Leh Wi Lan
Learning and School Safety Study 2021

Briefing note 1: March 2022

Recovering from school closures in Sierra Leone
Status of pupil learning outcomes in junior and senior secondary schools

1 About the Learning and School Safety (LASS) Study

In September 2021, pupils in Sierra Leone stepped into classrooms to begin their second academic year in the COVID-19 pandemic. Like their peers across the world, junior- (JSS) and senior secondary school (SSS) pupils were affected after schools in Sierra Leone closed for six months between April and October 2020 and social distancing measures were enforced. The Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education's (MBSSE) emergency planning and sector response included immediately rolling out distance learning tools, starting community sensitisation campaigns to keep children safe, adjusting examination schedules and issuing guidelines to manage safe school reopening and learning recovery. These built on the foundations set by the Free Quality School Education (FQSE) programme to deliver sustained learning for all pupils and support the Sierra Leone National Development Plan 2019-2023.

The immediate impacts of secondary school closure on pupil learning and well-being were captured in the 'Back to School' study (2020) under the UK aid funded Leh Wi Lan programme.[1] Although comparisons with pre-COVID learning results were not perfect, the Back to School study found that Sierra Leone appeared to have avoided major learning loss following school closure. However, the majority of secondary school pupils were still performing behind grade, and learning only improved for certain groups of pupils (boys, richer pupils and those from certain regions) while the already disadvantaged probably fell further behind, suggesting increasing learning inequalities.[2] Children's physical, emotional and economic well-being were also affected by lockdown and this was especially so for girls, older pupils, and those from poorer households.

One year on, the Learning and School Safety (LASS) 2021 study under the Leh Wi Lan programme uses quantitative and qualitative evidence to reveal the direction of travel in both learning achievement and child safeguarding mechanisms in terms of violence reporting systems in secondary schools in Sierra Leone. In doing so, the LASS study aims to capture the longer-term impacts of school closure and catch-up strategies for learning recovery. It also aims to support children, especially girls and children with disabilities, to be in school safely.[3] Details of the study design are shown on the right.

This briefing note tracks the status of pupil learning outcomes and recovery in junior and senior secondary schools 12 months after school reopening by addressing five key questions:

a. Are there any notable shifts in JSS3 and SSS3 pupil learning outcomes compared with results from 12 months ago when schools had just re-opened?

b. What are the English and maths skills typically demonstrated by JSS3 and SSS3 pupils early in the 2021 school year? Are these skills in line with what the national curriculum expects pupils to have achieved in these grades?

c. Have disparities in pupil performance by gender and other background characteristics changed compared with results from 12 months ago?

d. What are some of the strategies employed by schools in Sierra Leone to support learning recovery after COVID-19?

e. How frequently are pupils studying at home, and what resources and support do they have? Do self-study practices vary by gender and other background characteristics?

2000 JSS3 and SSS3* pupils tested on English and maths at the start of the school year

One-on-one test administration: each pupil is tested individually by a data collector using a combination of paper test and handheld computer device for approximately 50 minutes

40 questions per test covering both English and maths

250 school principals interviewed for School checklist (including collection of observational data in schools)

Background questions on pupil profile characteristics, household assets, disability (functional difficulties), self-study practices and support, awareness of violence and violence reporting systems in and around schools

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with representatives from MBSSE, District Education Officers (DEOs), Family Support Units (FSU), and gender specialists

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with JSS3 and SSS3 pupils, and school and community representatives (via the Community Teacher Association – CTA)

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

1 Schools reopened on 5th Oct 2020. Fieldwork for the mixed-methods Back to School study took place in Oct-Nov 2020.

2 Interested readers can access the Back to School (2020) report and previous years' Secondary Grade Learning Assessment (2019, 2018, 2017) reports on the status of teaching and learning in Sierra Leone on https://mbsse.gov.sl/leh-wi-lan/

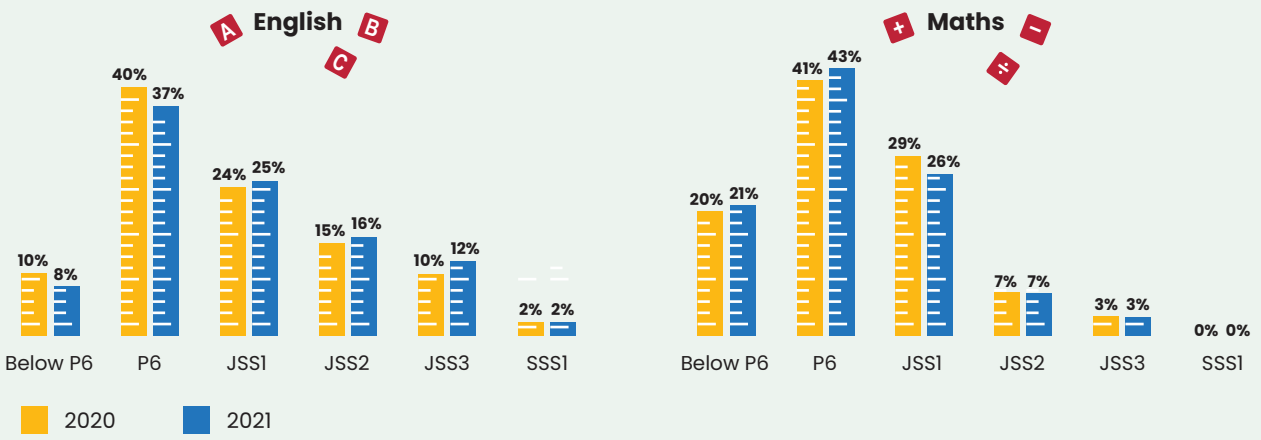
3 These results are discussed in LASS Briefing Note (2): Status of school safety and violence reporting systems in and around junior and senior secondary schools in Sierra Leone.

2 Are there any notable shifts in JSS3 and SSS3 pupil learning outcomes compared with results from 12 months ago when schools had just re-opened?

There has been some learning recovery for secondary grade pupils in Sierra Leone compared to last year, with signs that JSS3 performance in English, and SSS3 achievement in maths, has improved modestly as they start their second academic year into the pandemic. A large proportion of secondary grade pupils are still performing at primary level in both English (42 per cent) and maths (60 per cent), but recent survey data and qualitative evidence indicates movement in the right direction.

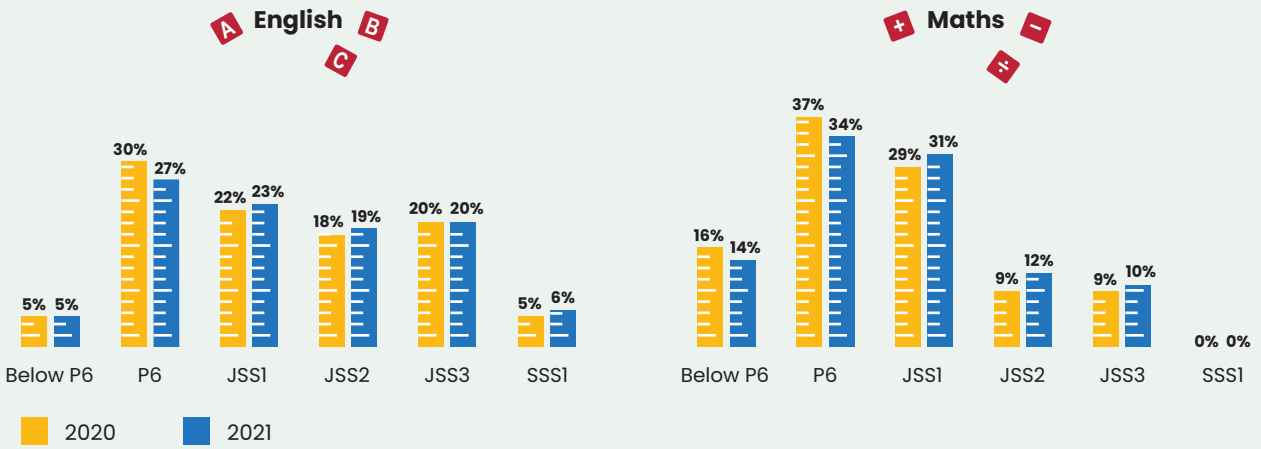
At the JSS level there has been a small improvement in English performance this year while maths results have not changed significantly. The distribution of JSS3 learning outcomes by performance band[4] for both subjects are very similar to what was seen in 2020. This is summarised in Figure 1 below. In English, the share of JSS3 pupils achieving at grade or above[5] increased from 12 per cent to 14 per cent this year. There was also a small improvement at the other end of the scale with the proportion of JSS3 pupils showing primary level skills (P6 or below) reducing from 49 per cent to 45 percent in 2021. The average JSS3 pupil appeared to do slightly worse in maths this year, with the proportion of JSS3 pupils performing at P6 or below in maths increasing from 61 per cent to 64 per cent this year, however the difference was not statistically significant.[6]

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



For SSS pupils, there has been a slight improvement in maths performance compared to last year, while English performance remained at a similar level. As shown in Figure 2, in both subjects there was a small shift of SSS3 pupils away from the two lowest bands into the higher bands, however only the changes in maths results were statistically significant while changes in English achievement were not. While it is encouraging that achievement has not fallen in either subject during this second year of the pandemic, even the top performing SSS3 pupils were behind by two or more years and showed SSS1 level achievement in English and JSS3 level in maths.

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



4 Six grade-level performance bands (ranging from below P6, P6, JSS1, JSS2, JSS3 and SSS1) have been defined in relation to the national curriculum. This alignment of the learning assessment questions with curriculum expectations was carried out in 2018 by a panel of MBSSE experts with technical assistance from the Leh Wi Lan Programme.

5 JSS3 or SSS1.

6 Not statistically significant means that there is less than 90 per cent confidence that the observed difference is due to a real change over time rather than due to chance factors such as who was tested.

Discussions with pupils and school representatives support survey results, with reports of improvement in pupil performance after an initial dip when schools initially resumed last year. School closure disrupted the learning continuum and pupils struggled when they returned to school. There were also challenges initially, for both pupils and teachers, because of the policy of mass promotion which meant that pupils moved into the next grade without coverage of some parts of the syllabus[7] These learning impacts were particularly severe for pupils who had limited opportunity for self-study during school closure due to competing demands on their time and limited access to resources and supervision at home. In response, there was increased pressure on schools by the government and community alike expecting them to prioritise learning recovery and ensure pupils' safety after reopening.

School and community respondents from Community Teacher Association (CTA) interviews said that schools had to re-strategise on addressing learning losses and preventing dropouts. Efforts were made to increase teaching contact time in schools, as well as self-study by pupils at home. The additional learning time was mainly used to cover the syllabus missed due to school closure and/or to ensure that pupils were better prepared for external examinations. Pupils in some schools also confirmed that teachers were now putting in effort to explain concepts in class more thoroughly and developed more exhaustive notes/pamphlets to distribute to pupils to facilitate learning recovery (detailed in Section 4 and Section 5 below). Some principals and CTA representatives had also engaged parents to ensure they supported children's learning by reducing household chores and ensuring regular attendance after schools resumed. As a result of these efforts, with more time having passed since the opening of schools, teachers reported improvement in pupils' performance with more pupils understanding and participating in class.

Box 1: How much do pupils learn in the three years between JSS3 and SSS3?

The comparison of learning achievement of JSS3 and SSS3 pupils against grade benchmarks gives some indication of how much pupils learn in the three years between these grades (assuming similar background characteristics).

All summary indicators of learning achievement in the LASS study show significantly better results for SSS3 pupils than JSS3 pupils. This strongly suggests that pupils are gaining skills and knowledge between JSS3 and SSS3. However, despite having more than five years of secondary education, about 5 in 10 (48 per cent) SSS3 pupils can still only show primary level maths skills, and about 3 in 10 (32 per cent) show primary level English achievement.

As such, while small '*green shoots*' of improvement are being seen at the secondary level and some learning definitely does take place as children move up grades, a majority of children are still behind grade and achieving at primary level.

> *"Children are doing better than when they first came to school after the COVID-19 school reopening. Even though the [exam] results from 2021 is not yet out, I believe the results will be better than last year's because pupils are more serious with their books." (Principal, JSS, Northern province)*

> *"Because of the covid the government decided give mass promotion to all the students and unfortunately most of them did not cover the syllabus and they said that we should promote them to the next class and that greatly affected their performance in the class that they were promoted to… that is the reason why we have a lot of failure in the previous academic year." (Teacher, JSS, Western province)*

3 How have disparities in pupil performance by gender and other background characteristics changed compared with results from 12 months ago?

The LASS study looked at variations in pupils performance by 7 key dimensions with the results below:

1 Gender

Boys still perform better than girls, but gender gaps have not increased since last year

Boys continue to out-perform girls on all three core measures of learning achievement[8] considered in the LASS study, but performance gaps remain similar to 12 months ago. Given that last year's Back to School Study found signs of increasing gender inequality in learning compared with 2019, it is positive to see that gender disparities have not continued to widen.

As with previous years, the LASS study found that the gender performance gap was higher in SSS than JSS, i.e. older girls were further behind boys than younger girls were. Figure 3 shows the proportion of girls and boys achieving at the primary level in both subjects. While the share of JSS3 girls who were achieving at primary level was higher than the share of boys, the gap became much larger at SSS3 level as more girls fell behind.

7 To ensure education continuity, the MBSSE directed schools to follow a 'mass promotion' policy after they opened in September for the 2020-21 cycle, which meant that all children regardless of their academic performance moved into the next grade.

8 These are 1) mean scaled scores, 2) proportion of pupils performing at P6 or below, and 3) proportion of pupils performing at JSS3 or above.

Figure 3: Changes in proportion of SSS3 pupils (by gender) performing at P6 or below* (2021)

Boys scores are higher than girls scores in English and maths. The gap widens as they move from JSS to SSS, but **has not increased** between 2020 and 2021

	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
A B C	42%	49%	26%	37%
+ − ÷	63%	65%	40%	54%

*Smaller proportion indicates better performance

One explanation for the gender gap in performance stabilising over the past 12 months is that the reopening of schools has given girls more opportunity to study by reducing distractions on their time. Schools provide essential learning and the closure of schools had disproportionate effects on some children. Last years' Back to School study found that girls, especially older girls at the SSS3 level, were significantly less likely to report studying during school closure. Boys had more uninterrupted time to study, while more girls reported extra work and domestic chores at home, and they were also involved in income-generating support to their families. A key informant from the MBSSE confirmed that the percentage of girls who failed in the WASSCE/NPSE exams immediately after schools opened was high compared to boys. The reopening of schools has helped level the playing field by giving girls at least some focused time in their day to study during school hours. Girls also benefit from extra lessons and classes organised by the school on par with their male colleagues.

> *"It is always they girls who are affected more because this is something that has to do with the mentality of some of our people in the rural area. For example, a family will have a boy and a girl going to school and if there is hardship, they will ask the girl to stay at home or even to get married so that the family can get money while they support the boy to go to school." (KII, MBSSE representative)*

Nonetheless, there are lingering effects on learning for a sub-set of girls who become pregnant or drop out of school. The performance of these girls is not captured in average scores in the LASS study. However, school representatives in the provinces said that despite the new Radical Inclusion policy, some girls never returned to school or dropped out after finding it too challenging to cope with the associated health demands and social stigma of being pregnant while in school.[9] For boys, the drop-out issue was less commonly reported, but in a few cases boys developed interest in business and were not willing to return to school or pupils preferred to re-enrol in different schools if their school made the decision for them to repeat a grade.

2 Wealth

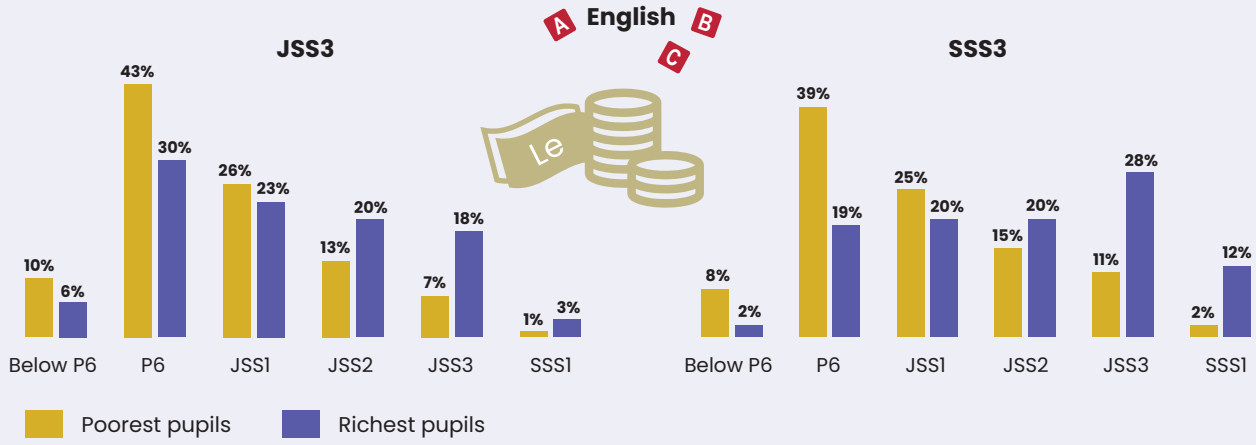
Pupils from the poorest backgrounds show weakest learning performance and wealth inequalities increase from JSS to SSS similar to the patterns observed in 2020

The LASS study reinforces previous learning assessment findings in Sierra Leone that the average score of pupils in both English and maths improve if they belong to richer households compared to more economically disadvantaged pupils.[10] This link between wealth status and learning performance was observed at both JSS and SSS level (see Figure 4), with the poorest pupils clustered in more of the lowest performance bands, while the richest pupils filled more of the top bands. Furthermore, the gap between the performance of the richest and poorest pupils was much more extreme at SSS3 level than JSS3 level. This suggests that pupils who are more economically disadvantaged are falling further behind their peers as they move up the grades.

9 These are discussed more fully in LASS Briefing Note (2): Status of school safety and violence reporting systems in and around junior and senior secondary schools in Sierra Leone.

10 The LASS study looks at learning achievement by wealth quintile with 'richest' and 'poorest' referring to pupils from the top 20 per cent and bottom 20 per cent based on the assets owned by their households.

Figure 4: Distribution of JSS3 and SSS3 pupils' English learning outcomes by wealth status



Overall, the relationship between wealth and learning outcomes this year was similar to what was observed in 2020. Performance gaps between pupils from the richest and poorest backgrounds have not widened in either English or maths over the last 12 months. The increased wealth disparities in performance observed in the Back to School study have not continued this year.

Qualitative evidence shows that there are competing forces at play with pupils from more disadvantaged backgrounds having less time and resources to study, but potentially more motivation. This helps to explain the survey results which found that the poorest pupils were less likely to self-study during term time (93 per cent) relative to the overall average (97 per cent) while almost all of the richest pupils did so (99 per cent). Furthermore, only 44 per cent of the poorest children were able to study every day compared to 63 per cent of the richest self-study group. Both pupils and CTA respondents commented that poorer pupils were more likely to engage in activities to support their households either via domestic chores or income generating activities. This cut into the study time of these pupils, and often left them too tired to study once they were done with their other tasks. This continues to have lingering effects on some pupils even after schools reopened, as some families are still trying to recover from the economic hardships induced by the lockdown. Pupils from the poorest households were also significantly less likely to have someone to help them at home to study (45 per cent) compared to the richest pupils (72 per cent).

> *"…for the rich ones they are finding it very easy since school opened because during the time of the lock-down they had private teachers who were coming to teach them at home because they are able to afford it. But for the poor ones who didn't have that and do not have someone in the compound who is educated to teach them are finding it very difficult." (Male JSS3 pupils, Western province)*

> *"Most parents over work their children forgetting the fact that these children need to study, they rely on their children and so when the children come home from school the parents will give them water to go and sell, or they take them to the farm to help with farming activities…. When that child is exhausted for the rest of the day and returns home, he or she will have no time to study." (CTA Chairman, SSS, Western province).*

Nonetheless, there were some reports of children from more economically disadvantaged backgrounds being more motivated to catch-up with learning. This was often linked to the fact that poorer children felt they needed to do well in order to elevate their families from poverty. Both teachers and community members in the CTA reported that several children from poor socio-economic backgrounds were now performing comparably well against children from richer backgrounds.

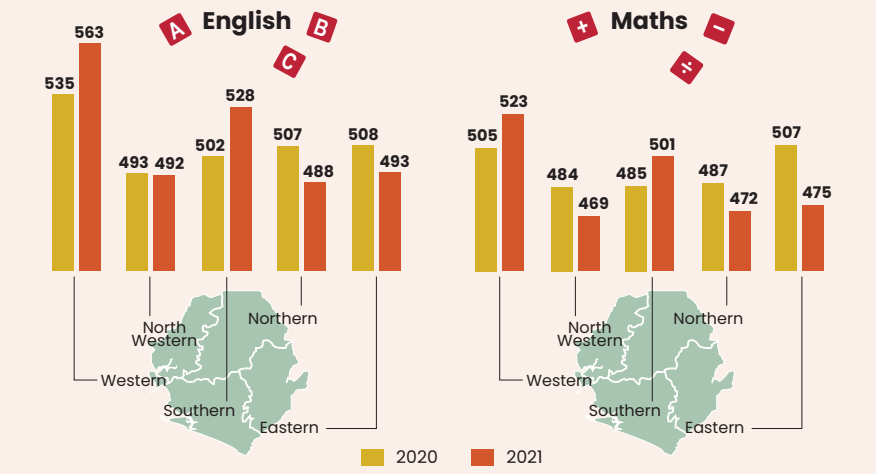
> *"Some poor children now perform better than rich children because rich children think that whether they get educated or not, their parents have money. The poor are trying more with their studies because they know that it [following school reopening] is a big opportunity for them to become better in the future… they think they will be breadwinners for their families so they have to focus on academic work." (Female JSS3 pupils, Eastern province)*

3 Location

Regional differences in pupil performance have increased since 2020 with the West leading as in previous years and only the South showing similar improvement. Pupils from the most remote schools show weakest learning performance

The average pupil from the Western province continues to out-perform their peers at both JSS and SSS level with substantially higher scores in both English and maths. This has traditionally also been observed, even prior to COVID-19. The LASS study found that pupils from the South were next most likely to do well which is a change from last year's results which did not show that the South was performing particularly better than the other four provinces. Figure 5 shows the improvement in average scores for pupils living in the Western and Southern provinces between 2020 and 2021, against the decline in average scores seen in the Northern region and in particular for maths in the Eastern region. The average pupil from the North West performed similarly in both years in English but did less well in maths in 2021. Overall, there has been a striking increase in learning disparities by region in the past 12 months.

Figure 5: Changes in mean pupil score by region (2020-2021)



When it came to school location, pupil learning outcomes were significantly lower for pupils whose school was furthest from the district centre ('most remote')[11] compared to the overall results. For children studying in schools that were closer, learning outcomes did not vary by school location.

4 Language

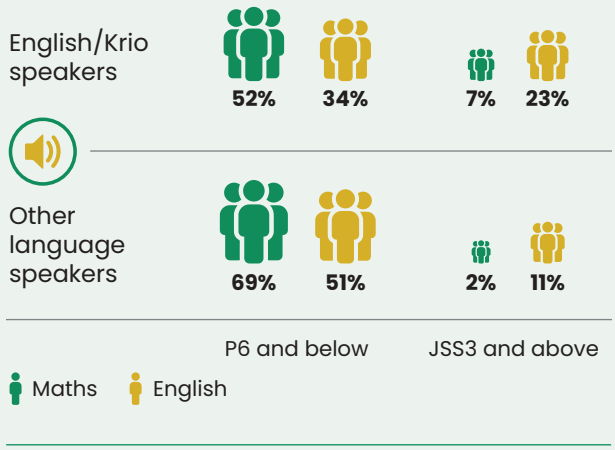
Pupils tend to perform better if their home language matches the language of instruction in school[12]

Figure 6 below shows that pupils who spoke English/Krio[13] at home had better learning outcomes than pupils who spoke other languages. 54 per cent of pupils in the LASS survey spoke English/Krio at home, while the remaining 46 per cent spoke 'other languages'. The English/Krio group had higher average scores, and a smaller proportion was likely to show primary level skills (P6 and below). The association between the home language spoken by pupils and learning outcomes was found even after controlling for wealth, location and gender. The qualitative evidence below provides some insight into why English as the home language can make a difference to learning.

Pupils highlighted the importance of English language in discussion and suggested that they would also like their teachers to focus more on this because it was at the foundations of education and prerequisite for admission into higher institutions of learning. Pupils mentioned that it was necessary to have a good grasp of English literacy in order to excel in other subjects.

> *"English language is the back bone of education … if you cannot understand English certainly you won't understand the maths and other subjects you are being taught because all these subjects have English in it."*
> *(Male SSS3 pupils, North-Western province)*

Figure 6: Pupil learning outcomes by main home language (2021)



11 The LASS study uses a remoteness variable based on GPS coordinates that splits the distance of the school to the nearest district centre into five categories of pupils.
12 Sierra Leone's national curriculum and official language of instruction in school is English.
13 Only 2 per cent were English speakers.

5 Disability

Pupils who self-report having at least some sort of functional impairment have weaker learning performance

The LASS study asked pupils to self-report about any functional difficulties (disabilities) they may have because of a health problem using the Washington Group classification of impairments as a conceptual framework.[14] 32 per cent of pupils self-reported at least some type of impairment, with the most common type being cognitive[15] (15 per cent), followed by sight (11 per cent) and walking (10 per cent).

Pupils who had any type of functional difficulty tend to have lower learning outcomes than pupils who do not. In particular, having difficulty remembering or concentrating, and having difficulty communicating showed more statistically significant differences across the various performance measures than other types of impairment (difficulties seeing, hearing, walking, and self-care).

The average score of pupils with some impairment is **4%** lower in English and **3%** lower in maths

Pupils with difficulty communicating are **x2** times less likely to be in the top English performance band

48% of pupils with difficulty remembering show primary-level skills in English compared to **41%** of other pupils

Qualitative evidence shows that children with health impairments are more likely to be physically deprived of learning opportunities, and further socio-emotional support can improve their schooling experience. Commuting to and from school was a major challenge for pupils with walking impairments because transportation systems were not geared towards them. Taxis and bikes need to be specifically designed to accommodate pupils using wheelchairs and at times friends or teachers had to physically carry such pupils to class. Within schools too, the infrastructure was usually inadequate for pupils with physical impairments. For instance, pupils needing wheelchair access could not pass through classroom doorframes which were too tight, and in other cases schools did not have disability friendly toilet facilities, or ramps or railings to accommodate access around the school compound. Respondents also reported a shortage of assistive devices to facilitate the learning experience of pupils. For example, they said that some pupils with difficulty seeing did not have glasses or assistive (braille) textbooks. This again limited the independence and learning experience of such pupils. Pupils with disability were also subject to harassment and bullying from their peers in some schools which discouraged them from attending school.[16]

> *"Pupils with disabilities are already disadvantaged, already marginalized, and then with COVID-19 and all its challenges – it just made it worse for them. In the first place the school buildings are not accessible for them… and then there's this stigmatizing – children call them names… we also find that some of the physically challenged and visually impaired do not have all the necessary resources and the process of getting these across to them is slow." (KII, MBSSE representative)*

Some schools are now working to reintegrate pupils with disabilities back into learning by offering learning materials, assistive devices and more attention in the classroom. Respondents in these schools had received textbooks, braille materials and recorders from the MBSSE and its partners after the reopening of schools. In a few instances, teachers mentioned using inclusive methods for teaching pupils with disabilities, including having pupils with sight or hearing difficulties sit in the front row and/or paying special attention to them in class. Similarly, other pupils were at times disciplined by school staff to not bully or shame pupils with disabilities. A small number of schools also provided positive examples of children providing peer support and learning by helping pupils with disabilities copy notes and access classrooms. These efforts were said to help pupils with disabilities feel more included and improve their learning experience in schools.

> *"The government supplied brailles to those who sat the last BECE and the WASSCE exams. They also recruited some blind teachers who marked their papers so that their results were released on time [with other pupils]." (KII, MBSSE representative)*

14 The typology provided by the Washington Group questions is geared to identify 'functional difficulties' that affect the full and effective participation of a pupil in learning (including any invisible disabilities).These cover six core functional domains: seeing, hearing, walking, cognition (remembering/concentration), self-care, and communication.

15 Pupil has difficulty remembering or concentrating.

16 The safety of the school environment for pupils with disabilities (health impairments) is discussed further in LASS Briefing Note 2.

6 School type

Pupils in private (non-government) schools have better learning performance

Government or government assisted schools dominate the secondary school system in Sierra Leone, comprising 87 per cent of schools according to the survey data. However, pupil performance was much higher in the small group of non-government schools. The average pupil in a government or government assisted school scored about 10 per cent less than his/her non-government school peers in both English and maths, and a significantly larger proportion of government school pupils fell into the lowest performance bands (P6 and below). For example, in maths, 62 per cent of government pupils are performing at primary level compared to 42 per cent of pupils in non-government schools.

Qualitative evidence shows that the experience of learning loss as a result of COVID-19 was minimal for pupils in private schools compared to those attending government schools. This was noted in last year's Back to School survey results, with pupils in mission schools[17] performing better than their peers in maths at both JSS3 and SSS3 level. During the closure, some private schools in the Western and Southern provinces were reported to have set-up remote learning channels for their pupils via WhatsApp groups. These were used to deliver prepared lesson notes and video content that helped continue learning. In addition, pupils attending the more elite private schools often came from wealthier households who could afford private tutors and other learning support while schools closed.

Now that schools have resumed, some private schools are using innovative ways to continually engage pupils with their studies via bespoke learning resources, teacher support and fostering competition among pupils. For instance, a private school in the Western province had created audio and PDF notes on selected topics which were being shared with pupils via WhatsApp. Some schools in the South and West reported teachers provided hands-on support via WhatsApp where pupils were free to ask clarification questions on assignments, and teachers also shared video and audio teaching materials. Other private schools conducted regular internal prize competitions, or encouraged pupils to participate in inter-school debates and events which boosted the pupils' willingness to learn and compete among themselves to do better in their studies.

> *"For the SSS what we have done is that we created a WhatsApp group for them and teachers are part of the group. We have some topics we will create an audio and make sure we explain the topic thoroughly and then send the audio to the group. This way children can get access to the information, and some will even create other audios to ask questions and then the teachers concerned will respond... these were some of the contributions made by the school to improve the education of the children." (Teacher, SSS, Western province)*

7 Community Teacher Association (CTA)

There are no significant differences in learning outcomes for pupils in schools with active CTAs

Qualitative evidence shows that some schools are now engaging their CTAs to help ensure that home-based learning complements school-based efforts to deal with learning loss. This included using the CTA to sensitize parents on the need to support learning recovery. CTA members advised parents to reduce household chores and distractions at home that compete with pupils' regular study time. Parents were also encouraged to supervise learning at home. In some schools, CTA members collaborated with the school administration to support extra classes for pupils by collecting token payments for teachers, or providing access to electricity and lighting in the evenings and a venue to hold classes on weekends.

Nearly 81 per cent of schools in the LASS survey have an active CTA i.e. a CTA exists and has met recently. However, no significant difference was observed in the survey data between learning outcomes for pupils in schools with and without active CTAs. One explanation is that the primary role of the CTA in most schools was reported to deal with the school administration and general infrastructural issues in and around the school compound. CTA members often did not engage extensively in pupil affairs and had limited inputs on the quality of learning in schools. Further investigation would be useful to understand the type and quality of support provided by the CTA and track improvements in learning over time.

17 The Back to School study looked at performance by status of school (government, private, or mission).

4 What are some of the strategies employed by schools in Sierra Leone to support learning recovery after COVID-19?

Free after-school classes organised by schools offer an equitable and inclusive learning recovery platform for pupils to catch-up with the missed syllabus and prepare for examinations. While evidence of extra-curricular classes existed even prior to, and during, the COVID-19 school closure,[18] these were normally paid sessions offered by teachers to cover the curriculum and/or augment their income through extra teaching hours. Leh Wi Lan has supported free after-school learning sessions for pupils through Winning Teams in selected districts of Sierra Leone.[19] Qualitative evidence from these districts, and more broadly in the LASS study, shows that most after-school classes post-school closure were free, and therefore open to a wider group of pupils. Only a few private schools mentioned that parents had to pay an additional fee, and/or community members were encouraged to make voluntary donations to support teachers providing these lessons. Similarly, there was no evidence of disproportionate challenges for girls' access to these classes, nor any particular safeguarding concerns raised around the extra time spent in schools. This may be because the extra-curricular classes were now organised more formally by schools as a catch-up strategy rather than on an ad hoc basis. Nonetheless, the structure of these classes varied by school in terms of frequency, duration, and category of pupils who attended. In several schools, these were targeted lessons for examination classes only. In others they were organised for all grades. Pupils, teachers and community members widely reported these after-school classes to have influenced most of the recent improvement recorded in internal and external examinations.

> *"It was agreed by the teachers, the Principal as well as the parents that the children should have extra teaching, which is free, so that they will be able to cover their syllabus for any targeted examination." (CTA member, SSS, Eastern province)*

> *"To make up for the lost time, extra classes were held for all pupils from SSS1-SSS3, Mondays-Wednesdays 4:30-6:00pm. Pupils were also given assignments to help them study at home. Mid-term and mid-month tests were also held to encourage pupils to learn." (Male JSS3 pupil, North-Western province).*

Schools have also made an effort to increase pupil-teacher contact time by extending the school-day, changing shift systems and/or reducing extra-curricular activities. The administration in some schools had decided to extend the closing time of their regular timetables by one to two hours to allow space for more teaching hours during the school day. In certain cases, teaching contact time was also increased by cutting down on other non-academic activities such as sports and pupil excursions. Extra-curriculars have traditionally taken up a significant proportion of time in the annual school calendar in Sierra Leone. Although efforts were made by the Leh Wi Lan programme to reduce this pre-COVID, the pressure of the situation created by school closure appears to have spurred more concrete action from schools. While respondents recognised that non-academic activities were important for the holistic development of children, they now felt that keeping these in moderation opened space for more teaching time in class. In a couple of instances schools had moved from a double-shift to a single-shift system after re-opening to free the evening hours of the day for extra classes and personal study time.

> *"We had extracurricular activities that came to a halt, which were all geared towards improving the learning process" (Teacher, SSS, Northern province).*

> *"We used to have flag-raising ceremonies and prize-giving to motivate pupils who were doing well at school. But because of the poor performance in the past public exams, the principal decided to stop everything until the glory of the school is restored." (Female JSS3 pupil, Southern province)*

Some schools are providing more learning materials and have initiated a continuous assessment process to track pupil performance post-resumption, which has helped with more targeted teaching. This included for example the distribution of photocopied versions of the Leh Wi Lan pupil handbooks and national syllabus to pupils to encourage them to study on their own. Several schools in the qualitative sample also reported administering regular classroom-based learning assessments to gauge pupils' progress, identify areas of weakness and motivate pupils to study daily. Efforts included conducting weekly tests especially for examination grades, arranging class-to-class quiz competitions, individual pupil presentations in assembly, and more routine recap and assignments in class. A few teachers also reported conducting regular review of pupils' notebooks and ensuring that corrections were provided alongside grades on internal assessments so that pupils could understand their mistakes. Some of these strategies to recover learning are part of the continuous professional development and teacher training offered by Leh Wi Lan before and during school closure. They allowed more regular oversight, and targeted support from teachers where there are learning gaps. KII respondents and CTA members in one school explicitly linked these strategies to material and training provided by Leh wi Lan, and said it helped teach children 'the right things'.

> *"The provision of learning materials by the Ministry and Leh Wi Lan has helped teachers to teach the children the right things.. Pupils now have the essential materials to face the challenges of examination. Before this, materials we were not put together [well], which made it very difficult for teachers to pass on the correct message and for the pupils to comprehend it." (Parent, SSS, Western province)*

18 See 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.
19 These included Moyamba district in the South, Falaba and Koinadugu districts in the North.

In addition, there is qualitative evidence of some augmentation to the teaching workforce after school re-opening, especially in private schools, but understaffing remains a key challenge towards achieving learning recovery. School level respondents suggested that they had replaced some teachers who were not on the government payroll and did not return after schools reopened. In other cases, additional teachers were employed to augment the existing teaching staff. In one private school in the North-Western Province when some of their teachers did not return, the school management negotiated with the nearest Teachers Training Centre to post teachers to their school for their teaching practice to help the school cope. MBSSE representatives also confirmed in discussion that over 5000 qualified teachers had been put on the official payroll soon after resumption. This is important for teacher availability, motivation and learning standards in schools. School respondents highlighted that teacher compensation remains a widespread challenge and without further salary payments, it becomes challenging to ask teachers to put in more effort than they already are making which risks plateauing learning.

Adaptations to make schools more COVID-19 safe have also contributed to a more supportive learning environment in some schools. A small number of pupils reported that their classes were now less congested due to the government's school reopening guidelines – especially in the Western province where enforcement was reportedly relatively higher. The provision of improved WASH facilities in some schools as a COVID-19 infection prevention measure also encouraged pupils, especially girls, to attend school regularly as they now had access to better toilets. However, survey data from girls shows that overall perception of WASH facilities in schools have worsened, with 31 per cent of girls saying school toilets are unsafe in 2021 compared to 22 per cent in 2017.[20]

> *"…well, some of the changes we have witnessed in schools availability of proper WASH facility. The school is cleaner now and even the toilet facility is clean and classes are not full like before. The classrooms are very conducive now for us." (Male JSS3 pupil, North-Western province)*

5 How frequently are pupils studying at home, and what resources and support do they have? Do self-study practices vary by gender and other background characteristics?

Self-study practices are widely prevalent amongst pupils, especially during term time, and studying daily is linked to higher learning achievement. Almost all pupils (97 per cent) reported that they studied at home during term time and just over half of them did so every day. Children were at times only able to study for very short durations, due to longer school hours and other activities at home. Nonetheless, regularity was linked to performance and pupils who studied daily during term time showed significantly higher achievement than pupils who studied less frequently or not at all. Self-studying during holidays was less common with only four in five pupils (79 per cent) reporting that they did this, which could be because there was less immediate oversight and check on pupils, and more competing demands on their time. This is also in line with last year's Back to School results, where 84 per cent of pupils said they had taken at least some time out to study while schools were closed.

> *"Those that were studying at home during COVID-19 lockdown, their brains were fresh when schools opened, so they just continued learning. On the other hand those that were not studying at all, they have just started studying [now that schools have opened] and this will affect them." (Male SSS3 pupil, Southern province)*

Qualitative evidence shows that pupils are now taking more responsibility for their own learning via independent study. Both pupils and teachers reported that since schools have reopened, pupils have been taking personal reading time, completing their notes and making effort to participate in class more. Although both boys and girls reported studying at home, boys who self-studied were more likely to do so every day (61 per cent compared to 51 per cent of girls). Boys were also more likely to study during their time off from school. Pupils realised that they had missed a lot of coursework during school closure and had to cover the curriculum to be better prepared for external exams (BECE and WASSCE). The reopening of schools had also reintroduced the element of competition between pupils, which was absent during lockdown, and encouraged them to study more. Pupils said they 'will study hard to win over from other [pupils] in terms of performance' in their studies and exams. A small number of pupils, however, were said to be distracted by their phones, social media, nightclubs and markets and it was challenging to teach them.

Many children have also resumed group-study practices with other pupils in the community which are very helpful to reinforce learning from class. This was possible now that social distancing requirements were less stringent. Children reported that by studying together they could explain concepts or tasks they struggle on, understand each other better, share learning materials and also refresh topics from class. Although this was a common theme in the qualitative discussions, especially with boys and pupils outside of the Western province, peer support was only reported by only 2 per cent of pupils in the survey data who had someone to help them study at home.

> *"Group studies has always been helpful to us because when you come across difficult words you will be able to ask a friend to help you but ever since the lockdown we had to study on our own and that was affecting us but now we are having group studies and that has been very helpful…I can now have access to more learning materials because I can go to my friends and borrow some textbooks, I can also have discussions on some topics, this has been very helpful to me." (Female JSS3 pupils, Northern-Western province)*

20 Girls perception of school safety, including WASH facilities is discussed further in Briefing Note 2.

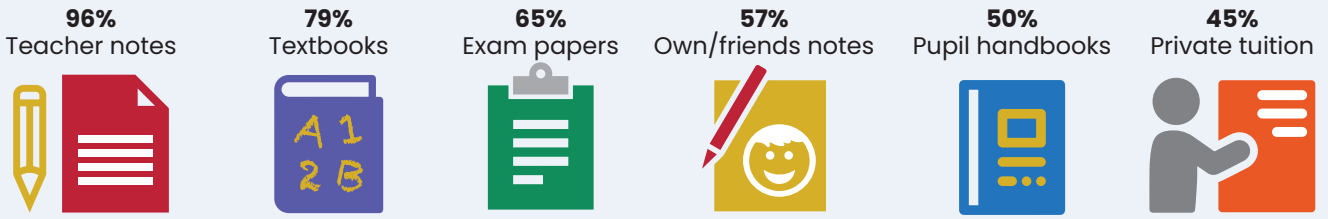
This contradiction can be explained by the fact that group study with other pupils usually took place in an outside location, so pupils would not immediately categorise it as home-based support. SSS3 pupils were more likely to report peer-support for learning than JSS3 pupils.

Traditional materials typically provided by schools are the most popular resources used for self-study, more pupils are now using past examination papers and private tutors. Teacher handout notes and textbooks were the most commonly reported self-study resource by pupils (96 per cent and 79 per cent of pupils used these respectively). This could be linked to the additional classes given to pupils where teachers use these materials. The use of past examination papers has increased and close to two-thirds (65 per cent) of pupils reported using these, compared to less than half of pupils (45 per cent) in last year's Back to School study.[21] This may reflect efforts to catch-up with the syllabus and prepare for examinations by prioritising certain parts of the curriculum that are traditionally more likely to be tested.

Nearly half of pupils (45 per cent) also reported having extra tuition support for self-study which is significantly higher than last year during school closure (26 per cent)[22] and may be another important coping mechanism for catching up. This was usually paid tuition support from private teachers, and therefore different from after-school extra classes. JSS3 pupils were significantly more likely to be using private tuition for self-study compared to SSS3 pupils (48 per cent vs 40 per cent). Likewise pupils from the richest households had more access to private tuition than those from the poorest backgrounds (57 per cent vs 29 per cent). Regionally, use of private tuition was highest for pupils in the East (56 per cent) and lowest in the South (33 per cent). However, there were also no significant differences in measures of learning achievement for the group of pupils who had private tuition for self-study compared to those who did not.

Figure 7 lists the key self-study resources used by pupils. The LASS study did not find significant differences in the types of resources that girls and boys use for self-study.

Figure 7: Commonly used resources by pupils who self-study



Although pupil handbooks are intended to be universally available and used, this is not the case for about half of pupils. 50 per cent of pupils reported using pupil handbooks for self-study and this was more common for JSS3 pupils than SSS3 pupils (55 per cent vs 39 per cent) and in government as compared to non-government schools (56 per cent vs 18 per cent).[23] Evidence from both this year's LASS and last year's Back to School study show a declining trend in use of pupil handbooks compared to pre-COVID times.[24] Access to handbooks is one of the key constraints, and of the pupils that did not use handbooks for self-study, almost all (97 per cent) said this was because they did not have a personal copy. This was usually due to supply side challenges with just over half of these pupils (56 per cent) reporting that their school keeps the copies, and a further 34 per cent saying that even their school did not have copies. This may be because distribution of pupil handbooks was based on 2017 school census data, while FQSE has significantly increased school and pupil numbers. Only a small share of pupils reported problems related to payment constraints (3 per cent) or parents/guardians preventing pupils from taking handbooks home (1 per cent), which suggests that the MBSSE's recent community-level sensitisation efforts in this regard are taking effect.

The majority of pupils (62 per cent) have someone to support them study at home, but no significant link was found between home support and learning outcomes. Support at home was almost always provided by a household member, with 94 per cent of pupils who had home support reporting that parents, siblings, relatives or other household members help them to study. Qualitative evidence shows that support often involved keeping pupils motivated and engaged after school, helping them with homework, and providing clarifications of difficult concepts. Pupils reported that this had been helpful since schools resumed. Pupils were also more likely to report receiving support at the JSS3 level than at SSS3 level (69 per cent vs 47 per cent respectively), perhaps because the content is more complex at higher grades. Nonetheless, nearly 40 per cent of pupils have no access to this type of out-of-school support, and this rises to 55 per cent for pupils from the poorest households. The LASS study did not find any significant differences in learning between pupils based on having access to support at home. As with inputs from CTAs, it will be useful to look more closely at the type and quality of support provided to pupils at home to better explain links with pupil learning.

21 Use of past exam papers as a learning resource for pupils pre-COVID was 43 per cent in 2019 (SGLA III).

22 The LASS (2021) study asked about using private tuition for self-study during term time/holidays, while the question in the Back to School (2020) study was about using private tuition during the COVID-19 school closure period.

23 Although the Leh Wi Lan programme did not provide handbooks for non-government schools, these are available online for open access.

24 In 2019 (SGLA III) 60 per cent of pupils said they used pupil handbooks, with more usage by JSS2 pupils (64 per cent) than SSS2 pupils (47 per cent).

6 Concluding remarks and recommendations

As children start their second school year in the pandemic, Sierra Leone offers insights on learning continuity, inequalities, and coping strategies in and outside of schools. The country already faced a learning crisis in the pre-pandemic 'normal', and school closure increased learning inequalities in its immediate aftermath. However, 12 months on, this latest shock to the education system has precipitated some positive learning recovery in secondary schools, even as a majority of children remain behind grade and achieve at primary level. Whether these 'green shoots' of improvement are driven by the more immediate pressure of missed learning in the face of external examinations, or by tangible transformations in the way teaching and learning takes place in and around Sierra Leonean classrooms will take a few more years to understand. But schools, communities and pupils recognise the impact of school closure on learning and are still reacting to it one year on, suggesting the need for a longer term approach to catch-up, remediation and the use of assessment data for policy interventions in the country. The LASS study identifies the following key themes for consideration in this regard:

- **Sierra Leone's education system has shown resilience to the risk of widespread learning loss following school closures in 2020, but overall learning levels continue to be low.** Sierra Leone's education system has faced multiple shocks, most recently with the COVID-19 pandemic. Both last year's Back to School study and this year's LASS study show that pupil learning outcomes in English and maths did not fall overall, as might have been expected, and there are now signs of improvement for JSS pupils in English and SSS pupils in maths. Schools and pupils have made concerted efforts to catch-up on missed schooling through a range of strategies. Nonetheless, overall learning levels remain well below grade-level expectations.
- **Learning disparities by gender and wealth have stabilised compared to the situation 12 months ago.** Last year's Back to School study showed that learning inequalities between pupils increased in the aftermath of school closures in favour of a sub-sample of pupils (boys, richer pupils and those in certain regions). One year later, the gaps have not worsened, other than by region. While this is a positive sign, significant achievement gaps remain related to gender, wealth, location, home language and disability.
- **Most pupils self-study regularly outside school.** Class learning time was generally not perceived as adequate (especially in terms of catch-up with an already accelerated curriculum) and both pupils and school representatives acknowledged the value of self-study after the reopening of schools. The LASS survey found that studying daily at home links to learning achievement.
- **Pupils mainly rely on traditional materials from school for self-study, but the use of private tuition and practice exam papers has increased sharply in the last year.** This increased reliance on these resources may reflect efforts by pupils and school representatives to prioritise certain parts of the curriculum that are traditionally more likely to be tested in external BECE and WASSCE examinations. This may lead to 'teaching to the test' and rote-learning. There is also a risk that this situation will compound existing learning inequalities by wealth because the poorest pupils have much less access to private tuition and other paid resources than their 'richer' peers.

Based on these, the MBSSE and its partners could consider the following recommendations:

1. The pace, and perhaps breadth, of the curriculum should be better tailored to meet the learning needs of most pupils who are behind grade-level expectations.
2. Non-standard approaches to learning like free extra-curricular classes, and adjustments to reduce time spent on non-academic activities could be more formally instituted by schools to support pupils with foundational literacy and numeracy skills expected in the curriculum. Accessibility for different groups of pupils needs to be integral to the design.
3. The association between pupils' home language and learning outcomes has scope to inform design of future interventions around the language of instruction in schools.
4. The role and outcomes of the FQSE and recent Radical Inclusion policy needs to be evaluated as a first step towards targeted support from the MBSSE and partners in giving all children equal opportunities to learn effectively.
5. The socio-physical environment of schools needs to be improved to facilitate children's learning experience, particularly for girls and children with disabilities. This includes better access to classrooms, WASH facilities and necessary learning materials.
6. Further school and community level research could be conducted to explore the factors contributing to the relative improvement in pupil performance in the Southern region over the last 12 months vis a vis other provinces.
7. Preliminary insights into the self-study practices of pupils at home suggests potential to tap into this to reinforce learning and facilitate peer-to-peer exchange between pupils.
8. The structure and quality of extra-curricular learning opportunities for pupils (e.g. self-study materials, tutoring, group community study) should be reviewed to ensure all children have access to acceptable standards of support outside of schools.
9. At the community level, it would be useful to investigate further the type and quality of support provided by CTAs. Creating parental support groups and engaging CTAs and school boards in pupil learning could facilitate more effective learning outside of schools. This is especially important for the 40 per cent of children without anyone to support their learning at home.
10. While schools are using new ways to check pupil learning in response to school closure, further developing continuous systems of classroom-based formative assessments will help learning for all pupils. This should tie in with the longer term strategy of the National Assessment Services Unit in Sierra Leone.

About the project and contact details

Leh Wi Lan/Sierra Leone Secondary Education Improvement Programme (SSEIP) is a UK aid funded programme aimed at supporting the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education (MBSSE) to improve learning outcomes for boys and girls at secondary level, and increase the enrolment, retention and well-being of girls in school. After successful completion of the first five years of the programme (2016-2021), an extension phase has now begun. This briefing note was produced under Leh Wi Lan to improve data and evidence for sector monitoring, and builds on experience from previous annual Secondary Grade Learning Assessments. Any views and opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, MBSSE, Mott MacDonald or Oxford Policy Management. For more details please contact: **Diana Ofori-Owusu at +232 76803741**