



Sierra Leone - Distance Learning During COVID-19

Qualitative Research - Final Report

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June 2021

Center for Global Development Background Paper

This background paper was commissioned as a complement to the study reported in the CGD working paper "[Teaching and Testing by Phone in a Pandemic](#)," August 2021. It was funded by the World Bank Strategic Impact Evaluation Fund. Author contact: rskpakra@gmail.com.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background and program description

Sierra Leone closed all educational institutions on March 31, 2020, until further notice. The first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Sierra Leone that same day. Soon after schools were closed, the Government announced a national “radio teaching” programme, to be broadcast on “Education Radio” and “Radio Maria.” A number of non-state organizations, including Rising Academy Network, supported the Government to develop content for the radio teaching program. The Sierra Leone Ministry of Education broadcasts educational content for all grade levels, from lower primary to secondary. Rising Academies also broadcast two hours of content each day, Monday-Friday, targeted to lower primary and upper primary students. To improve engagement with the distance learning programme, Rising Academies experimented with three interventions - SMS, reminder calls, and phone-based tutorials. The intervention reached a sample of all children attending 25 government schools supported by Rising Academies through the Education Innovation Challenge (EIC). The sample consisted of primary school girls and boys.

Intervention 1: SMS reminders. Many children may miss out on radio instruction simply through limited attention to the time schedule whilst at home. Reminders will help children remember to listen to the radio at the appropriate time.

Intervention 2: Phone instruction by private school teachers. Interaction is critical to learning. There are limits to the overall effectiveness of entirely one-way instruction delivered through mass media such as radio. Delivering actual instruction by phone allows for two-way communication, so teachers can check for the understanding of children and adjust instruction in real-time as necessary. Using private school teachers from the implementer (Rising Academies) will inform us of the potential impact of the intervention with high-implementation fidelity.

Intervention 3: Phone instruction by government school teachers. This will be the same programme of instruction but delivered using government teachers from government schools. This will inform us more about the potential scalability and sustainability of the intervention using government systems.

1.2 Purpose and methodology

The qualitative research was commissioned to supplement the impact evaluation being conducted by the Center for Global Development, in partnership with the World Bank’s Sierra Leone Education Team and the Strategic Impact Evaluation Fund. The inquiry gathered some basic details about student engagement in educational activities, such as listening to the radio, talking to their teacher on the phone, or self-study.

Data collection tools were developed and finalized in December 2020 and January 2021 while field data was collected in March and early April 2021 in the four intervention districts of Bo, Kailahun, Kenema and Western Area. A total of 28 interviews were conducted with samples

recruited from both the intervention and control arms. Interviews were transcribed and coded along the themes that corresponded to the purpose of the qualitative research.

Table 1. Distribution of interviews

Location and school			Intervention (FGD/KII)		Control (FGD/KII)		Tutors (IDI with public and private school teachers)
<i>District</i>	<i>Chiefdom</i>	<i>School</i>	<i>Pupils</i>	<i>Parent</i>	<i>Pupils</i>	<i>Parent</i>	
Bo	Kakua	Islamic Call Society Primary School	1	1			
Bo	Badjia	Roman Catholic Primary School, Ngelehun / Badjia	1			1	
Bo	Komboya	Bo District Education Committee Primary	1	1	1		
Kailahun	Jawie	Roman Catholic Primary	1			1	
Kailahun	Mandu	Supreme Islamic Council Primary School			1	1	
Kenema	Small bo	Integrated Community Primary School	1	1			
Kenema	Nongowa	Kulafai Rashideen	1			1	
Kenema	Kandu leppiama	Roman Catholic Primary Deima	1	1			
Western Urban	East III	Lifeline Nehemiah Primary School	1	1	1		
Western Urban	Central I	Christ Church Primary School	1		1		
Western Urban	West III	Stella Maris Primary School		1			5
Sub-Total			9	6	4	4	5

2. Results

2.1 Participation in SMS and mobile phone teaching

2.1.1 Pupil participation in the mobile phone teaching programme

The sample of pupils in the intervention schools widely indicated that the mobile phone teaching sessions started in April (although a handful of pupils mentioned May); most of them mentioned that sessions ended in August, although few pupils said it ended a month after, in September of 2020. The exact number of calls received varied, with some pupils indicated they were called three times in the week while others mentioned they received four calls in the same period.

“Our school teachers requested for the phone numbers of our parents and after we submitted it, during the time schools were closed, my mother received a telephone call and the man told her that he will start

teaching me. My mother told me about that and I stated receiving telephone teaching from the man who introduced himself to me as a teacher”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Western Urban District)**

“They came and I was not around but since my father is a teacher, he gave our names and his telephone number”. **(FGD Parent, Intervention, Bo District)**

“There was a period when schools were closing and then they were asked by their teachers to bring in phone numbers of every parent. So, they came home, asked for our numbers and took them to their teachers and there on, we started receiving calls from them and they started with interviewing us to ensure they are calling the right parents of the children”. **(FGD Parent, Intervention, Kenema District)**

“The telephone teaching started in April and ends in August 2020. The teacher always teaches me in the morning hours. In the afternoon hours I will join my mother in the market to sell”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Western Urban District)**

“As for me the mobile phone teaching started from April and September”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Western Urban District)**

“The telephone teaching started in May and ends in September 2020. After I have been taught, I also read my books at night because I want to be educated. The teacher will teach me ESPS, Maths, English, Reading and Social Studies”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Western Urban District)**

“On Saturdays, Mondays and even on Sundays they called”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Kailahun District)**

“They called me on Saturdays, Sundays, Mondays and Tuesdays and then no calls on Thursdays and Fridays”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Kailahun District)**

“When I received the mobile phone call, I will sit and listen to the teacher and will write what I know as I was doing the study with two of my friends who are in the same school”. **(FGD Parent, Intervention, Kenema District)**

“As for me, it was in the evening hours when my return home after doing her business, she then told me that one of my teachers will start teaching me on the following week. My mother then bought me new books and pen for the lesson. The teacher then called as promised and started teaching me. She usually called in the evening hours because my mother is a business woman and she has to go to the market every day to sell. The teaching started in April and ends in September 2020”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Western Urban District)**

2.1.2 What pupils and parents appreciated about the mobile phone teaching

The mobile phone teaching was liked by some parents as well as children for a number of reasons. For some parents, phone teaching was welcomed because it engaged children in learning, which broadly suggested that the platform was appreciated more out of the fact that it provided a learning space for children. Other respondents were pleased with the mobile phone teaching because it provided the platform for pupils to directly interact with tutors. Few pupils also found the timing of phone calls convenient.

“As for me, I liked the programme a lot. It kept our children busy and engaged with school activities and that was helpful to children in school”. **(FGD Parents, Intervention, Bo District)**

“The time was convenience because it was the time given to the teachers by my mother. At the time he will call I would have done all my household work”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Western Urban District)**

“You don’t see the teacher but the teacher that was teaching was very nice and sometimes will teach me in Mende just for me to understand. She will give me an assignment and text every week”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Bo District)**

“As for me I like the mobile phone teaching programme because if I don’t understand I will ask the teacher to go over the work so that I will get a better understanding”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Western Urban District)**

2.1.3 What pupils and parents did not so like about the mobile phone teachings

The data indicates that pupils had one common complaint about mobile phone teachings-i.e. the lessons were sometimes run on a schedule that pupils felt was inconvenient to them. For some children, it was about the desire to get away from the home and have fun with their peers, and the calls were competing for this leisure time. For other pupils, calls were received at a location that was not suitable for learning, either because the location was noisy (in the case of calls received in the market place) or calls came in when the pupil was busy, in some cases with domestic chores.

“Sometimes I did not feel comfortable with the time given to the teacher by my mother, because those were the times I would like to play football with my friends and as soon the teacher called I would not be happy”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Western Urban District)**

“The time was not convenient, because my mother is a business woman and sometimes, she will be with her phone at the market and if the teacher calls, the market place was so noisy that I could not find a quiet location for me to be taught and as a result of that I could not have total understanding on what has been taught but I will just pretend to the teacher that I understand everything...”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Western Urban District)**

“Most times you will be tired and do not have the energy to learn as my classes were mostly at night or in the evening hour”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Kenema District)**

“I was not too convenient with the time as most times it will coincide with the time we were preparing meal for the home and I will be exhausted somehow. You can’t be attentive if you are tired or just coming from work”. **FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Kenema District)**

“The other challenge was the timing for classes. Most times we will be in the farm when they will call for classes. You will not be prepared or you will be tired. But again, if you miss out, you will find it very difficult especially those who do not have good network in their homes”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Bo District)**

“Sometimes when the teacher called my father will not be at home at the moment and he will ask the teacher to call at night and when the teacher calls at night, I won’t be able to have total understanding because at that time I had started becoming sleepy, I will just pretend that I understood the lesson but in actual sense I do not”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Western Urban District)**

“Some parent will only be available at 9 pm because most do go to farm and they can only available at night. Even if I want to do my personal thing at night you must bear in mind that I have to teach at night”. **(KII Tutor, Western Urban District)**

“Because staff from Rising Academies did not take into consideration our sufferings as parents. During normal school hours, you will have to drop off your child in the morning and collect her after school. As I was saying, there is no one to look after my kid when I’m away and that is why she goes with me to the market. Do you think the market is a convenience place for her to learn?” **(FGD Parents, Intervention, Western Urban District)**

“We do not own the mobile phones and sometimes you will be talking and important calls will come in. you will have to stop and continue later. There was a time when my sister received a call from her husband. We stop and she received the call and we continue after wards”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Kenema District)**

“Again, it was not really too effective because in the case of my son, I will get a call and then they will say they are calling later to teach him but they are never calling back and again it was difficult for the kids to understand teachings on the phones because of the poor responses they get. I am a teacher too so when I see my child not responding too well, I know that he is not understanding the things he is been taught. The responses were really poor in that regard”. **(FGD Parents, Intervention, Kenema District)**

2.1.4 Wider challenges with mobile phone teachings

On the specific challenges with the mobile phone teaching, the data revealed some fundamental contextual and structural gaps that limited the effectiveness of the method for distance learning purposes, especially in the rural setting. Firstly, there were challenges with

infrastructure relating to significant weaknesses in the mobile network and/or shortage of power supply to constantly keep the phones charged.

“Not all homes have access to the network. Only few sections in the community have access to mobile network so calling to get the parents was very difficult. Sometimes you will go one week without having classes due to poor network in this community and the surrounding. You can sometimes receive the call but to get the person clearly was an issue. Sometimes we will postpone the lesson to another day or other time”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Bo District)**

“Sometimes we had poor newt work and you will not get clearly what the teaching is saying”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Kenema District)**

“The other challenge was with the network. You will have to look out for a point to stand and take the class. That is why we’re listening together in a group as it was difficult for us to do it individually. We only have two points in this community where you can access quality mobile network”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Bo District)**

“We do not have access to mobile network. If you have phone in this community and you charged it, it will last for over a week as you will only have access to network in the hill overlooking the village. We have a palm tree that is the place we go and make our phone calls. People don’t call at the time they wanted. We are troubled as a community as even the communication pole that was constructed in Njala Komboya is not reaching our community. We are in total darkness from the rest of the chiefdom”. **(FGD Parents, Intervention, Bo District)**

“Due to lack of electricity supply to charge the mobile phone of our parents some of us were not able to take classes because our parents’ mobile phones were switched off”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Western Urban District)**

The other challenge was with the duration of the calls. Based on Interviews with a sample of pupils parents as well as tutors, the duration of teaching sessions varied from 5-25 minutes, depending on the indivial experience of the consultee.

“Well for me, I was always with my child each time they called and I know more for English Language, lessons lasted between 5-6mins only”.
(FGD Parent, Intervention, Kenema District)

“The teaching program did not last long. It lasted not longer than 10mins... It was the same for Math. It did not last long. They will teach just few minutes and then hang-up. Most times these guys call from other networks and because you are calling from another network, charges are high so they make it brief and then later tell the parents to teach their kids the other areas. Teachings were very brief”. (FGD Parent, Intervention, Kenema District)

“They will not spend more than twenty-five minutes... The time wasn't enough if they really wanted us to understand especially for mathematics”. (FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Kenema District)

“I sometimes spend 8 to 15 minutes to teach a child but it all depends on the smartness of the child. There are some pupils who are slow learner in have to spend more time for him/her to get better understanding. We were not given fix time to teach a child but at the same time I have to manage the top-up so that could be able to teach all the pupils. Again, whenever we requested for additional to top-up they started creating some doubt thinking that we have used it for our own personal use. The reason why we spent much top up was that, before teaching I asked the children to do recap from our previous lesson before introducing new lesson”. (KII Tutor, Western Urban District)

“Well, the calls lasted around 5 to 10mins really. Whenever she calls, I put the phone on speaker and call other kids around and leave the phone with them and go about my business. There's a boy around my area, he's a pupil too. He usually takes me through all the steps because I don't understand quite well how to operate a phone”. (FGD Parent, Intervention, Kenema District)

For some children, the absence of a face-to-face interaction with a tutor was an impediment to learning. Especially for mathematics, which is more technique-based, some pupils expressed the preference for having lessons delivered by someone who was physically stood in front of them, next to the blackboard. This method, in the opinion of some pupils, was quintessential for understanding the required steps for solving mathematic problems; it did not help to talk the pupil through maths problem solving steps over the phone, because it was just difficult to

relate to those steps virtually. For some pupils, not been able to see the teacher face-to-face also meant some a feeling of anxiety and panic on the part of the child, although some tutors did a good job at the pupil feel comfortable with him/her as the lessons progressed.

“The reason why we sometimes found it difficult to understand mathematics is because we were not seeing the teacher face to face. It is very important for us to see the teachers solving maths face to face on the blackboard than oral teaching on radio or telephone. Other topics will be easily understood but maths requires practical teaching for which we need to see the exact method in which the teacher is solving problems”. (FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Western Urban District)

“I struggled to understand the lessons because nobody was writing the things, they were telling me. I am used to seeing my tutor in front of me. That way I fully understand what you are trying to say through demonstrations”. (FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Kenema District)

“I sometimes have problem with spellings whilst the teacher was teaching me, sometimes I became panicked I do not know maybe because he was a strange person to me. But after sometime I developed confidence to talk to him”. (FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Western Urban District)

2.2 Participation in the radio teaching programme

Mostly in the Western Urban, participation in the radio teaching programme was confirmed by both the sampled pupils and parents.¹ Rising staff had initially informed parents of the programme through a phone call, and then sent SMS messages to notify children of upcoming radio lessons thereafter.

“We were receiving text message from rising Academies for our kids to listen to radio teaching programme”. (FGD Parent, Intervention, Western Urban)

“I was informed to tune to the radio for the teaching program by my elder brother since that time I have been listening to the radio. This was

¹ We observed during the field work that the radio component of the programme was less prominent among all respondent categories: pupils, parents and mobile phone tutors. This was in stark contrast to the mobile phone teaching, which was well known and amplified by the fact that this scheme seemed to have been offered only by Rising Academies during the school closure; this was not the case with the radio, where multiple local FM radio stations, in addition to the national radio, were running radio teachings.

done on SLBC and they were teaching ESPS, Mathematics, Reading and English”. (FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Western Urban District)

“... The radio programme was done on Tumac Radio”. FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Western Urban District)

“All subjects for lower and upper primary. They were doing the teaching at KISS 104 FM in Bo. But since majority of the people in this community do not have access to radio or mobile phones, they were left out as there was no way for their kids to participate”. (FGD Parent, Intervention, Bo District)

As much as those messages were received, the evidence suggests that the effectiveness of the radio teaching was challenging for some pupils. The first limitation was often related to the lack of access to a radio for the pupil, either because the household did not have a radio set, or the available set was up for competition from other household members. Another complaint was the perspective that radio was a one-way channel of communication where pupils did not have someone to support them during the teaching.

“Things were rough with me during that time even though I received the first call and they told me about their intention for my child to be taking part in the radio teaching program. I accepted, hoping that I will be able to buy radio and find a convenient place for her to be listening to radio. Unfortunately, the company where we were working to make a living was closed down as a result of Corona virus. What she was doing was to listen together with one of our neighbour’s son and she will write down everything and I will explain to her at the end of the day”. (FGD Parent, Intervention, Western Urban)

“As you are saying it was very good, but they did not take into consideration parents who do not have phones or radios. They assumed that we are all equal and that every parent is supposed to have a phone and a radio”. (FGD Parent, Intervention, Western Urban)

“I had access to radio teaching programme though it was not much effective as my elder brother was more in control of the radio. I will only use it to study if he is not around or he is not using it to study”. (FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Bo District)

“Sometimes those in Classes Five and Six were listening to radio but it was not effective as there was no one by their side to help them understand what they are saying in the radio. The session was full of playing. In fact, not all of them were taking part, because they were not learning from the teaching program. That is why we paid more attention to the lesson we organized as a community and it was helpful as it was evidenced based from the result we saw”. **(FGD Parent, Intervention, Bo District)**

2.3 General challenges with the Rising Academies distance learning programme

2.3.1 Language barrier

Language barrier was a recurring theme from pupils and parents when highlighting their experience of what did not work so well with the distance learning programme; the challenge was also corroborated by the tutors that delivered the lessons. Mende is the main local dialect in the districts of Bo, Kailahun and Kenema, and for the schools the schools targeted for the intervention, they were mostly in remote rural communities, where in fact Mende was more dominant as a dialect, than one would expect in urbanised locations in those districts. Pupils indicated that their regular teachers delivered lessons to them in mix languages of Mende and (some) English. For the tutors assigned to deliver the mobile phone lessons, the standardised medium of communication was the English Language, although they also thought in Krio. This emerged as a significant barrier for effective tutor-pupil interaction during phone lessons. For some pupils, it was not just that they were not fluent in the Krio that tutors spoke, it was also about the accent of the Krio that the tutors communicated to them that they found advanced to understand.

“But we had problem with the way they speak or talk even the Krio they speak had some element of okra [implying it was different from the accent people spoke Krio locally] and it was hard for us to understand as sometimes our teachers will explain in Mende if we did not understand. Even the Krio they speak is advanced for our standard, as we are far away from Kenema”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Kenema District)**

“The other constrain was our kids are not so versatile in the language. Not all of them are good with this Krio language. Some of them are only good speakers in our Mende language. They found it extremely difficult to grasp concepts through the phones. Even for us Adults, not all of us can easily understand phone conversations, least I talk about the kids. You would need to pay keen attention if you want to fully understand and the kids don’t have that patience more so when they are just left on their own. It was very difficult for our kids here. This place is

predominantly a Mende community so it was a major challenge...”.
(FGD Parent, Intervention, Kenema District)

“One of the challenges was that we were not seeing those teaching us and we are not used to them. Sometimes they teach in Krio and English only and not in Mende as you are doing”. (FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Kenema District)

“The other challenge I had was with the language. I speak and understand Krio but the way the teacher was speaking was a bit difficult especially when she was teaching English language. If you don’t have someone who is more educated, you will not understand...” (FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Bo District)

“The understanding from the part of the children was one barrier and even the language was another issue. Some of the parents and the kids you call will only understand Mende or Krio and so teaching them in English will be very difficult. Sometimes you will call and the parent will say I don’t understand the language you are speaking. So, the parents will be looking out for someone to connect you with and that was time consuming. It wasn’t really easy”. (KII Tutor, Western Rural District)

“One of the challenges I encountered was the language barrier. Some children cannot understand English neither Krio, unless I have to teach them through their parents. Some parents cannot even understand the Krio either. Most of the pupils I was allocated to where Mende speakers and I found it difficult to communicate. I then told them to get a neighbour who can speak Krio or English to always be with the child when am teaching in a form of guiding the child and that was what most of them did”. (KII Tutor, Western Urban District)

“**Moderator:** How many of the twenty-three kids assigned to you that were residing in the provinces? **Respondent:** I will say around ten and most times the person that will pick up the call will start speaking Mende to you or other language that you will find it very difficult to understand”. (KII Tutor, Western Rural District)

2.3.2 Remote teaching perceived as less practical for primary level education

Apart from language barrier, some respondents also shared their perspective that it was not practical to effectively teach children in lower classes through mobile phones and radio. Some

respondents made the point that the physical absence of a tutor standing before the child was a hinderance to learning, and for some children that absence meant they that no one was there to help them figure out mathematical signs on their own. The absence of a teacher also implied that pupils also created the opportunity for pupils to be less attentive to lessons, since the teacher was not there to keep an eye on them.

“I struggled to understand the lessons because nobody was writing the things they were telling me. I am used to seeing my tutor in front of me. That way I fully understand what you are trying to say through demonstrations”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Kenema District)**

“I had more challenge with mathematics than English as it was very difficult for me to copy the mathematics they were dictating. I don’t know some of the signs”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Bo District)**

“We were studying as a group and the English was a bit easy compared to the mathematics. We did not understand what the teacher was teaching. Mathematics general is very difficult for us even in school. We don’t know some of the signs”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Kenema District)**

“There are some playful children they pay less attention because they were not physically seeing me while I was teaching. When I give them exercise and then ask them to give the answer, they will give wrong answer because they were paying less attention”. **(KII Tutor, Western Urban District)**

“... They read passages the kids did not understand and when they asked questions they can’t answer. There on you can tell they were understanding nothing because if they were, they would certainly answer some questions and when they do, it indicates they understood what they told them but when they don’t, you know they didn’t. So, my experience as a teacher I know they understood nothing really”. **(FGD Parent, Intervention, Kenema District)**

“Mobile phone or radio teaching methods are not the best ways for the child to learn. Because you will not see the teacher and it is possible that you will not pay the kind attention need for the subject compared to the

attention we give when a teacher is standing in front of you”. (FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Kenema District)

“Even when you take them to a quiet place they still could not understand. It was difficult for a child to understand on his or her own... You can’t expect some of these kids in class 1 to write on their own. They will certainly need someone by them to guide them”. (FGD Parent, Intervention, Kenema District)

“...I will say the mobile phone teaching and the private lessons that were organised by the teachers. But we were paying more attention to the study that was organised by the teachers in the community, as there is no way you can hide from that. But for the mobile phone teaching programme, you can hide and your parents will not see you during the call time”. FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Kenema District)

2.3.3 Social factors

There was also some latent conflict around the relationship between tutors and parents of the pupils. While the research did not explore the substantive impact that this had on teaching, the evidence suggests that this was sometimes uncomfortable for both sides; in some instances, though, both parties resolved misunderstandings and moved forward to collaborating on supporting the learning interest of the child. In other instances, it was about the tutor calling in at a schedule that did not work for the parent.

“Sometimes the parents will become very aggressive with us and some will in fact put their phones off. There was a time when one of the parents hits me but because I’m a teacher I was able to handle that situation. We are now friends and she was calling me to know the time for the next period”. (KII Tutor, Western Rural District)

“We were teaching the children twice a week but their parents were with the view that it will be every day. But we do explain to them and they understood. It is possible for the child to have more than two classes a week as they have other teachers for other subjects. I was teaching them mathematics, but they [referring to parents] were expecting us to be teaching every day. Some were calling our private lines to ask if we are not going to teach today. it was challenging”. (KII Tutor, Western Rural District)

“The other challenge we had was that our teachers were not involved which made things very difficult for us as we are used to his method of teaching. He is nice to us and encourages us to understand. But with the mobile phone teaching programme that was organised by the Rising Academies you do not see the teacher”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Bo District)**

“Again, it was not really too effective because in the case of my son, I will get a call and then they will say they are calling later to teach him but they not call back...”. **(FGD Parents, Intervention, Kenema District)**

“Again, even those with mobile phones are not office workers who are expected to be home all day. These people, all of them are farmers. They don’t have to be home all day. They need to go to their farms and work so there are most times the kids are unreachable because of that because the parents can’t be home waiting for those calls all the time. You can’t leave your bush work to wait for a 5mins call. You can’t do that because you have to eat and feed your kids”. **(FGD Parent, Intervention, Kenema District)**

“Sometimes they will call and the person with the phone will be at the mining site and they ask him or her to call when in town. Some will forget to call back and you will the lesson on that day. If they have time, they will call back and reschedule for another day. But sometimes they hardly honoured their promise to call back and teach...”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Kenema District)**

“They have problem and that is why a single man was receiving calls on behalf of more than four children. The man works in a company in Daru but he is almost always not around and he is educated. If they did their recruitment through the community, it would have been very simple for them”. **(FGD Parent, Control, Kailahun District)**

“The other challenge is that most of the people in the community are miners and the distance from the community to the mining field is too far. Most times when they receive a call from rising academies teacher, they will either ignore or put their phones off. It happens when my uncle was managing people who were washing gravel at the site. He only released that they were calling when they made another call at night and it was almost too late for me as I was tired”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Kenema District)**

“Farming is the only source of income we have in this community. If you ignored farming, you family will suffer. That is the more reason why we do not leave our children behind when going to the farm, as they will have to assist us to raise money to support their education. They will be going to secondary schools and it involves money. So, it is important for us to start preparing for that”. **(FGD Parents, Intervention, Bo District)**

2.4 Benefits of participating in the Rising Academies distance learning programme

Many pupils indicated that the distance learning programme was beneficial in terms of putting them in a good position to return to school after a long break. Some pupil expressed the position that the Rising Academy learning programme helped them become more confident to now participate in the classroom, considering that many of the content that was being taught when schools reopened had already been covered on the Rising programme. Some pupils also made the point that they were doing better in school exams today as an outcome of what they had learnt during the distance learning programme.

“It helped me to be ahead of most topics that are being taught because we have dealt with those topics during the mobile phone teaching”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Western Urban District)**

“I learnt what the teaching is currently teaching in class six. It is the same topics and I already have the note as my brother was assisting me with taking of the note”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Bo District)**

“Radio teaching also was effective and has helped me to be able to be self-confidence because I can now participate in class whenever the teacher asked question. Most of the topics we are doing now had been dealt with during the telephone teaching am now bold to answer questions in class”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Western Urban District)**

“Rising academy mobile phone teaching has now helped me to spell words easily. Before now, I was finding it hard to spell word but I can now spell easily because I was taught how to spell in syllables”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Western Urban District)**

“I can now confidently participate in class because I know what I will say is correct. Most of the topics we are now doing in class have been

dealt with during the telephone and radio teaching programme”. (FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Western Urban District)

“The assignment that our teacher is giving us is been done by myself. The telephone teaching made me to understand most of the topics before the reopening of schools. Even my friend who uses to show me in class I can now compete with her in terms of grades”. (FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Western Urban District)

“Even myself, my grades are now higher than before. I can now score 60% to 80% on school assessment and is because of the Rising Academy teaching programme I was having when schools were closed”. (FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Western Urban District)

“They asked us questions even our teachers never asked us and that helped us better understand many things and when we got back to school it was easy to answer these questions each time we were asked”. (FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Kailahun District)

“Rising Academy teaching was helpful because it introduced us to new learning techniques like the one we did when we didn’t have access to our teachers”. (FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Kenema District)

“It was very helpful. Both the rising academy program and the private classes. They helped us settle back in school well because if those programs were not available to us we would have struggled badly in class”. (FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Kenema District)

Not all of the pupils (and in some cases parents) offered a positive feedback on how much they benefitted from the programme in terms of learning. The data generally points to two important factors. For some pupils, they participated in the programme alone, with no one around them to support them through the lessons; they implied that being alone on the session was not helpful to learning. Secondly, other pupils expressed the view that they did not feel they learnt enough through the programme because they did not have access to radio or mobile network; this was particularly the case for pupils in remote communities.

“I did not learn anything new as I really find it very difficult to study during that because I was alone and there was no one to help me study during that time”. (FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Kenema District)

“They started calling our parents and parents will tell us the time for the lesson. We started and it wasn’t easy especially when you are alone. They were given us test and I failed the first test when I was alone. But when I invited my friends to also witness the lessons, we were doing it in a group and it was helpful”. (FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Bo District)

“The only benefit we got from rising academies project was the exercise books and the teaching gude. But to say to recruit kids from this community to participate in the radio teaching program or the mobile phone teaching program wasn’t effective because we do not have access to mobile net work”. (FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Bo District)

“They were helping children to learn when schools were closed though our children were not directly involved. It was only effective when their teacher stepped in as it was really difficult for some students to understand or even write what they were saying in the radio or during phone discussion. But thank God the community teacher was able to organize them to benefit from the program. Otherwise, it would have been a wasted time as of the kids selected were too young to learn on their own”. (FGD Parent, Intervention, Kailahun District)

2.5 Reasons some pupils in the distance learning programme did not return to same schools previously enrolled

The interviews also enquired about reasons why some of the pupils enrolled on the distance learning programme were no longer available at schools where the enrolment had occurred. The sampled pupils offered a variety of reasons, including the report that some of their colleagues had transitioned from to secondary schools. Other pupils had taken transfer to other schools. But also, other pupils had dropped out of schools, either due to pregnancy, or following the death of a parent, thus leaving them with no one to cover the cost of schooling.

"Another friend of mine has now turned school dropout, I saw her selling vegetables in the market and I asked why she stopped coming she said she will continue later but she has not come yet. I asked her but she did not tell me the reason why, she only promised to return to school

but she has not yet come" **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Western Urban District)**

"In my class, two of my classmates did not return to return to school and we were told by our teacher that one of them have travelled to the provinces and the other took a transfer to another school". **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Western Urban District)**

"Some just decided not to return to school any longer. They were not stopped but they decided to engage in farming instead of going to school". **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Kenema District)**

"One of our classmates lost her mother and since there is no one to pay for her in school and to buy uniform and shoe, she decided to drop out of school. But if there is someone to assist her, she will go back to school". **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Kenema District)**

"Some are now in Baoma Town attending secondary school as they were promoted to Form One". **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Bo District)**

"Some are now farmers especially those whose parent have huge cocoa farm. They are following their parent's money and have dropped out of school". **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Bo District)**

"Those who were in classes six are now in form one and are attending in other school. Also, there was a girl in class four who got pregnant and she is currently with the husband". **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Kenema District)**

"Some failed and refused to repeat the same class, we have some who have dropped out of school because of mining especially the boys". **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Kenema District)**

“We have one girl who was in class four. She got pregnant and has dropped out of school because she does not want us to provoke her”.
(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Kenema District)

“Only two of our classmates did not return to school and when I asked our other friend, she told me that one of them has transferred to waterloo with her relatives and that she had started attending another school”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Western Urban District)**

2.6 Willingness to join Rising Academies distance learning programme again

2.6.1 Perspectives on willingness to participate again

Many pupils, as well as parents, expressed willingness to participate in a similar distance learning programme, in the event that the Covid-19 pandemic deteriorated further to again warrant the closure of schools across the country. Some pupils expressed preference for one method over the other, such as a preference for radio over mobile phone teaching. At the same time, the respondents would wish to see such a teaching programme extended to all pupils rather than a selected few. Some parents felt that the programme was suitable for pupils in upper classes in schools.

“If the Covid situation is to get worst again, I will prefer the radio teaching programme that was organised. It was good because one can maintain social distancing by not allowing the teacher to come close to you or to visit your home but by teaching through the radio”. **(FGD Pupils, Intervention, Western Urban District)**

“I will prefer the television teaching because we can be able to see the teacher face to face”. **(FGD Pupils, Intervention, Western Urban District)**

“As for me, if covid situation get worse again I will prefer the radio teaching from the rising academy because most of our friends in class that were participating in the radio teaching told me that the sessions were good and from their performances you can tell that they were learning whilst schools were closed”. **(FGD Pupils, Intervention, Western Urban District)**

“I am very much okay with the mobile phone teaching because the teacher will not flog us whilst in classroom our teacher will flog us

especially when we solve maths wrongly on the board”. **(FGD Pupils, Intervention, Western Urban District)**

“They should continue this same method because it helps build our confidence especially those of us approaching examination classes”
(FGD Pupils, Intervention, Kenema District)

“The mobile phone teaching programme was good. But they need to have a full list of all those enrolled in the programme and do proper monitoring to ensure that the children are really participating in the programme. They should also to be sending personnel if not all the time but once or twice a month to do supervision and see children’s progress in the programme. That way they can know if programme is a success or failure”. **(KII Parent, Intervention, Bo District)**

“We will prefer our teachers but if they do not want to use them, we prefer the mobile phone teaching program as they will allow you to ask questions unlike the radio teaching program”. **(FGD Pupils, Intervention, Kenema District)**

“The radio teaching program and the mobile phone teaching program were not bad taking into consideration the situation at hand. The problem was with the recruitment of pupils. If you recruit a child whose parents is always busy and do not have time, how do you think that child will benefit. Also, if you recruit a child that is very difficult to learn on his or her own as my sister was saying will be waste of time. When they are in class, they don’t pay attention, how successful do you think the radio teaching program and the mobile phone teaching program will be effective when the kids are not monitored. It will only be effective if the kids from upper grades are recruited and for those from lower grades, we employ community teachers as they can’t read on their own or study by themselves”. **(FGD Parents, Intervention, Western Urban District)**

“Also, they should not select all the pupils as that is the only way they can succeed. All students in the country should benefit from this program. They were calling to teach me and my sister’s name was not included. I can’t study a lone as we are in the same class and stay in the same home and do things together”. **(FGD Pupils, Intervention, Bo District)**

“If something like this ever happens again, we would want all our kids in the community to be beneficiaries and not just a handpicked of children. That is unfair!”. **(FGD Parents, Control, Bo District)**

“That too is nice but the radio is more guaranteed compared to the mobile phone because with the radio, ten or more children can sit somewhere and listen together whereas with the phone you cannot”. **(FGD Parents, Control, Bo District)**

“To cater for all pupils next time so that we all can benefit because some of felt really bad when we were left out”. **(FGD Pupils, Control, Kenema District)**

2.6.2 Reservations about rejoining the scheme in the future

The data indicates that pupils did not outrightly decline that they will not be open to participating in similar scheme in the future. Rather, most respondents put the emphasis on the preference of having pupils taught by teachers in the community, even when schools were closed. Some pupils expressed the position that lessons delivered by teachers in the community covered more subjects, compared to the distance learning programme.

“I prefer the community-based teaching that was organized as it covers all the subjects we do in school. That was not the case with the phone teaching program as they covered few subjects only”. **(FGD Pupils, Intervention, Kenema District)**

“I prefer the lesson in the community because they were given class work and if you do not understand a particular topic, you will approach your teacher at any time and they were willing to assist us”. **(FGD Pupils, Intervention, Kenema District)**

“I prefer the community-based teaching because in the lesson, you will have to go through what you learnt yesterday before you start another topic. But this was impossible with the mobile phone teaching as they will only ask if you were you ok with the lessons yesterday. We will say yes especially if you are tied or the parents are around”. **(FGD Pupils, Intervention, Kenema District)**

“I will prefer our teachers to be teaching us as that will help us complete the syllabus. Also, they will not just select few students but will allow the entire school to participate as that will help improve our education. But

with rising, only few were selected. Our teachers will not select students but will allow us all to participate”. **(FGD Pupils, Intervention, Bo District)**

The preference of being taught by a teacher in the community, even when schools were closed, was re-echoed in the parent interviews. Some parents implied that the mobile phone teaching in particular was not appropriate for parents that were illiterate; for others the reservation of signing up to mobile phone teaching in the future was influenced by the consideration that the scheme put a lot of demand on the parent being around to receive and hand the phone call to the child. Some parents also believed that a face-to-face teaching had the major advantage that it was more realistic for the teacher to make an assessment of the academic standard of the child; it was not easy doing the same of the pupil over the mobile phone.

“The teaching they received from their teachers in this community really helped them. He knows where they stopped before schools were closed and can identify those students who are weak from those who are strong. In fact this will help them complete their syllabus. But for the teaching them on phones, he or she do not know the strength of the child academically so it will be difficult for the child and the teacher as well”. **(FGD Parents, Control, Kailahun District)**

“Most of the parents in this community did not go to school and hence can’t teach their children. The program was good but it was more beneficial to parents who can read and write and have time to assist their children. You can’t be in the farm and at the same time monitoring your child”. **(FGD Parents, Control, Kailahun District)**

“I will prefer our teachers to be teaching us as that will help us complete the syllabus. Also, they will not just select few students but will allow the entire school to participate as that will help improve our education. But with Rising, only few were selected. Our teachers will not select students but will allow all to participate”. **(FGD Parents, Intervention, Bo District)**

“The children are used to Mende, so moving them to Krio will be something automatic. They need to be given time to teach them in Mende as that will help them. Allowing someone to teach them in different language will not work as planned”. **(FGD Parents, Control, Kailahun District)**

3 Household engagement with the distance learning programme and overall satisfaction with the initiative

3.1 Household members supported learning of pupils enrolled on the Rising Academies programme

The role played by parents in supporting the participation of children was explored. As it emerged from the data, parents provided a variety of support ranging from facilitation and making the environment right for the child to participate, to more direct engagement in the teaching programme. On facilitation, parents took the necessary steps, such as ensuring that mobile phones were charged and ready ahead of the calls, monitoring the child to stay home for the calls, ensuring that the child had a meal before sessions came up, etc.

“My mother will ensure that her mobile phone was always charged in order for me not to miss the class. Even if there was no electricity, she will find a way to charge it”. (FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Western Urban District)

“Our parents were also reminding us about the time for the mobile phone teaching program and some will ensure that we eat before that time as the learning materials were provided by the rising academies staff”. (FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Kenema District)

“Sometimes if our radio had no battery, my father will ensure he provide battery for the radio in order for me to listening to the radio teaching”. (FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Western Urban District)

“My parents ensured that on days I was supposed to have class, I was up earlier to do my domestic work and finish in time, rest and then wait for the call”. (FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Kailahun District)

“My parents will wake us up early to do our house chores and after that, they tell us not to go anywhere but wait for the call. When they called, we will take our books and pen and then listen and write at the same time”. (FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Kailahun District)

“What I did was to instruct the eldest daughter to be assisting them whilst they listen to the radio teaching program, I will also ensure that the radio has new batteries at all that”. **(FGD Parent, Intervention, Western Urban District)**

“I provided radio to the kids even though they stopped listening earlier than expected for reason best known to them”. **(FGD Parent, Intervention, Bo District)**

“My mother will make sure the phone is charged and placed where we can access strong mobile network”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Bo District)**

Some parents took on a more active role in supporting children through the learning programme. Some parents for instance sat in on lessons in order to monitor and provide follow up teaching. Some parents also called to remind teachers of the teaching schedule; some parents did go as far as buying top up to extend teaching sessions in circumstances when the airtime of the tutor ran out.

“My parents will sometimes call the teacher whenever she did not call on time. My parent will sometimes buy top up and called the teacher to teach me so that I will not have time to play a lot”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Western Urban District)**

“I could remember on two occasion the teacher’s top up get finished whilst he was teaching me, my father then hurry up and bought Le20,000 top up in his phone and called the teacher again and the teacher”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Western Urban District)**

“Also, their parents supported by making the children available at all time. After the teaching session some parents have been calling and requesting me to teach their children on phone for which I did voluntarily about two weeks before the reopening of schools. I was teaching two of my pupils in the interior through their own credit. They were calling on my phone. And very recently, two of the parents called me and said their kids are doing very well in school and it was as a result of the teaching they got from the rising academy. And I say, let them say thanks to Rising because it was the Rising that brought this programme. Again, I was teaching in Krio, English, Sherbro and Mende”. **(KII Tutor, Western Urban District)**

“Our father used to assist if he is at home and we write what the teacher is saying and will ensure that we study the notes at night”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Bo District)**

“Whenever we do not understand what the teachers were teaching us, they will ask us to give the phone to our parents, having done that, they will explain to them that they should revise the lesson to us after the phone call. Thereafter, our mothers will then put more attention to us so that we can understand the subject”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Western Urban District)**

“Whenever I had difficulty in a particular topic, I will let it be known to my elder brother who will help me to understand it. Most times he was beside me when the teacher was teaching”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Western Urban District)**

“My child is in Class 1 so they ask if she can write or she can get someone to write for her. So, they asked me to have a book and a pen and I write as they teach and after every lesson, the lady will say to me “concentrate on this and that area to make sure your child understands.” **(FGD Parent, Intervention, Kenema District)**

3.2 Did pupils receive help from household members in exercises and tests?

Exercises and tests were given to children during the programme. Some pupils, explicitly and implicitly, confirmed that they got assistance from a family member during test and difficulties that they encountered while sessions were active; in those cases, the family member sat next to the child, making support readily available to pupil.

“They sometimes give classwork at the end of the topic or sometimes will go over what they have thought us. If it is a class work, I will call those who know and they will help us because the teachers are not around. The first classwork they gave me was on mathematics and we failed all but it was done by us. Since then, we decided to involve those who know better than us”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Kenema District)**

“My father was helping us as he is educated and he is the councillor in this community. Myself and my sister will sit together and he will listen and write down everything for us. He will help us write the test. It was really helpful we were having lessons three days in a week. We will then

use the note to study”. (FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Bo District)

“Whenever I had difficulty in a particular topic, I will let it be known to my elder brother who will help me to understand it. Most times he was beside me when the teacher was teaching”. (FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Western Urban District)

“But really the questions were so critical so we had no choice but to help them. Like most times the lady who used to teach my daughter will text me the questions and she will ask me to monitor my daughter write them and I text her back. I just sit and do it myself and send her the answers”. (FGD Parent, Intervention, Kenema District)

The prospect that (some) pupils could have received help from a household member during assessment, including test administered for the midline survey was further researched. Some household members implied that parents and/or an older sibling were at hand to help the pupil through tests.

“Yes, we were with them during the test. The phones belong to us so we had no choice but to be with them”. (FGD Parent, Intervention, Kenema District)

“I talk in her ears and tell her the answers”. (FGD Parent, Intervention, Kenema District)

“Me I spoke in his ears many times and told him the answers”. (FGD Parent, Intervention, Kenema District)

“Yes, my sister was with me during that time... Yes, if they asked me questions and I did not know the answers she would help me”. (FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Kailahun District)

“As for me what I mostly did was when they ask my child and he doesn’t know the answer, I push the phone far away and tell him the answer”. (FGD Parent, Intervention, Kenema District)

“Even myself I did that. My own book was the sand on the ground and my pen was the stick. So, when a question is asked, I use my stick to

write on the ground and my child watches and responds”. (FGD Parent, Intervention, Kenema District)

3.3 Satisfaction with the distance learning programme

On the question of what pupils and parents were satisfied with about the Rising teaching programme, the data suggest that the effectiveness of the teaching technique employed by the tutor largely influenced satisfaction among beneficiaries of the distance learning programme. For some pupils, it was the ability of the tutor to use simplified teaching techniques to enhance the pupils’ understanding that influenced a positive perspective of the programme. For instance, teaching pupils to spell words in syllables was a point of satisfaction among pupils. For some pupils, the use of their native tongue to deliver lessons got them excited about participating in the lessons. Some pupils also believed that the tutors employ the relevant teaching skills, except that the content that they taught was new to the pupils.

“The teacher taught me how to spell big lettered words into syllables, which makes it easier for me to understand. She said I should learn to spell big words by breaking them down bit by bit. Since that time, I have learnt so many spellings. She also taught me maths and English”. (FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Western Urban District)

“The English was so easy as they will spell words you don’t know. They really helped us learn new things”. (FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Bo District)

“There was a time when the teacher called teaches me in Mende. I was so happy on that as the entire session was very interactive and we asked a lot of questions and we were able to understand. He was teaching mathematics”. (FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Kenema District)

“What I liked about the programme was the patient of the teachers as it is not that easy to teach pupils at lower grade through mobile phone. But the teachers were able to do that very well...”. (FGD Parent, Intervention, Western Area Urban)

“The teachers were very good but we sometimes I could not understand what they were teaching because it was totally new to us...”. (FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Kenema District)

“They will tell you not to get panic and they were calling us by our names. It was just that some of the things they were teaching was new to us”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Bo District)**

“The skills of the teachers were good because my sister and brother were able to understand the concept and explain it to me”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Bo District)**

4 Spillover and alternative learning channel for pupils not enrolled in Rising Academies distance learning

4.1 Spillover

The qualitative inquiry explored the subject of Spillover, wherein pupils not selected for either the distance learning scheme, through one mechanism or the other did find themselves benefitting from the Rising Academy distance learning programme. For context, the experimental design assigned pupils in the same school to either a treatment or control arm of the study. Without necessarily highlighting the limitation of the experimental design, the study observed that significant spillover occurred on the mobile phone teaching. Two main factors explained the spillover. Firstly, some pupils as well as parents whose child were assigned to the mobile phone teaching felt they were somehow compelled to share the opportunity for learning with other children, especially if that child was a sibling or a peer that they attended the same school.

“My child was not fortunate to be part of the mobile phone teaching program. But fortunately, one of his friends invited him as he was part of the mobile phone teaching program organised by Rising Academy”. **(FGD Parent, Control, Kailahun District)**

“Well, the calls lasted around 5 to 10mins really. Whenever she calls, I put the phone on speaker and call other kids around and leave the phone with them and go about my business. There’s a boy around my area, he is a pupil too. He usually takes me through all the steps because I do not understand quite well how to operate a phone”. **(FGD Parent, Intervention, Kenema District)**

“I use to call my friends from the next neighbour to join me in the telephone call teaching because we are attending the same school, but whenever they came along, they will be making a lot of noise and because of that my mother strongly warned me not to allow other people to join me and since that time I took classes alone”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Western Urban District)**

“I have been involving my younger brother to join me in the teaching programme who is also attending this very school because I want him to learn more”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Western Urban District)**

“As for me I only visited my friend who was listening to the telephone teaching ones, during that time they were teaching him mathematics and I joined him on that session. That was the only time I went there... On that day the teacher was teaching social studies and I learnt that there are 149 chiefdoms we have in Sierra Leone”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Control, Western Urban District)**

“As for me I used to call my sisters to join me to take the lesson and she is attending another school”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Western Urban District)**

“Only few children were selected from our school. Only five of us although in the end, we were calling on other children to join us”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Kenema District)**

“We were studying as a group with friends from the same school who were not fortunate to be selected to benefit from the programme”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Kenema District)**

“It was opened and that was why we were calling our friends to join so that they can benefit as well. If you want, you can take part and if you don't, is your business as it was not compulsory”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Bo District)**

“We were helping others to be part of the program by listening together especially those of us from the same household or if we are staying in the same compound or if they are our friends”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Bo District)**

“The friends we invited attend the rising academies mobile phone teaching program were from the same school and some we are in the same class”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Kenema District)**

“I did not take the class alone. I had people join me because I put the phone on speaker”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Kenema District)**

“She has his little brother and then a cousin but not all the time though. They come once in a while and they sit with her during the phone call”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Kailahun District)**

“*I put the phone on speaker for all to hear*”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Kailahun District)**

“But we have colleagues who were sharing the notes they were copying through the help of other relatives. We were given them the notes so that they can study. We are the same and live in the same community and attending the same school. Only few of us were selected and those whose parents do not have mobile phones were not selected”. **(FGD Primary School Pupils, Intervention, Bo District)**

In addition to being motivated to share lessons because of friendship and the desire to share learning opportunity with others, there was a more practical sense to also inviting others to participate in the lessons. As it emerged across communities, private lessons were offered to pupils, and in some instances, parents felt it made sense for the tutor of the private lesson to listen in on those calls, so that they can reinforce the content that was taught in the private lessons.

“Our children only benefited through the effort of their teachers who usually connected the phone to Bluetooth so that other children will also benefit. He was teaching what they learnt from the phone afterwards so that those who are slow learners can benefit as well. It is difficult to tell how many boys or girls benefitted from the rising academies mobile phone teaching programme”. **(FGD Parent, Control, Kailahun District)**

“Also, we have a man in this community who is a bit educated but he is not a teacher but was very much instrumental throughout the Corona period. He was able to coordinate five kids that were beneficiary of the mobile teaching program. Through his effort, other kids in this community who were not part of the program benefitted at the end of the day. What he was doing as their teacher was to bring the children together especially those in the same class to study together. It was really

a very good idea as it helped other kids learnt as well”. **(FGD Parent, Control, Kailahun District)**

4.2 Learning channel used by pupils left out of the Rising Academies distance learning initiative

Parents whose children were not enrolled on the distance learning programme explored alternative learning methods in the period that schools were closed down as part of the public safety measure to control the Covid-19 pandemic. The data suggests that two broad options were often pursued by parents, although the qualitative evidence also suggests that in many cases, both options were simultaneously used by parents in order to facilitate learning for children. Firstly, many parents tapped into the available resources in the home that could more or less take and deliver teaching functions. This role usually fell to older siblings that were themselves in the school system, but enrolled in a higher class that they could support siblings in lower classes with teaching and studies. Parents and relatives, especially fathers, that were also teachers stepped in to deliver teaching services to (their) children that were did not have a slot on the distance learning programme run by Rising Academies. Other parents also mentioned that they got their children to undertake self-study, and one parent in Kailahun District indicated that a fixed study timetable was in place for the child to follow.

“I have my daughter in secondary school so really she was the one was the one involved with that. She was teaching my child at home all the time”. **(FGD Parent, Control, Kailahun District)**

“What we did was to encourage our eldest son to be teaching her younger sister in the evening after taking classes from their teacher in the community. Also, we have a man in this community who is a bit educated but he is not a teacher but was very much instrumental throughout the Corona period. He was able to coordinate five kids that were beneficiary of the mobile teaching program. Through his effort, other kids in this community who were not part of the program benefited at the end of the day. He was doing as their teacher was doing by bringing the children together especially those in the same class to study together. It was really a very good idea as it helped other kids learn as well”. **(FGD Parent, Control, Kailahun District)**

“What we did was to encourage our eldest son to be teaching her younger sister in the evening after taking classes from their teacher in the community”. **(FGD Parent, Control, Kailahun District)**

“Some children were taking extra lesson. There is particular place in our community wherein one man was conducting private lesson.

Since children were not going to school at that time some parents enrolled their children into that lesson”. (FGD Primary School Pupils, Control, Western Urban District)

“My uncle is a teacher and whenever he was taking extra classes with the class 6 pupils, he will ask me to join them. That was how I was received teaching during that period”. (FGD Primary School Pupils, Control, Western Urban District)

“We were studying in the evening hours with Alpha... He is a student but in secondary school”. (FGD Primary School Pupils, Control, Western Urban District)

“My sister, Jeneba, was taking me private lessons”. (FGD Primary School Pupils, Control, Western Urban District)

“... One of my brothers came and I had to ask him to help my child with studies and I gave him something, at that time I gave him some money, then he started but then he left us talk because I could not afford paying him anymore and it was challenging for me because you know I am a farmer...”. (FGD Parent, Control, Kailahun District)

“As for me what I really did was, I had to get my child engaged with studies at home. He used to study in the morning at 9 to 11 AM and then the rest for a while and then he continued studying in the evening, from 8 to 10 PM; that is how it happened”. (FGD Parent, Control, Kailahun District)

Parents also used private tutors in the communities to provide teaching services to children during the closure of schools; in most cases, the tutors were school teachers in the local community.

“We were not fortunate, as our children were not part of the mobile phone teaching that was going on in this community. Thank God we have a teacher in this community who organised private lesson for all the children in this community. It was really helpful, as he was able to engage our children throughout the holiday. We have some parents who are educated and were helping their children with studies at night. But for those of us who are not educated, we relied on what the teacher was teaching them”. (FGD Parent, Control, Kailahun District)

“My child was not fortunate to be part of the mobile phone teaching program. But fortunately, one of his colleagues invited him to join, as he was part of the mobile phone teaching programme organised by Rising Academy. My child was also part of the private lesson organised by the community teacher. as he is not on the (government) payroll, so what we did was to contribute as a community to give the teacher stipend at the end of the month. The teacher was also with them during the mobile phone teaching program to ensure that they got right what the teacher is teaching. I was also assisting my children as I am a bit educated and can teach primary grade effectively”. **(FGD Parent, Control, Kailahun District)**

4.3 Feedback on restricting the Rising Academies initiatives to selected pupils in the community

The experimental setup of the programme naturally involved that a pool of pupils had to belong to the control arm of the study. It is not clear how well this design was explained to communities in a way that they could understand that no bias and favour was involved in assigning a child to the intervention group or otherwise. As it emerged so often on FGDs, many parents for children in the control group expressed both misunderstanding and disappointment about the recruitment approach. Few parents even had the thought that the programme had deliberately recruited better performing students for the distance learning programme; one parent also felt that recruitment for the mobile phone teaching was only open to children whose parents had a mobile phone.

“What they did was wrong as we have children in examination class [referring to NPSE Class] who were not selected, because their parents do not have mobile phones. I have a mobile phone but my child was not selected for reasons we do not know. It was like the project was only for the selected few and which was bad. Other parents were thinking that their children were not doing well and that is why they were not selected to participate in the rising academies mobile phone teaching programme”. **(FGD Parent, Control, Kailahun District)**

“What we ended up seeing were phone calls coming in asking parents to locate their kids so they can take classes on the phone. So, I started asking myself why a program like this is on in this community and we do not know about?” How were these kids enrolled? How did the connection come about?” **(FGD Parent, Control, Bo District)**

“We do not know if the problem was with the head teacher in this community. Only few children from this school were selected. Had it not been the intervention of the community teacher, our children would

have suffered the most. We wanted to know how the kids were selected to participate in the rising academies mobile phone teaching programme, but the head teacher has not been around”. **(FGD Parent, Control, Kailahun District)**

“Parents were called and asked to give their phones to their kids and then they will, then the kids will find a quiet place to sit and take classes. The only unfortunate side of it was, not all the kids benefited from this programme; only a few of them benefited from the programme that is what I know really”. **(FGD Parent, Control, Bo District)**

“Those who were selected to participate and whose parents have access to mobile phones. You can have a phone but if your child was not selected, he or she will not benefit. It is even surprising to know that they were calling children from this community to take part in the mobile phone teaching program. That is why we are always grateful to the community teacher we have even though he is not getting from us what he wanted as we are all poor. We are asking for the government to approve him so that he will be on the teachers’ payroll...”. **(FGD Parent, Control, Kailahun District)**

5. Conclusion

Overall feedback from pupils and parents conveys the common message that the distance learning initiative was both relevant and responsive to the learning needs of children in a public health emergency setting that keeps children away from school over an extended period. Regardless of whether they resided in urban or rural locations, parents were generally keen to support the participation of children enrolled in the programme. Some parents not only made their mobile phone available, they also sat through lessons to support both the child and the tutor, as lessons were delivered. For children who participated in the programme, they associate the distance learning with improved performance in their academic work since they returned to school.

Despite the general acceptability of the programme, especially among parents whose children were enrolled, the study also identified several factors that otherwise undermined the effectiveness of the programme. Firstly, mobile phone infrastructure is not sufficiently developed across the country, and evidence from remote rural communities shows, programme participants did not benefit as much as their peers in locations with better mobile network coverage, such as in Freetown. In addition, some of the implicit assumption built into the programme did not always hold for a number of beneficiaries, including the assumption that every child assigned to radio teaching will have access to a radio in the home; in practice, some children did not have a radio in the home, but for others, even they had one, having sufficient and regular access to it proved be a challenge because of the lack of battery to power

the radio, or the fact that there were multiple users of the radio. Also, it is implicit that a child assigned to a mobile phone teaching would have both timely and regular access to a mobile phone of someone in the household; the evidence suggests that sharing mobile phone was very demanding for some parents, since their occupation required them to be out of the home at the period that calls were scheduled. The use of English Language was not supposed to be problematic, since this is the formal language for teaching instructions. The reality was different for children outside of Freetown; their teachers deliver lessons in both English and the native language; the tutors hired for the mobile phone teaching were not native speakers of the Mende, which is the dominant language in selected districts for the intervention. As a result, the tutors and pupils struggle with communication, which also made comprehension of learning sessions challenging for both parties.

The study also observed that spillover was common, especially in the rural setting. Both children and their parents actively encouraged children and at some locations the community teacher to listen in on sessions, as they were delivered. There are many reasons for inviting non participants to attend sessions, but the desire to also share learning opportunity with siblings and friends sums up the reason for the high spillover. Although this relationship was not directly explored at the data collection phase, the feedback from the community widely suggest that communities were not necessarily sensitised about the experimental set up of the programme, and as such there was no education on why other children could not join teaching sessions.