given the late-summer BECE and WASSCE exams. While this was helpful in preparing pupils who were to sit their exams, others struggled to cope. Teaching higher order concepts (e.g. from the JSS3 curriculum) or exam materials meant that children who were currently at a more foundational level (say in JSS1) found it difficult to follow. Although there was later recognition to break sessions down by specific grades (especially for core subjects like maths) this had not been done for all subjects and grades.

In addition, radio lessons were audio-only for the most part, and pupils struggled with understanding particularly for more conceptual subjects like maths and the sciences. Pupils and school representatives reported that it was relatively easy to teach and pick an English story or grammar from the radio. But this became much more challenging for pupils when it came to understanding a formula or physics concept just through hearing it. They felt audio-visual resources would be more helpful in such cases.

Nonetheless, over 90 per cent of pupils confirmed that they would like to see the radio programme continue as a learning resource for them even after schools reopen. More familiarity with technical platforms for learning would also help pupils in the future. In addition, girls in the North Western province indicated that they find the general advice given via the programme on issues of girls' safety and child well-being helpful.

“The radio teaching program particularly helped those pupils who were in the examination classes i.e. WASSCE and BECE. I knew what time the teaching would come on so I would call my children to attend and they gained a lot out of it. Even when I questioned them after their exams, they were able to tell me.” (Teacher, SSS School, North Western Province)



“The radio programme was not tailored to everyone because ... for the syllabus sometimes they chose topics from a particular subject that would be too advance and they may not be the first [introductory] topics one would teach, so some pupils will find it very difficult to cope.” (Principal, SSS School, Western Province)



“I would say the radio programme is benefitting Art pupils because listening to the radio teachings is like listening to stories... for me, you cannot tell me that you are solving maths through the radio. Because even in class, the teacher will tell you and will write out a maths problem for the children to understand.” Teacher, SSS School, Eastern Province)



“Well if I rate the programme in terms percentage, I will rate them at 40 per cent because I was really not satisfied with the teaching. The lessons were good, but we were not seeing the one teaching.” (Girl, SS3 pupil, Western Province)



“The radio programme was useful, and we should continue encouraging them. Our pupils face a lot of difficulties in universities and other places because we are not used to the online learning including radio... children lack the understanding of what they are saying.” (CTA member, SSS School, North Western Province)



“I like the way they were teaching, and I was able to understand them very well. I also like the advice that they were providing especially for us girls and our parents as well.” (Girl, JSS3 pupil, North Western Province)

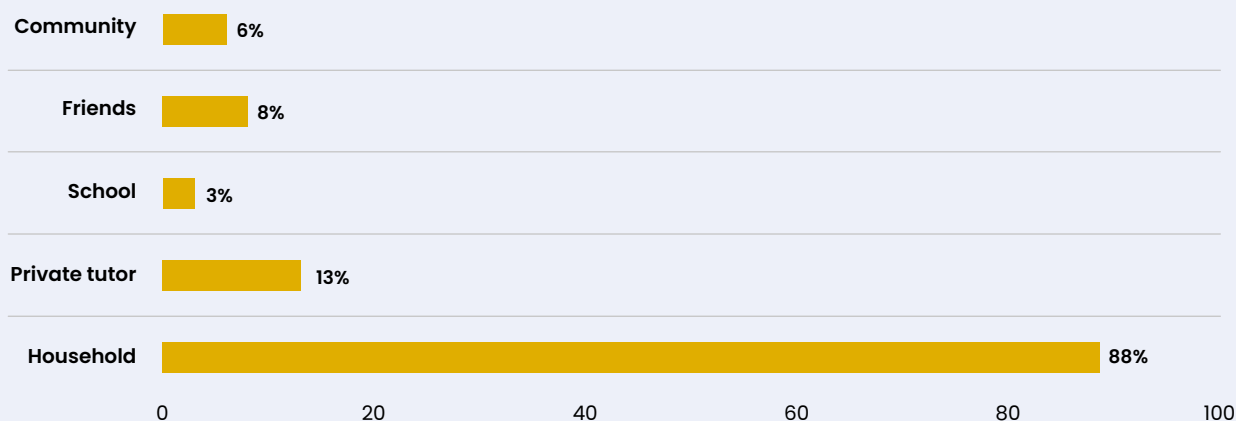




4.4 Other learning support at household and community level

A majority of pupils reported receiving support to study when schools were closed with 62 per cent of all children mentioned receiving support to study in many other ways. This support may have been in the form of provision of lights for studying, supervision and guidance when they struggled with some topics, extra classes or paid tuitions and sometimes mere encouragement from parents and peers. JSS3 pupils and pupils in less remote regions were the most likely to report having received support to study. The figure below illustrates the sources from which children received help to study when schools were closed

Figure 12: Support to pupils during COVID-19



Most pupils mentioned receiving additional help from someone in their household. As shown in Figure 12, 88 per cent of pupils who studied when schools were closed reported receiving help from someone in their family, while 13 per cent reported having private tutors to help them learn in the absence of schools. Barely any pupils (3 per cent) mentioned receiving any kind of learning support from their schools.

4.4.1 Tutions and private lessons (external to school)

Pupil performance had a slight correlation with access to private tutors, although just over one in ten (13 per cent) pupils reported using tutors. While traditional learning in schools was discontinued during COVID-19 closures, pupils who had the support and financial means found ways to continue learning through private classes and tuitions. Many children stated they were having extra classes, sometimes paid and other times unpaid, which were extremely helpful during school closures. Depending on the district, some children were attending these extra classes every day and following a routine, while others would attend these on an ad-hoc basis.

More SSS3 pupils reported using external tutors than JSS3 (18 per cent versus 11 per cent respectively), possibly because they were in more advanced classes with upcoming WASSCE exams where they needed extra support. With JSS pupils, tutors were used for teaching the core subjects to ensure that pupils perform well in the upcoming BECE exams in those subjects. This also explains why extra (group) classes were less common for SSS pupils as they could not be organised for common subjects like the JSS pupils. At the SSS level, the subjects for which tutors were used differed depending on which stream the child belonged to.

“[For SSS pupils], the subject depends on the stream where child belongs. The tutor teaches subjects accordingly. Also, for the JSS pupils, the parents were hiring teachers based on the core subjects. Like mathematics, integrated science, agriculture and social studies.”



(JSS School Principal, Northern province)



Both extra classes and private tutors were very common in the Western region. One in five of all pupils in the Western region had an external tutor to help them study, the highest amongst all regions. All pupils and CTA members spoken to in the Western region mentioned that many pupils were attending tuitions three days a week, and some of them were attending every weekday. In other areas like the North-West, tuitions were not as common and so the children did not take private tutors as seriously, while the minority who did attend claimed that they were very useful. During the qualitative discussion, there were regions where pupils said that most of their parents could not afford to pay for these extra classes or the location was far away, and they felt that they missed out on learning compared to pupils who attended these classes. Expectedly, pupils from the richest households were 13 percentage points more likely to have private tuitions compared to those from the poorest households.

4.4.2 Learning initiatives at the school level

While schools provided very limited support to pupils when they were closed, the study shows that it was mostly the private schools which were able to support children during school closures. Qualitative discussions reported that there was a disparity in the resources and support available for pupils enrolled in government and private schools. Private schools had many initiatives running for children even when schools were closed, from recorded lessons to WhatsApp groups and teaching on WhatsApp. Some schools had also organised online teaching for which the pupils had to pay directly to their schools. However, this was not very common and was only mentioned by some pupils during the qualitative discussions.

In contrast, only some government schools were able to support children in an organised manner like the private schools were doing. A few schools part of the qualitative discussions organised extra classes for their pupils but outside the school premises keeping the government directive in mind.

“Yes, I have about three teachers in my school who were organizing classes every day for primary pupils and for the JSS3 pupils. They were asking for money but a very small fee. During the COVID-19 holiday, the private classes were helping the pupil to remember things that they have learnt from school and the things that they have not learnt yet. So, to me the classes were very helpful.” (JSS School Principal, Western province)



“Very few parents provided support for their children to study at home during the closure of school. I was having lesson classes and very few parents send their children to study. Only few pupils come to that lesson and even if you call them, they will not come, and they will take it that it is nonsense what you are doing.” (CTA member, JSS school, North-western province)



“Yes, it was mostly the private schools that were preparing lessons and recording them and then giving them and I am sure most parents paid for those lessons. The Prince of Wales was using the WhatsApp platform, they were even teaching them on WhatsApp but that one was designed by the past pupils to help the school.” (Assistant Director Junior and Secondary Schools)



“We organized (free) classes here for the JSS3 pupils during the holiday before the government remedial classes and when [the pupils] sat for the exams they were able to get 97% pass. This shows that the private classes they were taking were useful. We organized the classes in private places so that we will not go against the government rule that was why we never organized the classes in the school. We had the classes from M-F and all subjects for JSS3. No classes were arranged for SSS3.” (JSS School Vice-Principal, Northern Province)





This is in contrast to the stance of the government officials to stop any extra classes in schools during the time of school closures given the threat of COVID-19. However, it was clear from the qualitative research that all regions had extra classes ongoing, but how many children accessed these varied.

Some regions saw teachers getting creative and taking initiative to have their own ways of teaching pupils to augment the learning from other resources like handbooks and radio teaching.

Teachers in one of the Western schools started teaching SSS3 pupils through videos over the internet to incorporate visual representation in their teaching. Some teachers were taking private classes even though public gatherings were restricted. In some cases, teachers who were part of the CTA got together to help pupils study during the lockdown, even though they were not paid for any of these.

Education officials also mentioned other initiatives that were implemented during school closures to help pupils learn. These included teacher training, communication and awareness about the radio teaching programme, school visits targeted at the examination classes, providing learning and sanitary materials in partnership with other organisations, and provision of face masks. However, these did not come up when speaking to pupils or CTA members within the districts.

4.4.3 Household (parental/sibling) support

Most pupils mentioned receiving additional help from someone in their family. 88 per cent of pupils who studied when schools were closed reported receiving help from someone in their family to ask questions when they were unsure or stuck while going through their notes. This was usually an elder sibling, while some also mentioned receiving help from other children in the community who were attending higher classes. In other cases, family members were able to contribute to their learning by providing financial support, which was in the form of buying radios (and radio batteries), buying textbooks, and sometimes providing a communal light in the village for all pupils to study under.

All children and CTA members mentioned that children were being supported by parents, siblings, relatives and elder pupils in the community to support learning through other means like tuitions, radio programme, and handbooks. Considering that the government implemented restrictions on socialising and public gatherings to reduce the spread of COVID-19, children had to rely on the people closest to them, most likely within the household, to help them in their studies. This was especially important for children in examination classes, for whom giving up studying completely during school closures would have meant not passing the upcoming examinations. For some, this meant help in answering questions or during difficult topics, while others received financial assistance in buying learning materials like stationery, textbooks, or a radio to listen to the radio teaching programme. Some parents admitted constantly encouraging their children to study.

“We did not allow [extra classes]. No, I did not hear that because we told them that they should not go to schools and that if we hear of any schools giving lessons to children, I will go there and stop them because that would have been against policy.” (Deputy Director of Education, Eastern province)



“It came to a time when even the teachers were not accepting if you ask them to teach your child at home since they were afraid of COVID. So, what we were doing is we buy the materials (textbooks and pamphlets) and give to our children to read, if they have any doubt, they will meet someone in a higher class to help them.” (SSS Parent, Northern Province)



“Yes I was receiving support from my father in various ways, anytime I want to listen to the radio teaching I ask him to buy me a battery and does and he also supported me financially in my academic work in every aspect.” (Boy SSS Pupil, Northern province)





On the other hand, for pupils in higher grades, being the eldest in the household meant that they had the additional pressure of helping their younger siblings and other younger children in the community. Some SSS pupils mentioned this being a hindrance to their own learning during school closures. Quantitative findings also showed that JSS3 pupils were 10 percentage points more likely to have received help from someone in their family compared to SSS3 pupils. SSS3 pupils were expected to spend time helping younger children in their studies which took precious time away from their own studying.

The need to have someone guide children on a daily basis in the absence of schools is clear from children giving up studies when they did not have to a close family member to help them. Qualitative findings showed that some pupils did not have any support from their family, friends or community during school closures, and so they gave up studying altogether during this time.

4.4.4 Community support

A small proportion of pupils (6 per cent) reported receiving learning support from their communities. However, boys were significantly more likely to have received this support compared to girls (10 per cent versus 2 per cent). JSS3 pupils were also more likely to receive support from communities compared to SSS3 pupils.

Many CTA members and education officials mentioned other organisations who assisted in the provision of different necessities, such as radios, food distribution, textbooks, and other learning materials while schools were closed. Organisations which came up frequently included Mott Macdonald, UNICEF, and the Girls Education Challenge, among others. Pupils were less likely to mention support from external organisations compared to parents, teachers, and school officials, although pupils in the North-Western region mentioned an organisation, which supported them by providing resources and helping pupils who had dropped out of school.

The qualitative findings suggest that most of these efforts were targeted at examination classes, with pupils in the Western region the most likely to receive support from communities than any other region. One of the Western schools mentioned having a Western Area Student Union which organised a WhatsApp group which had teachers helping pupils with materials but only for the examination classes. In another Western school, a teacher started a WhatsApp group and taught his pupils by sharing audio notes on WhatsApp. In the North-western province, the Old Girls Association held extra classes five days a week for pupils in examination grades.

“I also drew something like a blackboard which represents teaching. During my time of being there, I was the most senior pupil among them and the community asked me to help other children and I do teach them.”



(Boy SSS Pupil, Northern province)

“I was not studying at all during the holiday. I am not able to study alone, and I was not having someone to help me study.”



(Girl SSS Pupil, North-western province)

“Mott Macdonald is an NGO that is looking at the schools and the things that are affecting the pupils. When they came, they wanted to give us a book, but they decided to change the idea because the book will be used only by the teachers. So, they decided to bring the idea of the radio that was preloaded with episodes and they have mentors in every school. For us here, one lady and I are the mentors of this school. They brought the radios before the closure of the schools for COVID. We were using these radios to teach the pupils.”



(JSS CTA Secretary, Eastern province)

“Yes, we have a program at the council. The name of the program is Heart of Salone. The program was helping pupils who dropped out of school. Heart of Salone bought bag, shoes, books and uniforms for us. That was the support they gave us. They supported us once and for the studies at the council, it was once a week.”



(JSS Girl Pupil, North-western province)

“The old girls’ association helped the teachers to organise classes for the children just to motivate them to help the children. But it was free, and the parents were not asked to pay anything ... It was done five days within the week which was Mondays to Fridays, and it was done for about a month. It was organised for pupils who were in examination classes. Due to the government regulation, the class was held outside of the school.”



(SSS Pupil Parent, North-western province)

The background is a solid blue color. Scattered across it are several faint, white line drawings of children's artwork. These include stick figures, some with large heads and small bodies, and some with multiple heads. There are also drawings of rectangular objects with internal patterns, possibly representing books or signs. The drawings are simple and childlike in style.

5

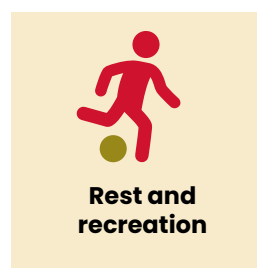
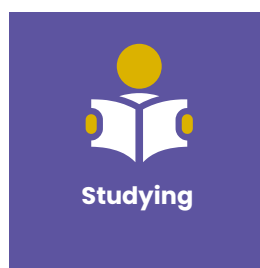
**What were children
doing while schools
were closed?**



5 What were children doing while schools were closed?

When schools were closed, most pupils divided their time amongst domestic chores, supporting their families in income generating activities, and rest and recreation, but they still found time for study. The distribution itself varied significantly by gender and background characteristics.

“During the corona period, I would usually go for studies at 4pm to my teacher for classes and after that I would come back home and go over the work he taught me. Then I would normally go the field and play football and after that I would go to the garden and do some garden works. I would then come back home and rest for the next day to embark on the same activities.” (Boy SSS3 pupil, Eastern Province)



Nearly a fifth of children (17 per cent) reported spending a considerable part of their time doing extra domestic chores during the school closure period. This included activities like cleaning, preparing food, fetching water and caring for younger siblings. Girls especially were burdened with household chores with 22 per cent of female pupils reporting having to do them, compared to half (11 per cent) the proportion of boys. For most children, the domestic chores in and of themselves were not so much a problem, as the fact that some pupils said they would be tired and not have the time or energy left to study after completing them.

A similar proportion of children (18 per cent) reported that they were involved in income-generating activities such as farming, petty-trading, apprenticeships and odd jobs like gardening and okada (motorbike) riding during the break. This was most commonly reported by SSS3 pupils (25 per cent) compared to JSS3 pupils (17 per cent). Pupils in the Southern region (32 per cent) were also the most likely to report this amongst all regions, and pupils in the Western region (11 per cent) were the least likely to do so. Girls especially were said to engage in petty trading and selling in the markets. Pupils from the poorest backgrounds were also much more likely (23 per cent) than richer pupils (13 per cent) to report financial challenges and engagements during school closure.

“During the time when school was closed my aunt helped me study for about a month...later she asked me to go to my mother in the village and when I went there [to the village] I met my family doing farming so I joined them to do some of the work in the farm. I was also responsible for cooking and cleaning the compound and preparing the food on the table.” (Girl, SSS3 pupil, Eastern Province)



“My mother does not have money so she told us to sell in the market so that by the time schools reopen, she will be able to buy our school materials... [probe: did this affect your studies?]. It only affected my studies for the four days that I will be selling.” (Girl, JSS3 pupil, North Western Province)



“You really do not need to be an education officer to know this because when you walked down the street, you would see some children that are of school-going age selling in the market place. Some parents even sent children to sell on their behalf and look for money for them.. we have heard of this experience not only during COVID, but also in Ebola times.” (Deputy Director of Education, District 1)





Children undertook these activities to help their parents and support the family in meeting ends. In addition, some children sold in the market to keep themselves occupied, while others said they did so to save up money to buy materials and go to school once they reopened. As with domestic chores, qualitative evidence suggests that for most children farming or selling in the markets was a frequent (at times daily) activity and took a solid chunk of their time.

Despite this, most pupils (84 per cent) self-reported taking out time to study while schools were closed, although the duration and frequency of study varied between children. The frequency was often linked back to individual motivation and the surrounding environment for the child and is discussed in more detail in Section 5.1. Some pupils dealt with academic uncertainty positively and continued to study, while others treated it as a break. In discussion, children suggested that they studied or revised subjects that interested them or where they felt they needed to work harder. On the whole it appeared that richer pupils, those in urban areas, boys and JSS pupils found more uninterrupted time to study than others. The variation across pupils is also indicated in Table 7 below.

Table 7: Proportion of pupils self-reporting studying during school closure

	Studied during school closure
Boys	84%
Girls	84%
JSS3	86%*
SSS3	79%*
Richest quintile	87%
Poorest quintile	77%*
Urban	84%
Rural	84%

“Well I was studying because when corona started, all schools closed down and there were also no public gatherings, so for that reason I decided to be reading at home so that I do not forget many things.” (Boy, JSS3 Pupil, Northern Province)



“I sell every day except on Fridays because I go to the mosque for Friday prayers. I didn't study every day. I would study when I felt good [wanted] to study and if I did not feel like studying, I would watch a movie instead.” (Girl, JSS3 pupil, Southern Province)



Evidence from parents and school representatives was more mixed and suggested that children treated the school closure as a ‘holiday’ and did not use this time to learn. Instead they spent their time resting and socialising with friends, playing football (this was particularly popular with boys), watching TV and playing video games. In such cases, parents reported finding it difficult to motivate their children to study at home and struggled to discipline them. They suggested looking forward to schools reopening so that their children could be more productively engaged.

“Most of the children were also engaged in watching movies, and those with android phones spent so much time on those instead of reading their books.” (Teacher, JSS School, Southern Province)



“I bought two black boards at home and I thought my children would use them to study, but that was useless, because the children were not using it and they would not study once I left them. It was just like flogging a dead horse.” (Teacher, JSS School, North Western Province)



“If I can add something to this, I can tell you that majority of pupils were not reading their books during the school closure. Although I don't have the statistics now, they seemed to have forgotten about their book completely as if schools will never reopen again.” (Parent, JSS School, Western Province)





5.1 Frequency of reported study time

Although the majority of pupils self-reported studying during school closure, the time and effort put in varied across children. Some children were able to manage time for study alongside their other activities, but others complained about being too tired to study after completing domestic chores or income generating activities (see Section 6.1). This meant that children only found time to study at the end of the day when it was dark, and they faced challenges with electricity.

64 per cent of pupils reported studying frequently i.e. they studied three or more days a week, and this was especially common for boys, richer pupils and JSS3 pupils. The variation in pupils' study patterns is shown in Table 8 below. Girls generally studied less regularly than boys, with 25 per cent of girls studying 1-2 times per week compared to 15 per cent of boys. At the other end of the spectrum, 68 per cent of boys reported studying 3 or more times per week compared to 59 per cent of girls. Similarly, a significantly larger proportion of JSS3 pupils (30 per cent) reported studying every day compared to SSS3 pupils (20 per cent), and richer pupils were also significantly more likely to study more frequently. Regional differences were not very apparent, other than fewer pupils in the North Western province studied every day compared to other provinces.

“The business [petty trading] was not affecting my studies because I always returned from the market at around 2pm and then I would rest a bit till 4pm. After resting, I would take my book and study till 6pm. After that I'd go for prayers and after the prayers, my brother would help me to study at night.” (Girl, SSS3 pupil, North Western Province)



“When I went to the village all I was doing was farming... I did not even take a book to my village. We went to the farm every day from morning to evening except if it rained. But if we went in the morning we would be at the farm till evening when we would be returning to prepare food.” (Girl JSS3 pupil, Southern Province)



“After I returned, I would be at home with my brothers and sisters ... We are not able to study because we do not have light at night, so what I'd do is that I'd sit with my younger siblings and make fun.” (Boy, JSS3 pupil, North Western Province)



Table 8: Frequency of reported study time

Study time	Proportion of pupils studying
Did not study during school closure (0 days)	16%
Studied sometimes (1-2 days per week)	20%
Studied frequently (3-4 days per week)	37%
Studied every day (5 or more days per week)	27%

The BTS study did not collect quantitative data on the duration of time spent studying, but qualitative evidence suggests wide variation in this. Some children reported studying for 10 minutes, while others put in five-six hours daily and also took private tuitions. This had differential impacts on children's learning performance as discussed in Section 3, with children who studied daily performing significantly better on the pupil learning assessments than those who didn't.

“Since I was a science pupil and the Corona situation was getting worse with no information about when academic session will resume, so I decided to study five days a week.” (Boy, SSS3 Pupil, Western Province)



“I was spending ten minutes a day studying.” (Girl, JSS3 pupil, Eastern Province)



“I was studying about three times per week at least and I studied for 6 hours each time I was doing it.” (Boy, SSS3 pupil, North Western Province)





In addition, because the BTS study sampled examination grade pupils (JSS3 and SSS3) there was particular consciousness amongst the pupils and parents about their academics. Children reported studying 'more' than their siblings or friends in other grades because they wanted to revise and prepare. In some cases, parents were also reported to be more likely to pay for private tuition and lessons for their children because they had to sit external exams. Private schools and old pupil associations in the North Western and Western province were also said to arrange special resources and classes for examination classes to assist them in studying from home.

“I was studying five times per week because on Saturdays and Sundays we do not have class [private lessons]. The classes run from Monday to Friday. We have a three (3) hours class in the morning and two (2) hours class in the evening. I was attending classes because I want to see how best I can pass the WASSCE examination.” (Boy, SSS3 pupil, North Western Province)



“For me I use to fetch water on a daily basis for our hand washing as it was a task assigned to me at home.... I engaged myself in studying my notes during the lockdown because I knew I have to sit to the external exams and if I do not study hard, I will not pass my exams..” (Boy, JSS3 pupil, Eastern Province)



6

Child well-being and safety in Sierra Leone during the school closure

I was learning instrument to be the best instrumentalist in the world. for the past months.



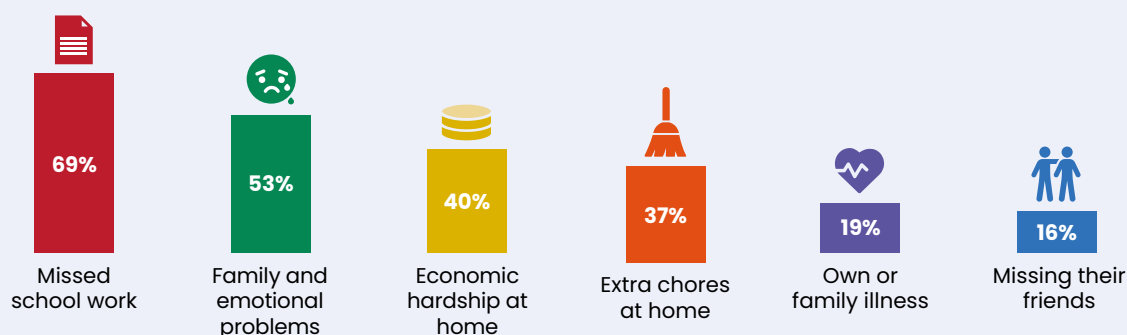
6 Child well-being and safety in Sierra Leone during the school closure

Schools are not only places of learning, but also providers of social protection, nutrition, and emotional support. As such, the BTS study aimed to gather information on the well-being status of children when they were unable to attend school. This section presents the key child well-being concerns that pupils faced while schools were closed. It assesses the variations in trends across different regions and gender as well as information and support facilities that were available in communities to help children cope with difficulties. To note, the child well-being theme was specifically introduced in the BTS study in the context of COVID-19 and has not been assessed in previous SGLAs. As such there are no comparative benchmarks to compare against.

6.1 What were the key challenges to pupil well-being during school closure?

Nearly half (45 per cent) of the sampled pupils self-reported that they had faced some type of problems while at home during school closures. Key concerns reported were centred around violence and exploitation, emotional and social well-being, economic and financial difficulties, and physical health and hunger. Older pupils were significantly more likely to report this, with nearly 60 per cent of SSS3 pupils reporting challenges compared to 38 per cent of JSS3 pupils. There were also clear regional variations with pupils from the Southern region being most likely, and pupils from the Western region being the least likely amongst all regions to report facing challenges during school closures. These challenges not only directly affected pupils' health and well-being, but also influenced their ability to learn during school closures. In some cases, they even have had more longer lasting impacts on school attendance and dropouts after schools resumed in October 2020. Figure 13 summarises the main types of issues faced by children while they were off from school.

Figure 13: Types of challenges faced by children



The following sub-sections dive further into four concern around pupils' well-being during school closures and the impacts they had on children's learning and development. There are obvious crossovers across these categories and the impact is likely to be particularly profound for groups of pupils facing multiple deprivations such as girls, pupils from the poorest backgrounds, and those in remote locations.

6.1.1 Violence and exploitation

The lockdown and associated restrictions on movement, school closures, and economic shocks for families disrupted pupils' routine and social interactions while exposing them to the risk of abuse. From discussions, many pupils shared that they experienced feelings of stress, anxiety, isolation, and depression as a result. This was the case for both girls and boys, and common in all regions, although the nature of risk and abuse varied.

Girls faced violence and exploitation from various sources within their homes and in the wider community. Discussions with pupils, and school and community representatives revealed that girls were drawn into exploitative sexual relationships. Incidences of sexual harassment and exploitation of girls such as rape, early marriage, prostitution, and teenage pregnancy rose when schools closed as a result of COVID-19. This was usually more common in rural remote areas, although economic hardships and domestic frustrations in more urban settings were also said to trigger this. When it came to abuse, the perpetrators were often relatives or other members of the girl's immediate household. Girls who spent time petty trading were also said to be more exposed to other men in the community.



“Some girls were abused in the very house they lived in. If it was not the uncle, it will be the aunty, cousin or neighbour... It doesn't matter if they are rich or poor or in the most remote part of the country. It is the same for all of them.” (CTA member, JSS School, Western Province)



“Some children live with parents or guardians who are wicked... will ask them to bring money [by selling] or then leave the house... This will cause children to go to the street, especially girls, and when they do, you will see foolish big men who will see the girls in the street and ask them what is the problem? After explaining the problem, the men will ask the girls for sex before they can help them.” (Girl JSS3 pupil, North-Western Province)



There were also some instances where girls were reported to have engaged in transactional sex. Often the motivation for this was economic, with the hope of earning some money to support personal or family needs in times of difficulty. Similarly, the occurrence of transactional sex varied across provinces. This was said to be more rampant in the southern and Northern provinces compared to the Eastern province. One explanation proposed for this was that girls from these provinces were being influenced by the ‘big life’ in the Western province thereby being lured by the ‘gift of phones’, ‘money to buy flashy things’, and the pressure to compete among themselves.

“The children have just decided to join bad lives because they want to live like their other friends forgetting that some of their parents are poor. So, to me, the children in the cities are more faced with the challenges than children in the villages.” (CTA member, JSS boys' school, Northern province)



In few communities, discussions also linked involvement in transactional sex to the likelihood of a girl child ‘running away’ from home which further exposes them to risks associated with other forms of childhood abuse and neglect. In turn, these may impact academic success, interpersonal skills and social relationships that may provide a context where such lifestyle become viable solution for meeting one's needs.

“Girls were more vulnerable, although boys also have an issue. Families depended on girls for survival ... the coming of COVID19 just created more opportunity for them... previously if they could make Le 5,000 [via prostitution] now, they can make more The way girls look at it, they have something to offer that will not harm them so much, but it will help them survive.” (Parent, JSS School, Western Province)



The rise in teenage pregnancy and its associated factors across all regions as revealed by school, community, and education officers varied across grades and family background. JSS3 girls were more likely than others to become pregnant. Factors such as peer pressure to engage in sexual activities with older pupils and a lack of sexual and reproductive health knowledge are some of the contributing factors to the high rate of unintended pregnancy among young girls. For the most vulnerable children, especially girls in more remote areas, accessing education and staying in school is hard enough, with additional unanticipated disruption further diminishing their opportunities of being able to continue their education after childbirth.

The government established a school continuation policy that allows pregnant girls to return to school especially those in examination classes to enable them to sit their exams and learn alongside their peers. A small number of pregnant girls returned to school to sit the examination, however, some were said to not complete all their papers following stigmatization and mockery from their schoolmates who teased them. For many of these girls, these experiences may mean limited or no education, and falling further behind their peers.

“Children who are in SSS- both boys and girls were engaging in sexual activities during the time when they were at home. When schools reopened, it was mostly the girls who could not go to school because they were pregnant.” (CTA, JSS Boys, Southern province)





“Because I was taking the statistics, we had 25 girls that were pregnant during the BECE and 12 for the WASSCE. And most of them that did not come to take the exams, when we did a background check, it was because they were pregnant.” (Principal, SSS Girls, Southern province)



Financial struggles and domestic frustrations increased risk of physical violence and abuse against children. Due to the COVID-19 lockdown, families spent longer stretches of time together at home, often under various types of mental strain and the threat of economic hardships. This meant that patience levels were usually low, and children suffered.

“I drew my mother flogging me... [during the lockdown] she asked me to accompany her to the farm, but I refused, so that was why she flogged me.” (Girl JSS3 pupil, Northern Province)



“When children were at home many were subjected to domestic violence, even though it was not done openly. This is because during normal school [session] parents don’t spend a lot of time with their children at home, but now they were, so the children faced a lot of domestic violence through their parent’s beating them and other sources of abuse. The reason was that most parents were stressed for one reason or the other.” (CTA representative, SSS School, Western Province)



Source: Drawing by Girl JSS3, Northern province illustrating being punished by her parent.

At times parents were also encouraged to find their child a suitor or forcefully give their hand in marriage as a result of uncertainty around school resumption, economic hardships, and fear for their children’s safety in terms of being impregnated out of wedlock. Such children did not come back to school. In a small number of communities, boys who impregnated girls were made to marry them or otherwise take on full responsibility for their well-being. This meant these boys also had to drop out of school prematurely and take up odd jobs such as okada riding (motorcyclist) and mining.

Moreover, majority of the girls who became pregnant also decided to get married. In lower income households in particular, the mix of school closures, economic hardships, and existing cultural and gender norms around the role of women implies that girls may also need to work to support their new families exacerbating existing gender inequalities that put girls more at risk of not being able to return to school afterwards. The longer children stay out of school, the less likely they are to ever return.

For boys, especially for those in more central or urban locations, negative peer influence, in particular, increased risk of exploitation. School and community

respondents, especially in the Western and Northern regions, suggested that during the school closure, boys were surrounded by bad company and got drawn into smoking, drugs, gangs (‘cliques’), violence, and petty crime. Often this was a result of reduced opportunities for socialization and recreation. These children were said to have taken up ‘bad lives’ in wanting to be like their friends, often against the wishes of their parents.

“Like for us in the community, mothers are sending their girls for marriage. It is a common thing that people do.” (Girl SSS3 pupil, North-western province)



“Most parents normally don’t take care of the boys school’s activities since they have impregnated a woman. They say these words ‘You are now a grown-up man and you can take care of yourself’ so for that reasons most of them drop out of school.” (Principal, SSS School, Southern province)



“Most of the girls got pregnant during this lockdown and when schools are now open, they decided not to attend anymore and decided to marry and not to attend school. Boys who also impregnated girls did not also return to school because their parents most times decide to stop sponsoring them.” (Secretary, JSS school, Southern province)





“Most youth were being addicted to drugs like tramadol, quash, pam pass tea which affect their academic work seriously, and some are living in the street.” (Girl SSS3 pupil, North-western province)



“Well during the Corona period most of the boys were involve in bad habits, like smoking and joining cliques because of the long period of sitting at home without having anything to do. As we all know an idle brain is the workshop of the devil.” (Education representative)



Box 8 summarises how child safety and well-being concerns were dealt with in the BTS study from a ethical and safeguarding point of view.

Box 8: Researching with children in the COVID-19 context: safeguarding concerns during the BTS study

One of the primary research themes addressed by the BTS study pertains to child safety and well-being during the school closure period. Pupils were asked to discuss the experiences, welfare and support systems available to children while schools were closed. This potentially increased the risk of children sharing sensitive information on sexual, physical or emotional abuse and exploitation with the research team. As such ensuring safe and ethical research, and having robust safeguarding reporting and referral processes was crucial for the BTS study. A number of steps were taken to ensure this at the design, training, fieldwork and reporting stage. These included

At the design stage

1. Updating and adhering to the Leh wi Lan Output 5 Safeguarding framework (2019) and field protocols. This classifies referral processes by type of incident. We have seen evidence of the functionality of this system with at least four cases reported prior to the BTS study
2. OPM is subcontractor to Mott who has ultimate Duty of Care. As such we reaffirmed the reporting and referral mechanisms with the central team and agreed to maintain an updated risk evaluation matrix
3. Fieldwork design and instruments vetted via the OPM Ethics Review Committee; as well as concerned Leh wi Lan, FCDO and MBSSE authorities.
4. Careful design of research instruments so that questions around child safety and well-being were framed in the generalised third-person (e.g. ‘what do you think made children in this community feel happy or sad?’). Pupils were not to be directly or indirectly pressured into sharing personal accounts unless they wished to do so themselves

At the training stage

5. Recruitment of field researchers from amongst past pool of SGLA data collectors with demonstrated ability to interact safely with children. All data collectors signed up to a safeguarding package and declaration before any activity in the field
6. In-depth training for all data collectors on safeguarding protocols, interviewing children, recognising abuse and field reporting channels
7. Detailed manual provided to data collectors with specific modules on a) Research ethics & interviewing skills, b. Research in a Pandemic, c) Safeguarding Training, d) Pupil Assessment Introduction

During fieldwork

8. All the pupil FGDs were single sex (i.e. all the respondents were either boys, or all of them were girls) to ensure comfort of the respondents. In addition, each FGD was facilitated by at least two data collectors, one of whom must be female for any FGD with girl pupils
9. Data collectors were strictly instructed never to be alone with a child and to be sensitive to children’s behaviour during the interview
10. All data collectors were given a laminated ‘cheat sheet’ on safeguarding protocols and how to respond to various type of cases that may arise in the field. They were also provided with
11. Data collectors were aware that children are free to refuse to participate and/or respond to particular questions they were not comfortable with. This was completely possible and acceptable. As per instruction, ‘refused consent’ cases count as a completed test case so there is no moral hazard of coercing a child to continue.
12. Strict quality control mechanism and daily debriefs with the OPM qualitative leads to discuss findings and field cases and seek advice on actions and next steps

At the reporting stage

13. Comprehensive debrief with the Mott Macdonald and (anonymised) list of reported incidents shared with them for FCDO knowledge and onward referral
14. Ensuring complete anonymity and confidentiality in the reports and presentation of survey findings

Fieldwork for the BTS study was successfully completed with no major safeguarding hurdles. A total of 9 case reports were made by teams across fieldwork locations and these were passed on to Mott in a timely manner as per agreed safeguarding protocols for knowledge and onward action (where required).



6.1.2 Emotional and social wellbeing

Children were initially happy in the early days of lockdown, but later grew tired and discontent with being at home. They initially saw school closure as a holiday and time for rest and relaxation at home through playing, sleeping and watching television. However, the extended closure and restrictions meant that children eventually got bored and missed their friends, and social interactions at school. This was mentioned as a key challenge by nearly half (53 per cent) of the pupils facing issues. Pupils shared that they experienced feelings of 'stress', 'anxiety', isolation, and depression which they linked to lack of contact with their school community.

Parents also struggled to keep children productively engaged at home and in some cases this stress was transferred onto the children. School and community representatives reported that some parents grew tired of constantly having their children at home because it was difficult to control them, make them study, and keep them away from negative or harmful activities. Parents were eager for schools to reopen. Some pupils reported domestic tensions with their parents quarrelling at home. This was upsetting for children to see; and in more extreme cases was released on children through emotional and physical aggression. The quantitative findings show that one in two pupils (49 per cent) were exposed to emotional and safety challenges due to family problems and feuds.

Children faced additional stress because for many pupils' school served as a safe space which had been unavailable during the closure. While staying away from school, pupils reported being exposed to several new stress triggers including excessive domestic chores, financial pressure from parents to engage in petty trading and farming activities, and concerns around their safety and physical and sexual well-being. Going to school provided children with a partial release since they were away from home for some part of the day, but this was not possible during the lockdown and pupils reported that it affected their well-being and learning capacity. Girls and the poorest pupils were most vulnerable to this.

Pupils in examination grades were also particularly concerned about missing part of their academic year and curriculum due to school closures, and the impact this would have in the future. JSS3 and SSS3 are examination grades for the BECE and WASSCE, respectively. School closures in Sierra Leone meant that pupils missed the tail end (usually an assessment period) of their second term and the entire third term. Pupils, especially those that were more academically motivated, said they were unhappy during the break because they were worried about the schoolwork they had missed and whether they would be able to catch up in time to sit their exams and do well.

“Well I was happy initially because it was an opportunity for me to take some rest, but later I got tired with the long holiday and also I missed the lunch money that I used to get. So, I was a bit happy and a bit sad at the same time when schools were closed.” (Girl JSS3 pupil, Western Province)



“Another thing that upset children is when their parents quarrel at home, the children will never be happy. In some homes the father and mother would be quarrelling almost every day.” (Boy SSS3 Pupils, North Western Province)



“Because of the extended time spent at home, parents were now also able to understand the good and bad habits of their children which made them angry and shout at their children and also flog them.” (Principal, JSS School, Eastern Province)



“I was not feeling good when the schools were closed down because in the morning I have to go and sell and, in the evening, I have to prepare food. If I asked my brothers to help me, they would not do it.... in the area where I am living, boys like chasing girls, and they rape them at times. So, I was really praying for schools to reopen so that I will return back to school.” (Girl SSS3 pupils, Southern Province)



“I was not happy because it was not the time to close schools, and we were unable to complete the syllabus for the term. We only completed two terms, and this was the reason many of our peers failed the academic year... they would have passed had we completed the three terms.” (Girl JSS3 pupil, Southern Province)



“By failing to complete the syllabus and the removal of SSS4 now... it has a negative effect... right now not everyone is well prepared to face the exams because so many topics need to be covered but we are still behind.” (Boy SSS3 pupil, Western Province)





Pupils who had the resources and support were able to cope with academic stress by taking lessons, hiring private teachers, using distance learning resources, and seeking assistance from family members. However, this was not possible for the more marginalised, poor, and disadvantaged groups. Pupils also mentioned that academic concerns continue after schools reopened with some teachers rushing through topics, or focusing only on prospective examination content, in an attempt to catch-up with the curriculum in a compressed period now that schools have resumed.

“When they said COVID-19 is an airborne disease, people started fearing each other at home and they started distancing from each other. Because of this, children were mentally stressed. Also, social media and television created more fear in their mind by showing the dangers of the disease, so children were not happy at that time.” (Vice Principal, SSS School, Northern Province)



“Well I was not happy as I used to be because this time school was not closed under normal circumstance. So, I was thinking about what will happen next to our education and as things continue to go on, the problem continues to escalate and this affected everyone.” (Boys JSS pupil, North-Western province)



A small number of children linked their emotional well-being more directly to fear of the virus and the mental stress of lockdown. Pupils, as well as their parents, were afraid of contracting the disease or taking their sick children to the hospital, especially given the country's recent experience with Ebola and the health and social consequences associated with it. This was said to create 'panic and trauma'. It was also one of the reasons people took lockdown seriously and some children mentioned their parents did not allow them to return to school immediately after resumption because they were afraid of exposure to the virus. To deal with these psychological issues the MBSSE has rolled out training of some school administrators to introduce a psycho-social support manual for children.

Box 9: How does school closure during COVID-19 compare with the Ebola experience?

There are many parallels here with Sierra's Leone's experience of Ebola. Physical and sexual violence against children increased with a substantial rise in teenage pregnancy rates often linked to transactional sex to secure basic goods and services. Ebola triggered an adverse impact on children's well-being, especially for girls, and COVID-19 appears to have similar consequence.

The magnitude of exploitation among children during the COVID-19 lockdown was more substantial in a small number of communities. One possible explanation for this was that girls, to a greater extent during COVID-19, were pulled into several income generating activities and thereby away from the protective spaces offered by their homes in some instance which exposed them more.

Discussions also showed that Ebola led to a larger leaning loss as children were out of school for up to nine months and because of that experience, the country moved classes online within a few days of school closures during COVID-19. During Ebola, it was also illegal for visibly pregnant girls to attend school which also increased the likelihood of girls not returning to school later.

“Even if you compare the statistics of the pregnancy that occurred during the Ebola, you cannot compare them to the pregnancies that occurred during the Corona. We experience more teenage pregnancies during the Corona than the Ebola. Movement were restricted not to talk of the stigmatization. If one person in your family got the Ebola, the entire family will be stigmatised. People will not go close to you anymore.” (CTA representative, SSS school Eastern province)



“Ebola was worse because it was the first time, we were experiencing such a widespread disease. People panicked and so, remained indoor, some of the distractions we had during COVID-19 was not there.” (CTA representative, JSS school, Eastern province)

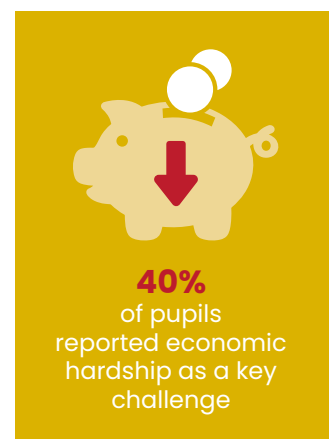




6.1.3 Economic and financial difficulties

COVID-19 impacted the economic standing of many families, and children bore a direct consequence of this. The national lockdown and restrictions on movement meant that many parents struggled with their jobs and daily income. 40 per cent of boys and girls reported economic hardship in their homes as one of the key challenges they faced during school closure. This issue was particularly common in the Southern province, while significantly less pupils in the Western reported financial difficulties. Children from poorer backgrounds and those living in more remote locations suffered more.

As a result, a large number of children (both boys and girls) engaged in income-generating activities during the lockdown to support their families. Children reported engaging in farm work with their families, petty trading in markets, and taking up apprenticeships and odd-jobs like gardening, motorcycle riding and manual labour. The latter was more common for boys, while girls were particularly engaged in market trading. As previously discussed, in some extreme cases girls also engaged in activities like prostitution while others resorted to begging to help with family earnings.



Source: Drawing by boy pupil, SSS3, Western Province, showing him dividing his time between selling in the market and studying at home.

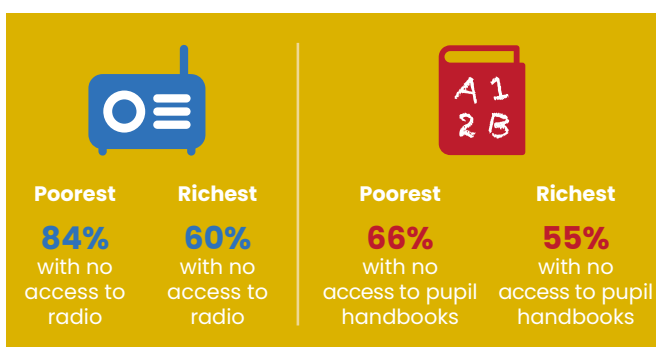
“You would see girls standing in groups and you would see boys come to pick them up. But all this was happening simply because the government announced a lockdown. If the family has been in lockdown for three days, and after the three days there is no food, the girls in the house will do something bad to feed the house. There was also a huge increase in the number of street beggars during COVID-19. People were begging just for them to cope with the situation.”
(Principal, JSS School, Western Province)

Financial constraints also meant that some pupils did not have access to necessary learning materials and resources during the school closure. For instance, nearly 85 per cent of the poorest pupils and 60 per cent of the richest cohort of pupils did not have access to a radio to enable them to tune into the government's Radio Teaching Programme.⁷ There is also some evidence to suggest that the fear of having to pay a fine around pupil handbooks may have been more prohibitive for poorer families meaning that such children were more likely to not have access to them. When faced with the choice, households spent on basic necessities and food rather than what was considered more dispensable expenditure such as batteries for radios. Pupils from the poorest households were also significantly less able to access private tutors or lessons during school closure. Lack of finances was also one of the key factor affecting children's return to school.

“My mother was worried about my school items since we didn't have any money at the time of the reopening of schools. But we were selling in the market and raised money that way to pay for my school.” (Girl JSS3 Pupil, North Western Province)



“The level of poverty is so high You cannot buy batteries when you have to feed the family or when you don't have money at all. So if a pupil is from such a family, they will have to suffer.” (Principal, JSS School, Eastern Province)



⁷ The poorest and richest households refer to the bottom 20 per cent and top 20 per cent of households in terms of assets.



6.1.4 Physical health and hunger

While many children expressed a desire to help out their families during lockdown, in some cases their domestic chores and economic engagements became too time-consuming and physically taxing. One in two girls (48 per cent) and one in four boys (26 per cent) reported having extra chores at home as a problem during the school closure period. Children at times spent up to six hours selling in markets or working on farms, following which they complained they were too tired to study and do other things. Some parents were also reported to discipline their children strongly in case they refused or were lazy with going to business. Children were physically and verbally abused or deprived of food if they disobeyed.

In addition, many children suffered from hunger and shortage of food during school closure. Dry rations were distributed by MBSSE to families in some communities. However, for most pupils, financial challenges coupled with the loss of free school meals meant that children, especially those in the provincial regions, were unable to secure sufficient nourishment. This affected their physical well-being as well as their concentration and motivation to study.

“My farming activity [during school closure] was affecting my studies because we would be on the farm for the whole day and return home only very late in the evening. I would be very tired by then and if forced to study, I would not be able to do so well.” (Girl JSS3 pupil, Southern Province)



“This (COVID-19) really affected the financial situation of some people... their expenses were above their income at that time. So many people cut down their food, if they use to cook four cups of rice they cut it down to three cups.” (Principal, JSS School, Northern Province)



“During the holiday I did not have enough food to eat and every time I did not have enough food, I would feel weak and I would not be able to study... It was not just me, some of my friends were also suffering from hunger.” (Girl SSS3 Pupils, North Western Province)



Source: Drawing by boy pupil, SSS3, Northern Province, showing intense physical manual labour.

This ‘hunger virus’ was reportedly more terrible than COVID-19 itself with lingering impacts despite the resumption of schools. Some pupils still suffered from a lack of food at home and were said to come to school on an empty stomach. As a result, they did not have energy to participate in class and learn. School representatives understood and sympathised with these pupils, but there was often little they could do to tangibly change their situation.

“Some pupils are coming to school from families that eat three meals a day, while others just get one meal in the evening... If you are a student coming from [the latter] family, your performance will be different... These pupils, if they come to school, they will not pay attention and they will sleep in class for the rest of the day. It is not that they do not want to learn, but they are hungry.” (Principal, JSS School, Northern Province)



6.2 Impacts of school closure on children’s performance and development

School and community representatives described various long term emotional and psychological effects of the exploitation faced by children when schools were closed. This included fear, anxiety, anger, shame, distrust of others, self-blame, stigma, and self-hatred. For example, many girls who were pregnant when they returned to school might struggle to thrive in school following harassment from their peers and may drop out prematurely or after giving birth. According to a CTA representative, this might further have devastating impacts on the motivation of children to learn. Moreover, children who have experienced psychological trauma, might face challenges building rapport with peers and confidence in various tasks.

The issue of child labour and hunger was generally agreed to lead to poor growth and delayed development for the child if this persists.



Beyond supporting the educational development of children, there is an urgent need for teachers to support recovery. This raises questions about the extent to which teachers are prepared for the contribution they could make in identifying child abuse and neglect within the school and what resource are available to them.

“When we look at learning in the first place you must have a stable mind before you can focus on anything. If the child is stressed, he can come to school with an absent mind and he will be looking at you but not really focusing on you all that will lead him not to concentrate in class because of the mind set.... (principal) The child will also become isolated where he will be in class without talking to anybody which will have a great effect on his mental ability. Sometimes, they become bullies in class because of the aggressiveness at home and an exhibition of that in school.” (CTA representative, JSS school, Western province)



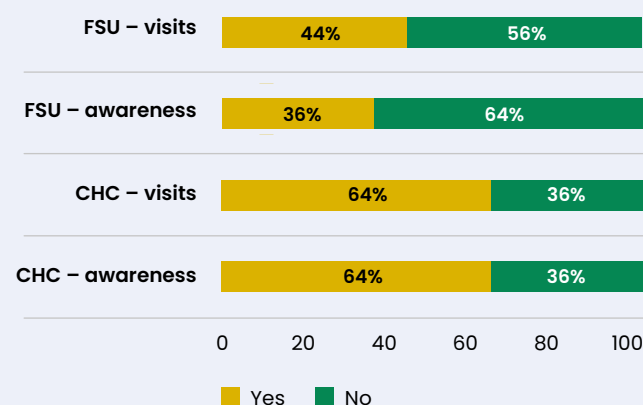
“During the COVID19, the pupils were mentally and physically affected because ... each day, the first thing they will think about is to go and sell. They were not even thinking about studies. So slowly their brains were becoming slow in thinking. The others were thinking about how to get married during the holiday and they were not thinking about going back to school so all their minds were just for men. So, the mind became distracted from school. That is why many are not able to return to school.” (Vice principal, CTA, JSS school Northern province)



6.3 Where do pupils seek help in dealing with these issues?

Pupils ability to cope with physical, emotional, and financial challenges during school closures varied according to their background and knowledge of support facilities. Pupils, and school and community representatives mentioned many different support mechanisms available to pupils to cope with safety and welfare issues. The level of awareness and usage of each varied. More formal support mechanisms included Family Support Units (FSU) and Community Health Centres (CHC), while informal support was taken from peers, family members, and others in the community. Figure 14 summarises pupils' knowledge and usage of CHCs and FSUs.

Figure 14: Pupils knowledge and usage of CHCs and FSUs



Children are more likely to be aware of CHCs compared to FSUs to report instances of violence or to seek medical assistance. Two-thirds of pupils (64 per cent) knew the location of the nearest CHC in their community.⁸ Compared to this, the awareness of FSUs was much lower, with only one in three pupils aware of where their nearest FSU was. In addition to pupils who were aware of these centres, a higher percentage had visited a CHC compared to FSU. This is somewhat in contrast to the qualitative discussions with pupils and school representatives in which the majority of participants were aware of the role and presence of FSUs especially when it came to reporting sexual violence or exploitation. They reported that in more remote communities, health facilities were not always available and the proximity in some cases hindered accessibility.

There are also regional variations with significantly more pupils from the Southern region being aware of or having visited their local CHC or FSU. Pupils in the Western region were least likely to know of these formal support mechanisms compared to other children. Across grades, although SSS3 pupils had a marginally higher awareness of both CHCs and FSUs, a significantly higher proportion of JSS3 pupils (49 per cent) had visited a FSU compared to the SSS3 pupils (36 per cent).

“Well we can also report cases of domestics violence caused by our parents like when a father beat up his wife for no good reasons, you as the child can report the matter to the FSU for them to seek peace between them. Like also in the area of this early marriage if the parents are forcing you to get your hand in marriage you can also report that issue to the FSU as well.” (Boy SSS pupil, Western province)



⁸ Pupils were asked whether they knew where the nearest CHC/FSU was regardless of whether they had visited it.



There were some indications during discussions with school and community representatives from the Eastern and Southern provinces that the outcome of **some incidences reported to the FSU can be influenced by the perpetrators**. This in itself acts as a deterrent to reporting of abuse.

In general, pupils suggested that physical and emotional abuse is either not formally reported by children or is more likely to be reported to friends, siblings, and colleagues. There are several reasons for this, including the long cultural undertone of stigmatisation, the fear of getting blamed, and the fact that some perpetrators of abuse are family members or trusted adults which makes reporting more complicated. Silence carries long-term risks for cumulative psychological problems and might promote a cycle of abuse without intervention. Although several respondents mentioned accessing support services through school-based and on-site counselling, these services were suspended when schools closed due to COVID-19.

There was limited evidence on the operation of the one-stop shop. Only one community representative and an education officer were aware of its existence. They reported that the one-stop shop has not fully commenced operation as it was still onboarding.

6.4 Other support systems

Several other welfare support mechanisms were reported to being available at the community level.

These included assistance from community chiefs and notable persons known for settling cases of abuse, as well as learning support to pupils in terms of organising space to study and study groups. Some schools and alumni associations, particularly in large private schools in the Western region, also created special learning channels (e.g. via WhatsApp groups or learning videos) that were circulated to pupils as an additional resource. In addition, the government and other agencies made efforts to support and sensitize pupils during lockdown through the Radio Teaching Programme and direct contributions such as the provision of radios and rations to certain groups.

In one community in the Eastern province, a committee of women referred to as the 'Mothers Club' has equally been a helpful resource for reaching out to girls in the community and promoting abstinence. The presence of boys and girls clubs acted as peer mentor groups that support pupils to develop confidence to be able to speak. However, most schools and community respondents disclosed that these were often not very active.

Support from NGOs picked up shortly before school resumption in many communities. NGOs are also helping to resolve disputes amongst families as well as addressing Human Right Violation issues. There was the distribution of dry food rations by Plan International, a local NGO, and other religious organisations. However, this was done in only a small number of communities.

"The Town Chief is also another symbol of authority in this community because when things like sexual, violence, rape, domestic violence and other offences happen in this community, the chief is the first person that we report to and he is the one who has the authority to send the matter to the police or court if he is unable to resolve the matter peacefully." (Boy JSS pupils, Eastern province)



"Some families use religion to cope with the situation and we will say God does not want this, it is God and that helps the family a lot. Also, the Priest encouraged us to drop any concern anonymously or with names if we need to that he will which follow up on this." (Parent, CTA interview, Northwest province)



"About the mothers' club, it is a group of women in every school. They sometimes form a group of 11 members. If the school is having a lot of dropouts, they will find out what is the problem and if they are able to identify the problem, they will find a solution and try to fix the problem. Again, if there is any issue of teenage pregnancy or rape, they will do everything possible to make sure the culprit is exposed and the law takes its course." (Girl JSS pupil, Eastern province)



"What I had about the dry ration, Plan Sierra Leone were the ones distributing the rice to children they support during Covid-19 and it was in only in selected districts...As we all know that Sierra Leone, we are very religious so during that many religious organizations were giving out donations to people as charity so for those who cannot afford at that time have the opportunity to have access to food items so they really play a great role." (CTA representative, SSS school, Southern province)



7

**School reopening
readiness: How safe and
prepared are schools
to reopen after the
COVID-19 closure?**



7 School reopening readiness: How safe and prepared are schools to reopen after the COVID-19 closure?

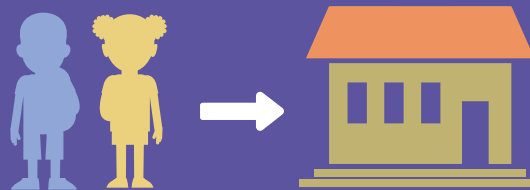
This section presents information on the preparedness of schools to enable the safe return of pupils. This includes measures undertaken to make schools safer, and whether additional safety measures were introduced in light of COVID-19. Finally, this section discusses how the school administration interacts with parents following school closures.

7.1 What is being done to make schools safer?

A large number of actors from the education system in Sierra Leone have been involved in devising and implementing measures to manage the safe reopening of school. This ranges from central and district officials, school administrators and teachers, to parents and pupils. Education officials mentioned developing an operation manual to guide schools on what is required of them to operate safely once all pupils are back in school. These include, among many others, details on how to proceed if a child in the school tests positive for COVID-19, providing veronica buckets and soaps for handwashing, having thermometers in the school to monitor temperature at regular intervals, restricting assembly, and implementing a phased lunch break across grades. At the time of the survey, the focus was on trying to ensure that all schools comply with these guidelines.

All pupils and CTA members mentioned that **schools now had more resources like veronica buckets, soap, sanitizers, and thermometers to ensure hand washing**. This was mentioned by pupils in all regions as there was an apparent emphasis by authorities on ensuring that all hygienic protocols are followed for the safety of pupils and teachers coming to schools. Some schools also provided sanitizers within the school so that pupils' safety would not be compromised. However, in some regions like the East, water scarcity was a real challenge. Schools in these regions struggled to provide enough water for regular handwashing, especially in the dry months.

Face masks had also become common, being used by pupils across grades. Qualitative discussions showed that most pupils, teachers, and school officials were adhering to the guideline of wearing face masks at all times when in school. Many pupils mentioned that their parents emphasised the need to keep their masks on when schools reopened, which made pupils adherent. However, there were some impediments to ensuring everyone kept their masks on throughout the day. Firstly, face masks had been distributed by the authorities to examination classes, but the distribution to other pupils was still pending. For those who had face masks, it was not possible to keep them on for the entire school day, especially in the hot weather. There were a couple of cases of pupils fainting and those suffering from asthma complaining about the use of face masks. In other schools, the teachers would remove their masks, setting a bad example for the pupils who would follow them and remove their own masks too.



The focus was on trying to ensure that **all schools comply with the guidelines** when pupils return to school

“Well we have hygiene practices now in and out of the school compound, for instance, there are veronica buckets all over the compound to ensure that pupils wash their hands when they want to go in and out of the classroom. There are also sanitizers that are provided for the teachers and the pupils for using frequently when they are in class.”
(JSS Boy Pupil, Eastern province)



“We also have limited amounts of buckets for the washing of hands and for now we have water supply but in the dry season, water supply becomes difficult to be washing our hands and we do not know if the government will be providing us with water supply.”
(SSS School Principal, Eastern province)



“We are trying but it's not easy. You go to all schools and it is the same problem. The one basic problem is the face masks. When we get back for the remedial classes, the children that were using the face masks, some of them are asthmatic patients. So, they started falling because of the face masks. (5 cases so far).”
(JSS CTA member, Western province)





All CTA members mentioned social distancing being very important and trying to adhere to social distancing at all times within the school compound. However, ensuring sufficient distance between pupils was very difficult for many schools, especially the smaller schools which are used to overcrowding in the classrooms. Pupils in the Northern and Eastern schools mentioned this as a problem. These schools typically did not have enough teachers or classrooms to accommodate smaller class batches, in contrast to some schools in the West where pupils mentioned attending school in morning or afternoon shifts so that social distancing could be maintained at all times. To account for this, many CTA members were awaiting government support to be able to either hire more teachers or construct more classrooms so pupils could be divided into smaller classes with adequate social distancing.

“In the area of social distancing we were not able to maintain it because the space was not enough. But we have to manage so that was a big challenge for us. We have so many pupils but then the classrooms were not enough because of the number of pupils who want to be enrolled in this school. If we said we want to space them, most of them will not be enrolled in this school. And we also run the school on one shift 7.45am to 2.30pm according to government procedures.” (JSS School Principal, Northern province)



“The number of children in the classes is another problem because when you have up to 70 children in a class, there would be no social distancing.” (SSS CTA Secretary, Eastern province)



Other than these measures, some other measures adopted by schools focused on limiting the number of pupils gathering in the school compound. Qualitative discussions revealed that morning assembly had been discontinued in all schools to avoid large gatherings of pupils. Some other schools had also implemented a phased lunch break to also avoid pupils from gathering at one time.

Although the intention of schools to comply and protect pupils was apparent, pupils and CTA members suggested that implementation and monitoring of the protocols was not always effective. Some pupils and school representatives complained about either not having, or not wanting to wear, face masks, while others faced challenges with ensuring adequate quantities of soap and water for pupils to regularly wash their hands. Space and resource limitations in many schools also meant that social distancing in classrooms was very difficult because they did not have enough teachers or classrooms to accommodate smaller groups. As such, many schools felt more support was needed from the government to enable them to effectively implement all the required protocols that had been instructed. In addition, monitoring of schools has become limited due to travel restrictions in place because of COVID-19. The loose monitoring and feedback loop by the authorities meant that not all schools are following the guidelines set for them.

“Most of the time we are out of the field to monitor the schools but because of the COVID restrictions, we don't move as we would like to because we are also trying to be safe, so we cannot do our work especially out in the field.” (Assistant Director Junior and Secondary Schools)



“For me this is what I had a problem with because we have now experienced the virus and we are aware about its seriousness. So, thinking about all the preventive measures, we were expecting the government to make sure that they provide protective gears for all the schools across the country. But if now you decide to pay a visit to some schools, you will notice that most of them don't have face masks and hand washing bucket.” (JSS School Principal, Eastern province)



“We do not assemble for devotion as we used to do before because of COVID-19. They now conduct their devotions in their various classes.” (SSS CTA Secretary, Eastern province)





7.2 What additional demands has COVID-19 put on school management?

Ensuring the safe reopening and return of pupils to schools is a clear priority across the chain of actors in the secondary school system of Sierra Leone, but as discussed above, there is a gap in intention and action. Detailed guidance material and protocols have been developed and shared with schools. However, there are challenges with implementation and compliance, especially in an education system where most schools are already struggling and under-resourced in a business as usual setting. These additional demands create further challenges for school administrators, although the commitment to keep children safe has encouraged them to innovate in some cases.

More specifically, **education officials emphasized that all actors involved in the school system must ensure that the COVID guidelines are being followed.** This includes everyone from the board of governors to the school principal, and even the pupils and teachers at the school. However, this meant that school officials and teachers now had the added responsibility of monitoring if the COVID guidelines were being followed. This was not extremely difficult for a majority of schools which were already feeling stretched for resources even in the absence of a pandemic.

Officials realised that some schools especially in rural areas of the Eastern and Southern regions were stretched for resources which led the ministry to create a package to support them. However, school officials also mentioned that many schools continue to remain stretched and need the support of government to continue to follow the COVID guidelines. These schools need be supported at a local level by the authorities to comply effectively, with regular monitoring and feedback loops required to be put in place.

Non-compliance to COVID guidelines by pupils and other members in the schools has also created fear in teachers and pupils, especially about the safety of their health. While some teachers complained that pupils were not wearing masks at all times thereby putting others at risk, pupils in other schools complained that teachers were not setting a good example for the pupils as they did not wear masks or encourage handwashing.

Syllabus changes and changes to textbooks at some JSS and SSS levels has also led to confusion amongst teachers and pupils. Schools and teachers were already facing a lot of pressure to cover many topics across the syllabus in a shorter amount of time as the schools have been shut for over 6 months. In addition, when the syllabus for some subjects was changed, it led to further confusion between pupils and teachers. Some pupils complained that they were either unaware of this change earlier on, or they could not afford to buy the new textbooks and learning materials associated with the latest syllabus.

“Well the school administration has been trying its best to ensure that they provide all the necessary materials for the pupils and the school, but the lack of adequate resources has been a challenge for us over the past years. We are still trying the best that we can and also we still want the government to support us with adequate materials.” (Chairman, Board of Governors, JSS School, Eastern province)



“We are happy for the reopening of schools but for us as teachers, we have some fear because of COVID-19. The rules say that we are not to touch each other, and although they have supplied face masks to all pupils but every day, we have to chase them so that they will put on their face mask. On the area of the touching, we are not able to control that much especially when they are out for lunch. They are not able to stay away from their friends.” (JSS School Teacher, Northern province)



“There are changes [in learning materials] because the government has changed the literature books. Now we have new books. There are changes also in the way the lesson notes are prepared and for the syllabus also there are changes.” (JSS School Principal, Northern province)





7.3 How has school participation been affected by the closure?

School closures following the Ebola outbreak in 2014 had led to a large increase in pupil drop-outs in Sierra Leone, as well as deep changes in the teaching workforce. These numbers have as yet⁹ not been estimated following the COVID-19 school closure. While the BTS survey did not collect survey data on enrolment numbers,¹⁰ pupil participation and teacher turnover were discussed as part of qualitative interviews and this section presents some key findings.

7.3.1 Pupil enrolment and dropouts

Generally, it appears that the recent school closure experience did not lead to a massive increase in the population of children out of school. MBSSE representatives also hinted that this was in line with the preliminary notions they had received from schools, but they were currently trying to establish more robust estimates via their field officers. School and community respondents confirmed that most children had returned school once they opened. One of the primary reasons quoted for this was the fact that children, and their parents, were tired of being at home during the COVID-19 lockdown and now that schools had reopened, they were excited to return. As suggested in Section 6.1.2, children had missed their school work and friends during the break and they were motivated and looked forward to the chance to reconnect.

“Well honestly speaking pupil turnout [after schools reopened] was very impressive this year, even better than normal school opening.” (KII, Asst. Director Secondary Schools)



“When schools reopened, teachers were very committed. Everybody was tired [of the lockdown] including the head teachers, teachers, parents and the like. Everybody wanted schooling. There was a larger turn up in schools compared to any other time in this country, pupils returned to schools in their numbers.” (KII, DDE District 2)



In addition, school and government policies were also reported to contribute to children's return to school. To ensure education continuity, schools had been directed to follow a 'mass promotion' policy after the school closure which meant that all children regardless of their academic performance moved into the next grade. While this increased the incentive for pupils to come back to school, teachers reported struggling with this because at time pupils lacked foundational skills for the next grade and this made it more difficult to teach them on par with the whole class. Some principals also complained that it would pull down the standard of education, especially for SSS grades. Some schools therefore decided to not follow this policy and had either conducted internal school exams or then retained struggling pupils in lower grades. Pupils who did not want to repeat the grade transferred to other schools.

“Pupil numbers increased because there was mass promotion so everybody knew they would be promoted unless there was some exception, that alone was motivation for them to come back to schools... the school is also doing well especially in the sciences and also the introduction of the FQSE has allowed enrolment numbers to increase.” (CTA member, SSS School, Western Province)



“Compared to last year's enrolment, our numbers have reduced by 5 per cent because some pupils were supposed to repeat the year because they failed, but they didn't want to repeat so they decided to go to another school... There was a time when our school's administration was in misunderstanding with the government because they wanted us to have mass promotion. But if a pupil does not pass a single subject, how can you promote him/her to a new class? We encouraged them to repeat the academic year instead.” (CTA member, JSS School, Northern Province)



⁹ At the time of data collection, November 2020.

¹⁰ The SGLAs collected this information during the school principal interviews. These were not part of the design of the BTS study.



The quality and reputation of a school was also a key trigger in attracting pupils, especially for exam going grades. Pupils, as well as school and community respondents suggested that some schools were known to perform better in the BECE/ WASSCE exams which is why pupils from other schools transferred to them. As a result of this and the mass promotion policy, these schools had in fact seen an increase in enrolment following reopening and there were complaints of overcrowding in classrooms. This was a concern given spacing regulations as part of COVID-19 SOPs.

Contrary to this some schools reported lower pupil attendance numbers since re-opening. Part of this is the traditional laxity shown by some pupils in returning to school at the start of term. This was reported to be especially severe this year because as a result of COVID-19, MBSSE did not conduct its usual sensitisation in communities pre-opening of schools. In addition, some parents and pupils expressed fears linked to the virus and they were concerned that their children would be exposed/ act as transmitters if were they to go to school.

However, even discounting for these initial dips in pupil attendance, financial challenges faced by families came across as a more severe barrier to children's schooling. This appears to be particularly problematic in the Western region. Although the institution of the Free Quality School Education (FQSE) policy in 2018 did away with the major burden of paying school fees from parents and guardians, there were associated costs like uniforms, schools materials, and monetary contributions to the school administration (for teachers off the payroll for instance) that parents struggled to meet. As a result, they were unable to send their children back to school and the children dropped out.

Linked to the above, school representatives suggested that **some children had now grown accustomed to earning an income and they (or their parents) were no longer interested in academics.** As discussed in Section 6.1.3, boys picked up Okada-riding or joined gangs, while girls had grown used to earning money petty trading in the markets. They did not want to give this up and go back to school. While this was often a personal choice by the pupils, in others cases the child had no choice but to skip school and continue earning to support the family.

“Well for the first few days attendance was dismal to say, especially in the northern region where I was visiting. I had to go on the radio with the Deputy Director to state that school were opening and nothing will change that date... last year prior to the opening of schools we made jingles, radio announcement, and did talk shows to inform parents that school were reopening on a certain date... but because of COVID we thought that children had been at home and they will happily go to school, only for us to go to schools on day one and see three or four children in a school of five hundred.” (KII, Asst. Director Secondary Schools)



“Well as for me, when schools reopened it took two weeks before I started coming because my mother was thinking of this Corona so that is why she was afraid.” (Girl, SSS3 pupil, Western Province)



“One of my friend's father lost his job during the COVID-19 outbreak and he has about six children now he cannot send all of them back to school because there is no money.” (Girl, JSS3 pupil, Western Province)



“Well my parents were concerned about my safety in school and also about my school materials like uniforms, books and bag. This was as a result of the COVID-19 because my father was not working and business was not successful at the time.” (Girl, SSS3, Eastern Province)



“I know a pupil who came to the school to pay her fees. I asked her to tell me why she was coming to pay late, she said her parents were forcing her to marry but she was not ready for that yet... Let us forget about the free education [FQSE]. There are are other things that the pupils need things like shoes, bag and other things.” (CTA member, SSS School, Western Province)



“Even the boys that are into this bike-riding, most of them have dropped out of school because of this. Some of them have wives and they have to take care of the wife and if they have any children. So this means that the boy will not be able to go back to school because of the responsibility.” (CTA Chairman, JSS School, Northern Province)





Finally, some pupils especially girls, were reported not to have returned to school because they faced violence and exploitation during the break. Girls got impregnated, married, or gave birth during the school closure and then were said to drop out of school due to lack of support and the social stigma attached. Often much of the mockery came from fellow pupils and peers which suggests the need for greater sensitisation and empathy in classrooms. School representatives reported that several pregnant girls had appeared for the BECE/ WASSCE examinations earlier in the summer. However, other pupils made fun or leered at them which discouraged them from returning to school once session resumed.

“One of my friends got pregnant and her parent decided not to support her education anymore because they have other children to look after as well, since she has been given her own chance and she has misused it.” (Girl, SSS3 pupil, Eastern Province)



“The girls who got pregnant are ashamed of going back to school because of the provocation in school by their friends.” (Girl, JSS3 pupil, Western Province)



Box 10: The decision to return children back to school

The decision to send children back to school was in most cases taken by a child's parents or guardian within the family as they were the ones responsible for the child.

The primary concern for parents was fear for their child's health and safety given they were returning to school during an ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, economic difficulties and considerations also affected their decision to send their children back to school. Parents from weaker socioeconomic backgrounds and those that had lost jobs during the lockdown particularly struggled with this.

In some cases, children felt that the government made the decision for them to return to school by setting the date for school reopening and that they or their parents had no choice in the matter.

“My parents know the importance of education so when they heard about the reopening of schools, they were so eager for me to return back to school. They called my aunty and she sent the money for the items that I needed to return to school.” (Boy, SSS3 pupil, North Western Province)



“My father was afraid, and he warned me to be very careful and he told me that I should avoid crowded places and I should always use my face mask... Some parents were not able to buy all the school materials for their children immediately, so some children had to wait a few weeks before they could start attending school.” (Girl, JSS3 pupil, Western Province)



7.3.2 Teacher enrolment and numbers

Qualitative discussions suggest that teacher turnover during the school closure period had decreased the number of teachers in several schools. Some teachers had moved on because they had been offered better jobs, while others left because of a lack of payment of salaries during the school closure period. In some cases, school respondents suggested that they had deliberately reduced teacher numbers when the number of pupils fell. This was particularly problematic for private and/or community schools where teachers were not on government payroll.

“Three teachers have left from the senior school because they have got a job elsewhere. If the numbers of pupils reduce, we have to reduce the staff. One new teacher has been added.” (CTA member, SSS School, Western Province)



“Some teachers did not come back [after the school resumed] because of lack of payment of teachers' salary. We had 25 teachers, but we only have 22 now... Yes, because the government subvention has not yet been paid, but we are waiting.” (Teacher, JSS School, North Western Province)





When asked, government representatives suggested that they had worked to pay salaries on time, and they had also tried to pay school subsidies for those teachers without pin-codes. They did this in order to motivate them to return, despite the complexities of COVID-19. However, as discussed, this support was limited to government and government assisted schools and did not cover all schools and teachers. Nonetheless, MBSSE and TSC staff generally did not think COVID-19 would have resulted in a greater than normal teacher displacement. This is yet to be verified.

Pupils had mixed feedback on teacher transition and how it affected their studies after the resumption of schools.

Given that term had just recently started at the time of the BST survey, children were not very comfortable with the new teachers and some of them found this unsettling. There were mixed reports on teaching quality with some new teachers teaching better, while others had room for improvement. One school in the Western region had instituted a timesheet and warning system for teachers to ensure punctuality and attendance.

Fewer teachers also meant that classes had to be merged and were more over-crowded.

This created problems for social distancing and spacing requirement following COVID-19. In addition, it meant that there was more work pressure on the remaining teachers, especially with all the missed term time.

“There have been some changes in term of the teachers. The teachers that we had last year have gone and now we have new ones ... But we are not familiar with most of the new teachers.” (Boy, JSS3 pupil, Northern Province)



“We have seen much improvement in teaching... they have changed some of the teachers that were not effective in their teaching so for now things are improving... Now the teachers are showing understanding in class and if we ask questions, they will answer those questions.” (Girl, JSS3 pupil, Western Province)



“There is no social distancing in this school because when we have combined classes all of us sit in one crowded class. This is because we don't have enough teachers in the school for now.” (Girl, SSS3 pupil, Eastern Province)



“COVID-19 has disturbed us seriously as teachers because we are not able to complete our syllabus. We used to have three terms in the academic year, but this past year we only had two terms in the academic year.” (Teacher, JSS School, Northern Province)



7.4 How do schools interact with parents and the community?

The interaction of schools with parents and communities has often been done through the CTA. This subsection presents the description of the role that the CTA has taken during school closures. In addition, Box 11 summarises findings on school board of governors (BOG) which play a more school-centric role than CTAs.

According to qualitative interviews, the **role of the CTA was to provide a forum for educational discussion, a means of communication to foster partnership between parents and the school for the benefit of children, and providing support to teachers.** The membership of the CTA comprised of the principal and a teacher who in most cases also performed the role of the secretary, parents, and other influential community members. In a number of cases, the evidence suggested that

“As CTA, many times we come to meeting and promote the activities of the school, we ensure children adhere to the rules of the school, we organise sport occasions and also support the school so that programs go well.” (CTA representative, JSS school, North-Western province)



CTAs within the regions tend to be more active and convene more regularly (at least once a month) compared to those in regional capitals. They also have a say in pupils' enrolment, teachers' recruitment, salary payments, and provision of infrastructural facilities to the school.

Following school resumption, some CTA members have supported the school by providing safety equipment. A couple of them have had meetings with the school management to think about ways the committee can support the school to adhere to safety protocols and what assistance pupils will require to catch-up with lost time at home. A majority of meetings had reached a decision for the school to initiate extra coaching hours for the pupils which parents are committed to supporting.



“We were putting together some money to assist some teachers especially those that are not on payroll, but we have stopped because of the free quality education, because government said we should not pay extra charges. Apart from that, the CTA thought about it years back that in order to keep the teacher in school, they should have a staff quarters. we stopped at wall height, because of free quality education.” (CTA representative, JSS school, Southern province)



“We were putting together some money to assist some teachers especially those that are not on payroll, but we have stopped because of the free quality education, because government said we should not pay extra charges. Apart from that, the CTA thought about it years back that in order to keep the teacher in school, they should have a staff quarters. we stopped at wall height, because of free quality education.” (CTA representative, JSS school, Southern province)



CTA members also expressed that **there is a need for extra financial support from the local community for school development**. Since the inception of the FQSE in the country and the prohibition of monetary contribution to the school from parents, a lot of the CTA members complained that this has hampered projects they have undertaken in the schools. For instance, in one school in the Southern region where teacher retention was a problem because of the long distance they needed to travel, the chairman said the staff quarter project they started has been left uncompleted since they received the directives from the government to stop donations. A few principals also complained that they lost most non-pin code teachers because parents were not motivated to continue to financially contribute to the school because of the financial hardship that most homes had suffered due to COVID-19.

Box 11: Prevalence and inputs of BOG

BOGs are appointed, voluntary in nature, and constitute part of the formal structure of governance for the school. Primarily, they coordinate the disbursement of funds that the school receives from the government, and to ensure that the school is run according to government guidelines. They also supervise the school administrator and ensure that the schools are run according to what the ministry of education prescribed.

In some schools where the BOG was yet to be established, respondents spoke of having what is called the standing committee who perform a similar function.

A representative from the MoE mentioned, the activities of the BOG are guided by a handbook which outlines what the composition of the BOG should be, their roles, the expectation of the ministry, and its tenure.

“As a member of the board and the C.T.A chairman, I assist the administration in the school to ensure that work is done correctly and also advise them on the things that they should not do and at the same time working together to build up the children. We also visit the school and ensure that we do what we are able to do for the children, and also if there are problems they face, we will brainstorm on how to solve them and also compensating the effort of the administration and how see how the school will be a good institution for the children. We also seek the welfare of teachers as we were able to adjust the stipend of teachers which they were not comfortable with.” (Chairman, CTA, SSS school, Eastern province)



“Well they are the ministry representative they monitor the daily affairs of the schools, control the finances of the schools and the school principal is the administrator but the board manages the affairs of the schools and we also think they must have an increasing role that is why we have just concluded in training of board of governors country wide in relation to the running of the schools, that is in our new outreach the quality assurance we have develop tools that will make sure that each will have a role to play in the monitoring and supervision of schools.” (Education representative)



8

Concluding remarks and recommendations



8 Concluding remarks and recommendations

This BTS Study offers robust evidence on what JSS3 and SSS3 pupils in Sierra Leonean schools know and can do in English and maths following school closures due to COVID-19, and how this has changed since before COVID-19. One of the primary objectives of this report is to provide MBSSE with robust nationally- and regional-level representative data on learning at the JSS3 and SSS3 levels in English and maths to input into Sierra Leone's education sector response COVID-19. This section draws the report to a close by proposing some recommendations, in the form of a longlist to move forward as a list of actions.

While pupil performance in the BTS study is marginally better compared to SGLA 2019, the overarching observation is that secondary grade learning outcomes remain low and that the inequalities in learning outcomes between boys/girls, rural/urban pupils, richer/poorer pupils have widened compared to previous years. Large proportions of pupils do not demonstrate more than basic English and maths skills despite completing eight (JSS3) to eleven (SSS3) years of formal education and passing the NPSE and BECE, respectively. The study uncovered key factors that explain why pupil performance is still low. A majority of pupils reported facing challenges when schools were closed. Key challenges that pupils self-reported were centred around violence and exploitation, emotional and social well-being, economic and financial difficulties, and physical health and hunger. These challenges not only directly affected pupils' health and well-being, but also influenced their ability to learn during school closures. In some cases, they even have had more longer lasting impacts on school attendance and dropouts after schools resumed in October 2020. This was more pronounced for older pupils, girls, and poorer pupils.

The results of the study suggest that while there is much potential for remote learning, the current education system and home environment for most Sierra Leonean pupils is not entirely conducive for learning outside of school. Girls and poorer pupils are particularly disadvantaged in terms of remote learning as they not only lack access to learning resources and support at home, but also have many different competing demands for their time. Remote learning systems can only be effective where pupils have the time, resources and ability to engage with them.

While it is difficult to change pupil background factors, it can be a much simpler task to facilitate pupils so that any time they dedicate to their studies outside of school is used more effectively. For pupils to be successful in their learning and examinations, it is important for them to not only be able to learn in school, but also to practice and consolidate their learning outside of school i.e. in-school and at-home (remote) learning should go hand in hand. Learning resources like radio lessons and pupil handbooks need to be mainstreamed as 'hybrid' rather than 'distance' learning solutions and teachers should integrate them into classroom practice to build pupils familiarity and comfort in engaging with them independently. Targeted interventions such as tutoring, peer-learning or community involvement, especially for the most disadvantaged, can accelerate pupil's learning. This is also important towards reform of the education system in Sierra Leone to be more robust in case of future crises. The role of CTAs and school BOGs can also be utilised to increase sensitization at the community level regarding the importance of at-home learning, including household support – and space- to allow more of this.

The BTS study, and the SGLAs previously, also indicate that not only do girls score less than boys in the learning assessment, but they face greater risk to their safety and well-being both in and outside of school. To support them to participate in education on an equal footing as boys requires some of these underlying biases to be addressed. Schools and communities should not only work towards providing girls with a safe place, but also to provide functional platforms prepared to deal with concerns that girls encountered when they were away from schools.

MBSSE launched an immediate and proactive response to protect pupils and their education following COVID-19 by focusing on response, recovery, and reform. However, there remains much to be done to ensure that the current system caters to the learning and well-being needs of all pupils, irrespective of gender, age, family background, or location. Partners like Leh wi Lan are providing active support to MBSSE in realising this goal, and the BTS Study is one such initiative to ensure MBSSE's response to COVID-19 are evidence-based and backed by data. Based on the results discussed in this report, below are the recommendations for MBSSE's consideration.



1 Align curriculum content with pupils' learning levels

COVID-19 has made it amply clear that curriculum reforms are highly necessary. Results suggest that despite an improvement in performance, a large proportion of secondary pupils at both JSS and SSS levels are struggling to keep pace and respond to the ambitious demands of the curriculum. One of the entry points for MBSSE and partners is to understand how to better align curriculum content with pupils' learning levels – could the curriculum meet pupils at their current level and gradually bring them up to where the system expects them to operate? Could non-standard approaches to learning, such as remediation, be brought to bear on the challenge at hand? Common approaches either streamline curriculum content to focus on priority skills to better coincide with pupils' learning potential (as is usually the case with tracking or training teachers in remedial pedagogy), or accelerate the pace of pupil learning, usually through more targeted attention or tutoring, such that pupils can better keep up with curricular pace (Banerjee, Cole, Duflo, & Linden, 2005; Duflo, 2011).

However, the education system post-Ebola provides many lessons on best practices following school closures. After Ebola, pupils were put on an accelerated curriculum that they were still on before schools closed due to COVID-19. Results from the SGLAs suggested that despite the accelerated curriculum, pupil learning outcomes are still very poor. This suggests that learning might go faster if curricula and teachers were focus on fundamental skills coinciding with pupils' learning potential. This might seem like a failure but it would help the system re-orient teaching and learning away from what happens for a small group of able pupils towards the typical pupil who is now better equipped to move ahead.

2 Reassess remediation programmes

Before COVID-19, MBSSE was already piloting remediation teaching methods for JSS1 pupils to ensure they are armed with the foundational literacy and numeracy skills. If Sierra Leone decides to go down this route again, some concrete action points would be to, first, assess the degree of gap between curricular content and pupils' learning levels and understand the flexibility currently afforded to teachers and principals to re-orient teaching at the right level and adjust pace. This approach would start where the pupil is currently at, by slowing the pace of the curriculum to better meet pupil's learning needs. Targeted interventions such as tutoring, peer-learning or remote learning, especially for the most disadvantaged, can accelerate pupil's learning.

This would also require serious consideration of the current examination and assessment system in secondary grades. Should we continue to rely largely on the BECE and WASSCE as a measure of academic success in secondary grades? Is the pressure to pass these seemingly all-important exams leading to "teaching to the test", exam malpractices and rote-learning? Do we need a more gradual and continuous system of classroom-based formative assessments to help pupils up the learning trajectory? Based on this initial diagnosis, a framework and operational plan for remediation would need to be designed.

3 Urgently address issues of sexual harassment and girls' safety

In the study, many girls reported that they view the school as a safe space which probably reflects the relative incidence and extent of harassment they encounter outside school in the community. However, previous SGLAs and this BTS have indicated that not only do girls score less than boys do in the learning assessment, but when in school, they are subject to lack of physical safety and sexual harassment. A sizeable proportion of female pupils are facing harassment while travelling between school and home, and while in school being sexually harassed by male pupils and teachers, including being asked for sexual favours by teachers in return for grades. One might ask – what have toilets got to do with girls' education? We find that lack of adequate toilet facilities near the main building of the school means that girls feel unsafe using them and absent themselves from school during menstruation.

To be fully prepared for girls to safely return to schools, schools should not only work towards providing girls again with a safe place, but also be prepared to deal with concerns that girls encountered when they were away from schools. No doubt, these challenges have deep-set social roots, but it is worth considering ways to start addressing this issue, namely by:



- Sensitising teachers (especially male teachers) and male pupils to become part of the solution – ensure they appreciate the extent and seriousness of the problem, its consequences on school and society, their role in the problem, and what they could individually do to prevent incidents of harassment.
- Ensuring effective accountability mechanisms exist such that when a girl or someone else lodges a complaint, they can do so without fear of retribution and appropriate action is taken. Garner support from the CTA/PTA to make these mechanisms more effective.
- Consider more female participation in the teaching workforce – While clearly easier said than done, there is ample evidence which suggests female teachers make a positive impact on girls' enrolment, attendance, and achievement in school (UNESCO, 2006). This is particularly important now that pregnant girls are able to return to school.

4 Give pupils from poorer backgrounds a fair shot at success

Results from the study showed that poorer pupils performed significantly worse than those from more well-off backgrounds. The evidence suggested that poorer pupils faced more challenges and had lesser support than more advantaged pupils when schools were closed. However, we need to understand these constraints further especially, for instance, the constraints poorer pupils experience at home and school; including the direct and indirect costs of schooling; the rationale between their education decisions; the opportunity cost of attending school and learning versus wage-earning options in the labour markets; and what teachers and school management can do to ensure these pupils don't fall through the cracks of the system. Armed with this knowledge, MBSSE – through the FQSE – should consider trying out different support systems for poorer pupils in particular and test if these approaches are delivering more learning for them. These approaches could potentially include introducing parental support groups in school, engaging parents, CTAs and school BOGs, ensuring most the marginalized pupils sign for and take-home pupil handbooks and have access to radios to have access to the radio teaching programme. Specific provisions to help overcome these inequities will help put children from all backgrounds on a more equal footing.

5 Improve pupils' ability to learn outside of the classroom

One of the clearer action points that has emerged from the feedback provided by pupils is based on the learning materials they had access to when schools were closed including textbooks, pupil handbooks, and lesson notes. While the provision of self-study materials is a necessary condition to ensure pupil learning, it is not a sufficient condition. The main emphasis should be on ensuring that pupils have adequate ability and support to use the materials independently or with peers, in addition to fostering a culture where learning at home is encouraged.

On pupil handbooks in particular, it is proposed that the developers of the handbooks consider that pupils have difficulty following the handbooks and understanding the content for future revision and improvement. Finally, Leh wi Lan needs to consider evidence provided by the study which suggests that some pupils are struggling to understand the content and structure of the Pupil Handbooks and need stronger support from teachers in school, and friends and family at home, to use the handbooks more effectively.

6 Improve how digital media can support learning

While the radio teaching programme was launched to enable all children of Sierra Leone to learn during school closures, access to the programme was hindered by access to radios and accompanying requirements. Aside from these challenges, feedback around the programme was very positive. This leads to an important consideration of how radio, television, and other sources of digital media can be used to better support learning in normal as well as emergency periods.



Many areas of improvement emerged during the study for the radio programme which can be extrapolated to other sources of digital media to enable these sources to be widely used even when pupils have gone back to school. These include:

- Finding a suitable time for the programme to air so that children are able to listen to it upon their return. Additionally, the programme could be a very useful resource to reach those who have dropped out. Given positive feedback around the programme, finding suitable times to cater to various categories of pupils would be an important step;
- The programme could possibly focus more on foundational skills in English and maths as opposed to moving onto advanced topics since pupils have been shown to significantly fall behind in this area; and
- The programme in Sierra Leone focuses on many different topics and subjects. One recommendation would be to shift focus to fewer topics with more repeated lessons. This will not only enable pupils who have missed certain lessons to catch-up, but also enable pupils to become more comfortable with concepts by watching the same lesson multiple times.

7 Learn from “success stories”

This BTS study affords us an opportunity to understand how learning performance varies from region to region. The learning assessment results indicate the distribution of pupil abilities in both subjects is fairly diverse: i.e. there is a small proportion of pupils who seem to know the curriculum and able to correctly answer the more demanding questions, while vast proportions who at best demonstrate the elementary skills expected in primary grades. The first step in unpacking what distinguishes these two groups of pupils has been done in this report by looking at some of the background characteristics of pupils (e.g. gender, family's assets, province, remoteness of school) to understand the average profiles of pupils who are performing well and those for whom the education system is not delivering much learning.

A potential next step would be to see what characterises regions and schools where pupils are scoring well in the BTS – are any of these replicable in a disadvantaged region or school? Are the teachers and principals doing anything different, which helps their pupils succeed? Are there lessons to be learnt from these pockets of learning that can be taken as lessons for other schools in the system? Further ‘post-COVID’ studies, such as the ‘pre-COVID’ deep-dive¹¹ conducted by Leh wi Lan earlier in 2020, will help answer these questions and provide key lessons on what works in the changed world pupils and policy makers live in today.

¹¹ MBSSE (2020). Positive deviance among Sierra Leone's secondary schools: A deep-dive study into pockets of effective learning among secondary schools in Sierra Leone.



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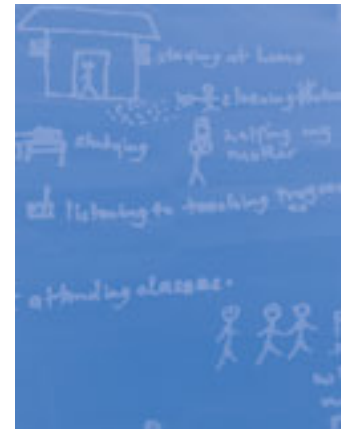
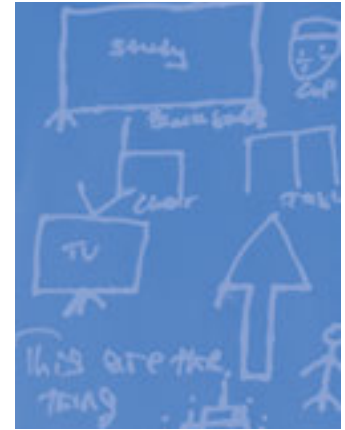
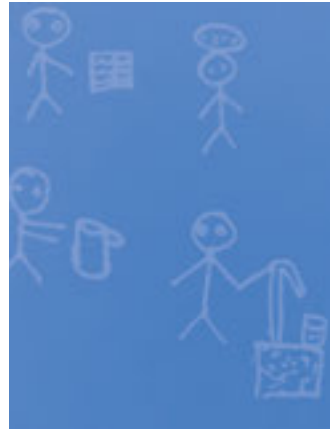
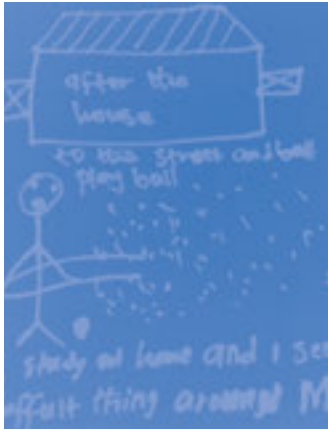
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