



BACK TO SCHOOL BRIEFING PAPER 1

January 2021

LEARNING OUTCOMES IN SIERRA LEONE'S JUNIOR AND SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS AFTER THE COVID-19 SCHOOL CLOSURES

450,000 junior and 300,000 senior secondary school pupils in Sierra Leone had to adapt to studying at home when schools closed in March 2020 due to COVID-19. Evidence from Sierra Leone's experience of school closures during the Ebola crisis of 2014-15 have helped to shape the secondary education sector's rapid response to promote learning at home during the closure. Findings shows that secondary grade learning outcomes remain below curriculum standards, with COVID-19 exacerbating learning gaps between boys and girls, richest and poorest pupils, and those without and with special needs.

This Briefing Paper provides robust estimates of the impacts on learning and child wellbeing due to COVID-19 and is based on the Back to School study, undertaken as part of Sierra Leone's annual Secondary Grade Learning Assessment (SGLA) conducted by the UKAid-funded Leh Wi Lan. The study involved one-to-one testing and focus group discussions with 2,000 JSS3 and SSS3 pupils and key informant interviews with those working in secondary education. All COVID-19 protocols were followed during the study.

Experiences of learning at home

Impact on study time

Most pupils have been able to study but individual motivation and environment affect the frequency and duration of their studies. 84 per cent of pupils self-report being able to take time to study, despite other commitments. Some children report studying for just 10 minutes once a week, while others commit five or six hours daily and took private lessons. Responses from parents and school representatives indicate a greater focus on 'holiday' than learning and most pupils complained about being too tired to study after completing domestic chores or income generating activities.

"Girls are faced with a lot more workload [in the house] than boys. Boys are able to do more [physical] hard work than girls, but girls are always working, taking care of the homes, and making sure that things are well organised."

Girl SSS3 pupil, Eastern province

Boys were more likely to study regularly than girls. Over 80 per cent of boys report studying at least three days a week compared to 70 per cent of girls. Almost double the proportion of girls (48 per cent) than boys (26 per cent) report having to do extra work at home during school closures.

Some children report studying for just **10 minutes** once a week



A higher proportion of richer pupils reported studying and studying more frequently. Pupils from richer households report studying in private schools (with better facilities and quality of learning) and are more likely to have access to resources and support (either help from a parent or sibling, having a tutor, or access to a radio to listen to the radio teaching programme).

Limited resources affect the poorest pupils' ability to study when schools were closed. Pupils from the poorest households report facing financial challenges, difficulties while studying, and a lack of access to necessities (electricity, required technology for learning, and washing and sanitation facilities).

More pupils reported studying during the school closures in the North-Western and Western regions. This may be driven by the low proportion of pupils reporting challenges during this period, and – in the Western region – the lowest proportion of pupils reporting extra work or chores at home. However, learning performance in the North-Western region was lower than average.

Learning materials and support

Pupils mostly used the same learning materials they had access to in the classroom when studying at home. Teacher notes (77 per cent) and textbooks (69 per cent) remained the most used self-study materials. Pupil handbooks (48 per cent) were used more than radio lessons (30 per cent), although neither appeared to have an impact on learning outcomes.

Pupil uptake of handbooks was relatively low due to financial and access constraints. The main challenge in accessing handbooks was the hesitation of parents to commit to the books being returned in the same condition and existing school policies to collect books back from pupils.

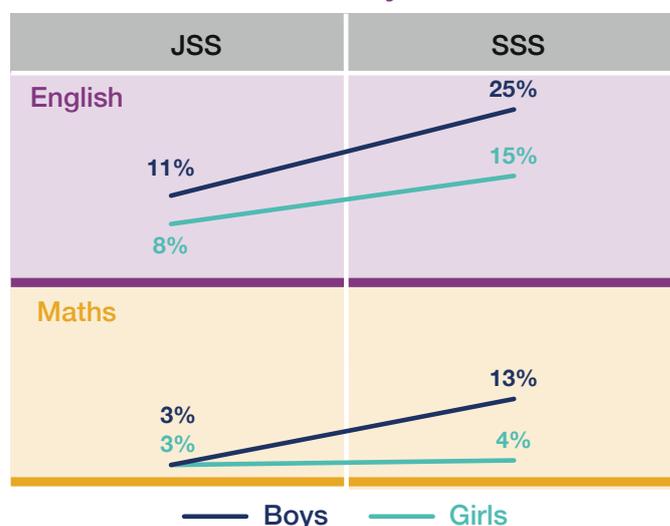
Timing and access constraints prevented pupil uptake of radio lessons. Only one-third of pupils mentioned having access to a radio and those that did were not listening regularly (once or twice a week). Boys and richer pupils were more likely to engage than girls or poorer pupils, respectively. However, there was no correlation between learning outcomes and uptake of the radio lessons.

Pupils who listened to the radio lessons had no problems with the content and found the subject matter aligned with their textbooks. However, they reported issues with the pace of teaching (too slow) and pronunciation (unfamiliar). Significantly more boys than girls listened to radio lessons regularly and found the lessons easier to understand, perhaps because they generally had more uninterrupted studying time.

Effect of school closures on learning outcomes

Pupils who studied daily during the school closure performed better.¹ On average, 32 per cent of pupils said they studied every day and these pupils performed significantly better in English and slightly better in maths at both junior and secondary school level. Boys, who had more opportunity to study, performed better than girls across both JSS3 and SSS3, with the performance gap widening as pupils move into senior secondary school.

The gender performance gap widens as pupils move into senior secondary school



Greater access to study support and more time to study did not translate significantly into predicting exam results. While pupils in less remote schools were more likely to report studying five or more times a week during school closure, to have used alternative learning sources such as the internet and private tuition, and to have had help studying, this did not translate significantly into predicting exam results.

Access to private tutors had a correlation with pupil performance. One in 10 pupils (13 per cent) continued learning through private tuition. These pupils were more likely to be from richer households and in SSS3 than JSS3, perhaps because of they needed extra support for their final exams (WASSCE).

Back to School results

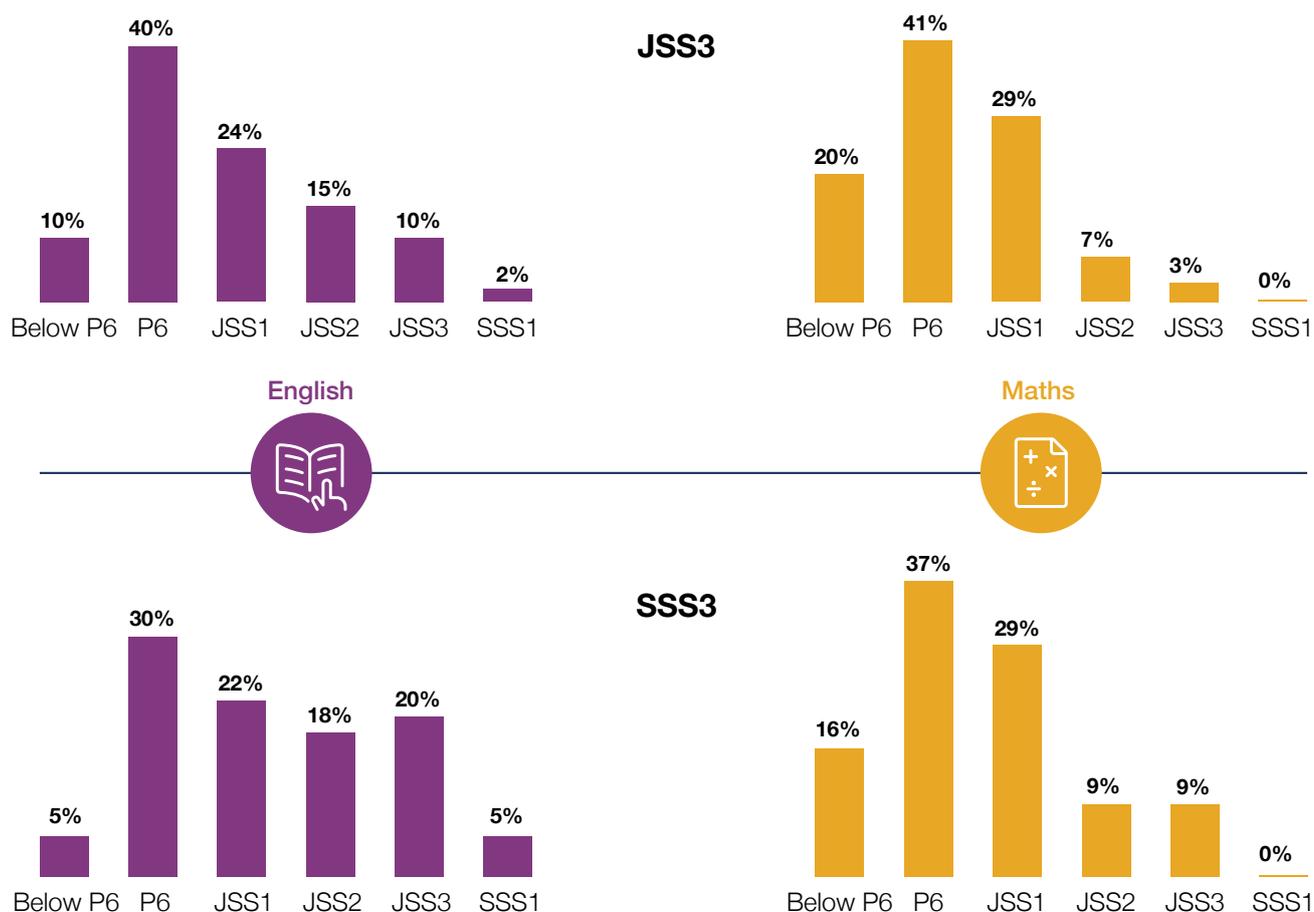
Results from the study show how COVID-19 challenged secondary school pupils ability to continue learning at critical junctures in their education, with a real risk of further exacerbating learning gaps between the richest and poorest pupils, boys and girls and those with and without special needs.

Secondary grade learning levels in Sierra Leone remain below the expected curriculum standard.

A large proportion of pupils do not demonstrate more than basic English and maths skills despite completing eight to 11 years of formal education.

In English, one in two JSS3 pupils and just over one in three SS3 pupils are performing at the primary level. However more JSS3 pupils are within a years' difference of their expected performance.

Distribution of JSS3 and SSS3 pupils across grade-level performance bands



Family wealth, and parental involvement and education, play a significant role in determining pupil performance. The performance gap between pupils from the richest and the poorest households held across both grades and subjects. The largest performance gap between richest and poorest households was observed for SSS3 pupils in maths; 20 per cent of richest pupils were performing at the JSS3 level in maths, compared to only 4 per cent of the poorest.

Schools in the Western region perform better than the national average in both English and maths. In English for example, they have a higher proportion of JSS3 pupils performing ‘at grade’ compared to the national average and at SSS3 level, 24 per cent of pupils are performing at the JSS3 level compared to only 19 per cent in the next best performing regions (Eastern and Southern).

Proportion of SSS3 pupils performing at JSS3 level in maths



“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

¹ The slightly better test score performance in 2020 was partially driven by focussing on pupils in BECE and WASSCE grades (JSS3 and SSS3). A comparison with SGLA IV results in 2021 is necessary to ascertain whether pupil performance has indeed increased.

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 maths learning achievement in all secondary schools, especially for girls. Any views and opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of UK Department for International Development, Sierra Leone Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education, Mott MacDonald or Oxford Policy Management

