

COVID-19 Sub-study



Significant Findings

- Schools were 'a little prepared' or 'not prepared' for closures.
- Perception of little communication or Government support.
- Closures have had a negative impact on learning outcomes.
- Schools receiving support for continued learning more likely to stay in contact with pupils and engage in small learning groups.
- Schools with higher results prior to closures more likely to engage students in continued learning, widening gap in learning.
- Most children not utilising the radio programme, but are more likely to use it when engaged in learning groups with teachers.
- Children in hard to reach areas excluded from learning activities.
- Few pupils are engaged in learning with their family.
- Boys and girls are engaging in increased work, with girls disproportionately affected and exposed to protection risks.



Context of the Sub-study

Developed by Concern Worldwide, the 'Safe Learning Model' adopts a holistic approach to the education of children in extreme poverty, in order to realise sustainable improvements in children's literacy, wellbeing and gender equality (including gender-based violence) in schools and communities. The model combines a comprehensive educational programme with interventions that support teaching practices, as well as gender-based violence. In order to evaluate the effectiveness of this integrated model, University College Dublin (UCD) School of Education is conducting a three-year longitudinal study with children in 100 primary schools in Tonkolili, Sierra Leone. Through a mixed methods design, the study aims to evaluate the model through a randomized control trial of its implementation across 100 communities. The study examines wellbeing, gender equality and literacy development of a cohort of pupils and their everyday experiences in school and at home and ultimately how this may be affected by the programme². Within the overall research framework, a sub-study was conducted on the impacts of COVID-19 on schools, children and their learning.

"Children's educational progress will be enhanced when they live in communities that are underpinned by support for gender equality and children's wellbeing."

COVID-19 has had, and continues to have significant impacts on all sectors of social, economic and political life in almost all countries of the world, with schools in Sierra Leone officially closed on 31st of March 2020. This sub-study provides information on the implementation of school closures in Tonkolili district and on the immediate and perceived impact on children, teachers and school principals. The data collected for this sub-study has the potential to map the impact of the school closures in the context of the Safe Learning Model with a view to informing subsequent analysis of both the 'moment in time' impact and the impact over the duration of the implementation of the Safe Learning Model intervention.



¹ This briefing is based on original research undertaken by Devine, D; Sugrue, C; Symonds, J; Sloan, S; Kearns, M; Samonova, E; Capistrano, D and Crean, M; University College Dublin, School of Education.

² For more information on the Safe Learning Model and main study contact: Amy Folan, Senior Education Advisor, Concern Worldwide amy.folan@concern.net

During the closure of schools, a number of adaptations to the implementation of the model were necessary to ensure compliance with public health measures including social distancing while maintaining continuous learning opportunities for students and teachers. All 100 communities of the study were provided with WASH and hygiene materials including the erection of tippy taps in strategic locations around the community. Mass social mobilisation and COVID-19 sensitisation was conducted at community and school level in all 100 communities as well as all catchment communities.



Small learning groups were established in the 75 intervention communities to support continued student learning. The groups were facilitated by teachers who were provided with training to engage students with the national radio programme. Each of the 75 intervention schools was provided with three radio sets to support this learning for grades one to three. Literacy trainings for teachers in the 75 intervention schools were adapted to small clusters with a limited number of teachers present for a reduced number of days. In addition, coaching that would normally take place during classroom instruction was adapted to focus on the small learning groups. Teacher Learning Circles previously established at school level continued as normal with teachers engaging in the reflective sessions on a monthly basis.

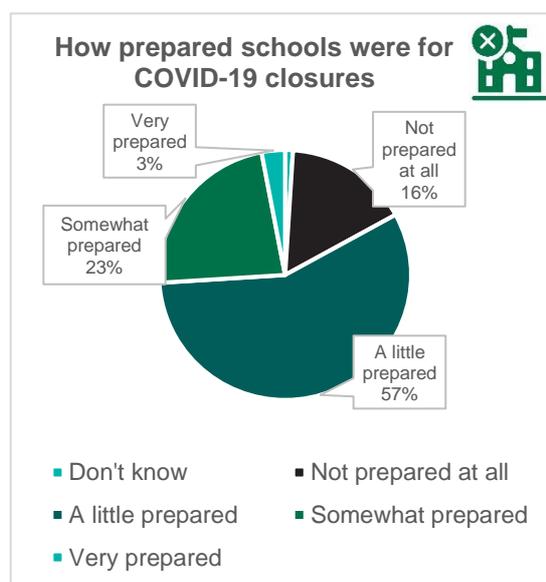
School Related Gender Based Violence (SRGBV) prevention and response actions including School Clubs and Social and Emotional Learning sessions with younger children were unable to continue during the closure of schools due to the inability to maintain public health protocols during these activities. However, community level SRGBV prevention and response activities in the 25 Treatment 3 communities continued at a reduced scale with Community Conversations shifting to increased social mobilisation to avoid mass gatherings. Living Peace sessions with parents and community members continued throughout with limited numbers of participants and facilitators ensuring strict compliance with hand washing and social distancing measures.

This sub-study is based on a mixed method approach. The quantitative element comprises information collected via structured interviews using Computer Assisted Telephone Interviews (CATI) with head teachers from 77 of the 100 schools participating in the main Safe Learning Model study. They represent 16 out of the 25 control schools and 61 out of the 75 intervention schools of the Safe Learning Model. All interviews were conducted between June 20th and July 2nd 2020. The qualitative element of the study comprises semi-structured in-depth interviews with four head teachers of schools that are part of the in-depth case studies for the wider Safe Learning Study.

Key Findings

Experiences of Government Support

Schools reported limited communication with the government since the official closure of schools on 31st March 2020 with only a quarter of head teachers stating that they were very prepared or somewhat prepared for the school closure. The majority of head teachers said that they were ‘a little’ (57%) or ‘not prepared at all’ (16%). However, in qualitative interviews, head teachers mentioned that the current school closure due to COVID-19 was better planned than the Ebola crisis due to the dates being communicated in advance. Despite the reported lack of communication with the government, head teachers are aware of recent decisions of the government, including the intention to resume classes for class 6 students. However, there is no clear understanding of government policy regarding the promotion of pupils to other classes.

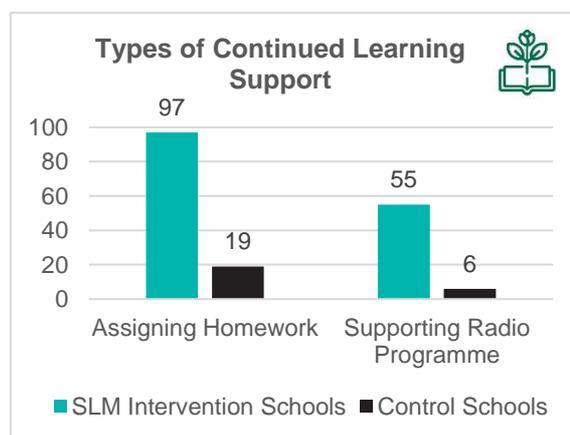
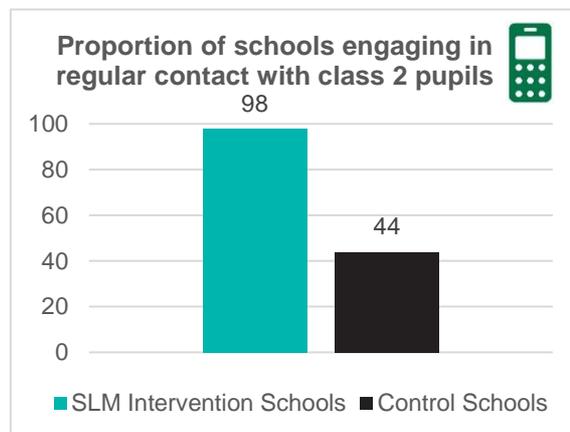


With the exception of salaries for paid teachers in government approved schools, head teachers reported limited provision of additional government support. Although most schools did not receive any support other than hygiene materials which were reported to have been received by 40% of schools, there are considerable differences in relation to which schools did receive support. Government approved schools were more likely to report receiving radio sets, learning materials, and food for pupils compared to unapproved community schools.

Contact and activities with pupils

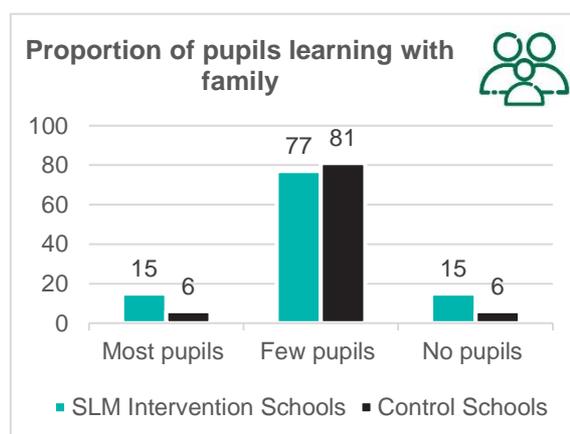
While almost all (98%) head teachers in schools participating in the Safe Learning Model said that students are contacted at least once a week; this proportion is significantly lower among control schools (44%). The most common ways of contact are personal visits and phone calls. However, head teachers report that while they can easily contact those parents who live in their communities, they have significant difficulties when attempting to contact parents who live in other communities.

In most schools, apart from the regular contact with pupils, teachers are assigning tasks or activities for pupils, however, the proportion of pupils participating depends on the types of activity and whether or not they are engaged in the intervention. 97% of schools involved in the Safe Learning Model are assigning homework as compared to only 19% of control schools engaging in this practice unsupported. Similarly, 55% of intervention schools are providing support on radio lessons as compared to 6% of control schools. The head teachers engaged in small learning groups view this initiative as a positive, but note that due to limits in group sizes, engagement in farming activities and challenges with reaching children in remote catchment communities, some children are excluded from the groups.



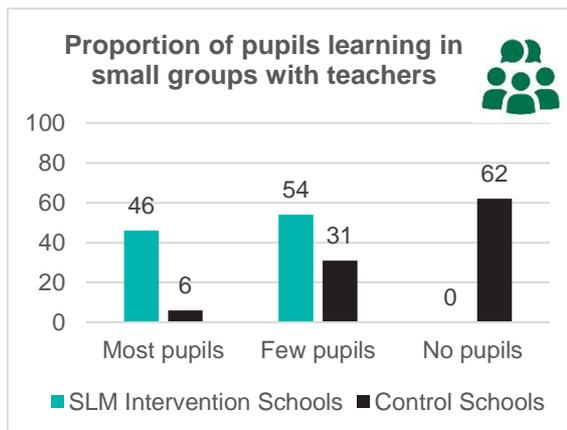
Continued learning and learning outcomes

When asked if Class 2 pupils were engaging in educational activities during schools closures, 15% of head teachers in intervention schools declared that most pupils were still learning with family as compared to just 6% in control schools. 77% of intervention schools said that just a few pupils were still learning compared to 81% in control schools, while 15% of intervention schools said that none of the pupils were still learning with relatives at home compared to just 6% in control schools. Data from the main study confirms that 71% of the children’s main caregivers do not know how to read and write which may contribute to the limited level of engagement in learning at home. In addition, children’s contributions to family livelihoods increased, which negatively affected the time they could spend on learning at home.



Levels of participation in continued learning were higher when learning activities involved teachers and when the school received external support through the Safe Learning Model. 46% of head teachers in intervention schools said that most or all pupils were participating in small learning groups with teachers with the remaining 54% of schools reporting that a few pupils participated in the groups. In contrast, in control schools where there was no external support to establish the groups, 62% of pupils were not engaged in learning groups with their teachers at all.

“We are not engaged in any form of alternative learning. The government had stopped all schools not to engage in any form of learning. We are afraid to conduct any form of classes for pupils in the school. There might be some pupils that are listening to radio but not to my knowledge. We are not engaged in any form of learning.” (Head teacher, Control school)



In 55% of all schools, no class 2 pupils were reported to be learning through the national radio programme, however of those that were, a higher proportion were found in intervention schools where direct additional support was provided. Head Teachers note the most common problem with accessing radio lessons was the lack of radio sets in households or in school. In some cases, children do not directly listen to the radio programme, but rather teachers listen to the lessons for the preparation of their own lessons in small groups.

Head teachers noted that school closures are having a serious negative impact on children’s learning outcomes. According to interviewees, even children engaged in learning groups have forgotten “almost everything that [they] had learnt in school” (Head teacher, Intervention school). It also appears that continued learning activities with teachers are occurring in schools where pupils were already performing better in Early Grade Reading Assessments (after the first full year of the main study). Therefore, as a result of school closures, this difference in performance is likely to increase.

Impact on Gender and Wellbeing

Qualitative data in the four case study schools shows that all interviewed head teachers agree that the COVID-19 epidemic has a negative impact on the wellbeing of children. Lockdown and movement restrictions limit the abilities of families to earn money and sell their agricultural produce, leading to increased poverty in the case study communities.

“Children are helping their parents with farm work more because presently there is no school. Some children will even have to help their parents in doing petty trading. They have lost so many things with regards to their education.” (Head teacher, Intervention school)

62% of head teachers think that boys and girls are equally affected by the school closure, 36% think that girls are more affected than boys. In schools where the principal declared that girls are more negatively affected, the gender equality indicator is lower within that community compared to schools where head teachers affirm that boys and girls will be equally affected. Qualitative interviews identified two main gendered negative effects of the school closure on females; girls having more responsibilities in the household resulting in disproportionate increases in workload and concerns about the greater risk of violations of child protections rights due to school closure. Despite no cases of such violations being recorded in the case study schools, one head teacher reported cases of teenage pregnancies in other communities.



“Yes, the girls do have more responsibilities at home than the boys. The girls will have to do some household chores, cook and go to the farm. While the boys will be sitting at home playing.” (Head teacher, Intervention school)

School re-opening

The majority of head teachers expect that all teachers will return to school after the reopening. However, some concerns were raised regarding unpaid volunteer teachers who might have found another source of income during the school closure.



79.2% of head teachers also expect that a majority of Class 2 students will return to school. Before the school reopening, head teachers plan to clean classes and school compounds. Qualitative data show two major concerns regarding the reopening of schools; difficulties with social distance due to limited space in classrooms and lack of hygiene materials including limited opportunities for hand washing in school. At the same time, 80% of head teachers affirmed that the experience during the Ebola outbreak (2014-2016) helped either a little (58%) or a lot (22%) in dealing with the COVID-19 epidemic. In qualitative interviews, head teachers mentioned that during the Ebola outbreak they developed a better understanding of the importance of hand washing and general hygiene and now know what to do to prevent new outbreaks.

Conclusion

The sub-study shows some differences across schools in relation to the impact of the pandemic, the measures adopted during the school closures and the potential impact for children. Government support and guidance is reported to be almost absent, leaving teachers and head teachers with the responsibility to adapt and conduct the school policy themselves. Findings suggest some differences in response between schools that are involved in the SLM (Intervention Schools) and those that are not (Control Schools). Most of the schools have maintained contact with pupils and parents, but educational activities are limited to primarily schools that are receiving additional support for continued learning and some pupils continue to be unable to access these activities. Despite the introduction of radio lessons, a large proportion of students have difficulties accessing the programmes due to the lack of radio sets and problems with radio signals. Small learning groups introduced as part of the Safe Learning Model intervention may have a positive effect on students' achievements and are the most common form of continued learning being engaged in.

For children, the school closures are associated with increased child work and higher risks of child protection violations, which may increase risk of teenage pregnancies. The data indicates that a significant number of students are not receiving educational support at home, which leads to a setback in terms of learning outcomes and increases risks of school dropouts. The study shows that the most vulnerable students are those who do not live in the same village where the school is located. While schools are ready to resume the work, head teachers express worries regarding the lack of hand washing facilities and an inability to follow social distancing guidelines.



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