



BACK TO SCHOOL BRIEFING PAPER 2

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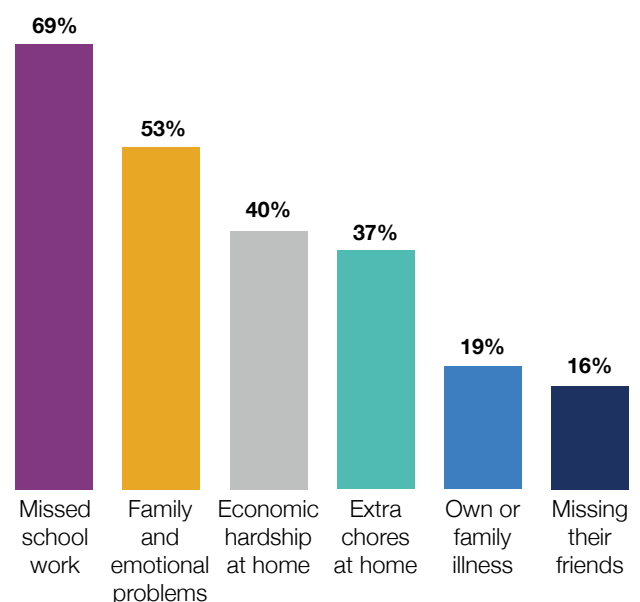
SAFETY AND WELLBEING OF SIERRA LEONE'S JUNIOR AND SENIOR SCHOOL PUPILS DURING THE COVID-19 SCHOOL CLOSURES

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. Experiences of school closures due to Ebola in 2014-15 helped to shape the secondary education sector's rapid response to safeguard children and their wellbeing and promote learning at home during the closure. Nevertheless, the negative impact of school closures on wellbeing is evident, especially amongst those who have been disproportionately affected – girls, older pupils, the poorest pupils, and those living in more remote areas. The re-opening of schools and the return of as many children to school as possible is a priority for all involved in the secondary education sector.

This Briefing Paper highlights key findings from the Back to School study, undertaken as part of Sierra Leone's annual Secondary Grade Learning Assessment conducted by Leh Wi Lan. The study provides robust estimates of the learning and child wellbeing impacts of the COVID-19 shock to Sierra Leone's education system. It involved one-to-one testing and focus group discussions with 2,000 JSS3 and SSS3 pupils and key informant interviews with those working across secondary education. All COVID-19 protocols were followed during the study.

Nearly half (45 per cent) of sampled pupils reported facing challenges during school closures. Senior Secondary School (SSS) pupils were significantly more likely to report challenges than their Junior Secondary School counterparts and pupils from the Southern region were more likely to report challenges than their peers in the Western region. The proportion of girls that reported having to do extra work at home was nearly double that of boys, and a significantly higher proportion of pupils from poorer households reported financial challenges and lack of access to necessities.

Challenges children faced during school closures



Violence and exploitation

Girls faced increased risk of violence and exploitation from perpetrators within their homes and in the wider community. Although more common in rural, remote areas, economic hardship and domestic frustration in more urban settings were also said to trigger violence against girls. Incidences of harassment of girls and sexual violence through rape, early marriage, prostitution, and teenage pregnancy have all risen since schools closed due to girls spending more time near perpetrators at home and having greater exposure to those in the community.

Financial struggles and domestic frustrations increased the risk of physical violence and abuse against children. Nearly 49 per cent of children said they were exposed to emotional and safety challenges due to family problems and feuds. School and community representatives reported that some parents grew tired of constantly having their children at home because it was difficult to ensure they studied and kept away from negative or harmful activities. Uncertainty around returning to school, economic hardship resulting from lockdown and parents' safety fears lead to some parents finding a suitor for, or forcefully giving, their girls in marriage. These girls did not come back to school.

Nearly

49% 

of children said they were exposed to emotional and safety challenges due to family problems and feuds

"...[during the lockdown my mother] asked me to accompany her to the farm, but I refused, so that was why she flogged me."

Girl JSS3 pupil, Northern Province

Boys, especially in more central or urban locations, faced increased risk of negative peer influence and exploitation. Schools and community residents, especially in the Western and Northern regions, suggested that an increase in free time meant boys followed bad company and got drawn into smoking, drugs, gangs, violence, and petty crime.

Emotional and social wellbeing

Children shared feelings of stress, anxiety, isolation, and depression due to lack of contact with their school community. While many initially saw school closures as time for rest and relaxation, many soon became bored and nearly one in five highlighted how they missed their friends.

Many children highlighted academic stress as a key challenge, although factors affecting this varied widely. Pupils in examination grades, particularly those more academically motivated, were particularly concerned about the impact of missing part of their academic year. While those from more marginalised and poorer backgrounds did not have access to resources and support to help them make up for a lack of learning time. Academic stress has continued since schools re-opened, with reports from children of some teachers rushing through topics or focusing only on prospective examination content.

"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 colleagues failed the academic year... They would have passed had we completed the three terms."

Girl JSS3 pupil, Southern Province

A small number of children highlighted the fear of the virus and mental stress of lockdown as a wellbeing challenge. Some parents were hesitant to send their children back to school based on their experiences of Ebola and a fear of exposure to COVID-19. To deal with these psychological issues the MBSSE has rolled out training to some school administrators on a psycho-social support manual for children.

Finances

Children bore a direct consequence of the negative effect of COVID-19 on their family's finances. 40 per cent of children reported economic hardship in their homes as a key challenge. Many engaged in income-generating activities to support their families. This issue was particularly common in the Southern province and amongst children from poorer backgrounds and those living in more remote locations.

40%

of children reported economic hardship in their homes



Pupils from poorer households did not have access to necessary learning materials and resources during the school closure because of financial constraints. When faced with the choice, households spent on necessities and food rather than what was considered more dispensable items such as batteries for radios. Almost 85 per cent of the poorest pupils did not have access to a radio, compared to 60 per cent of the richest cohort. In some instances, the fear of having to pay a fine for the damage or loss of pupil handbooks once school resumed proved prohibitive for poorer families to accept taking them home. Lack of finances has also affected children's return to school.

Physical health and hunger

Many children expressed a desire to help their families during lockdown but, in some cases, this was at the expense of their own physical health and time for learning. One in two girls and one in four boys reported extra chores as a challenge during school closure. Some spent up to six hours selling in markets or working on farms and were then too tired to study and do other things. Some children reported that they were strongly disciplined and even physically or verbally abused if they tried to refuse.

Many children suffered from hunger and food shortages during school closures. Although MBSSE distributed dry rations to families in some communities, the combination of financial challenges and loss of free school meals meant that children, especially those in the provincial regions, were not sufficiently nourished, affecting their concentration and motivation to study. The impact of food shortages at home due to lack of income persists, despite resumption of school.

"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

Social and emotional support

Children are more likely to be aware of community health centres (CHCs) than family support units (FSUs) as a place to seek support. Two-thirds of pupils (64 per cent) knew the location of the nearest CHC in their community. Awareness of FSUs is much lower, with only one in three pupils aware of where their nearest unit is. Of the pupils who are aware of either, a higher percentage had visited a CHC compared to FSU. This is somewhat in contrast to the qualitative discussions with pupils and school representatives, where most participants were aware of the role and presence of FSUs, especially when it came to reporting sexual violence or exploitation.

More pupils from the Southern region know or have visited their local CHC or FSU. Contrastingly, 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 these JSS3 pupils (49 per cent) had visited an FSU compared to the SSS3 pupils (36 per cent).



CHCs are better known and more visited by SSS pupils than FSUs

Generally, children do not formally report physical and emotional abuse. Reports are more likely to come from friends, siblings, or colleagues. There are several reasons for this: the long-standing fear of stigmatisation; the fear of getting blamed; and the reporting complications that arise when perpetrators of abuse are family members or trusted adults themselves. 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.

Several other welfare support mechanisms were reported at the community level. These included assistance from community chiefs and notables in settling cases of abuse and learning support for pupils in terms of organising space and study groups. Some schools and alumni associations, particularly in large private schools in the Western region for example, also created special learning channels (e.g., via WhatsApp groups or learning videos) that were circulated to pupils as an additional resource.

Wellbeing since schools have re-opened

Pupil attendance and dropout since schools reopened gives some indication as to the effect of children's wellbeing during the school closure. Schools reporting greater than usual pupil attendance said the increase in pupil motivation to learn was a result of them being away from school for more than six months and the MBSSE policy of mass promotions allowing pupils to move to the next grade more easily. However, some schools reported lower attendance and more dropouts, especially among pupils from poorer households where parents continue to face economic hardships and cannot afford school expenses. Girls, who are largely affected by sexual harassment, early marriage, and teen pregnancies, have also experienced more difficulties in returning to school.

Stakeholders from across the education sector are working together to support schools with implementing measures to lower the risk of COVID-19 transmission in schools. While the intention of schools to comply and protect pupils is apparent, pupils and CTA members suggest that implementation and monitoring of protocols is not always effective. As such, the current focus is on supporting schools to comply with guidelines laid out in the operations manual – including enforcing the use of face masks and social distancing in classrooms, as well ensuring adequate increased supplies of handwashing facilities.

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

