



REPORT

RESEARCH TITLE:

“Increasing Access to Quality Education for Rural and Marginalised Children in West Africa - Tracer study to assess the current level and situation of Accelerated Education Programs (AEP) Graduates in Sierra Leone

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Background and context of the study

Over the last decade, Accelerated Education Programs (AEPs) and girls' empowerment programmes have emerged as one of the key innovations for providing education to Out of School Children (OOSC) and addressing rural-urban disparities in education (AEWG, 2020). Studies have shown that rural areas are more affected compared to urban areas, with regards to education outcomes, late entry into school and dropout rates. There are more untrained teachers in rural schools, who need to be identified and supported through training and coaching to help improve the quality of teaching in these deprived areas. This tends to lead to low quality learning as was found in the results from a Performance Monitoring Test and National Education Assessments, which indicated that the majority of learners in the rural zones of the northern region of Ghana, leave primary 6 without having achieved reading proficiency. (Casely-Hayford et al., 2013). Demand for basic education in rural areas is comparatively low and children in rural areas are significantly less likely than those in urban areas to enroll in school, irrespective of the age category. This is said to have resulted in the existence and widening of the rural-urban gap in junior secondary school, as children in rural areas tend to go to school at an older age, increasing their chances of dropping out. (Akyeampong et al., 2007).

The goal of AEPs is therefore to provide learners with equivalent, certified competencies for basic education using effective teaching and learning approaches that match their level of cognitive maturity. These projects have the potential to address the numbers of out-of-school children, providing alternative education. They offer holistic forms of education which is flexible and age appropriate. AEPs offer access to education for out-of-school children, both for those who had dropped out of school or those who have never been to school, providing them with the opportunity to enter or re-enter the formal school system. However, knowledge about their effectiveness is limited.

The estimated population of OOSC in the three study countries (Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra Leone) is about 12,261,520 (UNESCO 2019). Comparatively, Nigeria has a higher proportion of OOSC, estimated at 10,500,000 (86% of the OOSC population across the three study countries). Ghana on the other hand has an estimated OOSC population of 1,041,777 (8% of OOSC population in the three study countries), while Sierra Leone's OOSC population is estimated at 719,750, which is about 6% of the population of OOSC in the three study countries (UNESCO 2019).

A comparative study of Accelerated Education Programs (AEPs) and girls focused programming models across the West African region including Ghana, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria was conducted in year 2 of the project. In year 3, the study conducted across the three countries investigated the cost-effectiveness of AEPs and the Political Economy Analysis to understand governments' uptake of AEPs. This year's study seeks to estimate the completion, retention and transition rates of AEP graduates and to follow up on what they are currently engaged in. A qualitative research approach was employed, using telephone interviews and face-to-face interviews to gather information from participants.

1.2 Purpose of the study

The purpose of this tracer study is to find out and to better understand the path that AEP beneficiaries, including those who went through the BRAC, Save the Children International and the MBSSE programmes, took, what they are currently doing and how they got to where they are now following their graduation from the AEP.

1.3 Research Objectives

The overall objective of the study is to assess the current level and situation of AEP graduates prelisted in 2022, who had been previous beneficiaries of the BRAC, Save the Children, and MBSSE models. The study therefore seeks to track and understand the life trajectories of these beneficiaries, following graduation from the AEP.

1.4 Research Questions

The overarching question is what happened to the AEP beneficiaries following their graduation from the program, their life trajectories and the contributing factors to the path they chose or find themselves in, including an estimation of the completion, transition and retention rates amongst them.

The questions and sub-questions that the study aims to answer include:

1. What are the life trajectories of the AEP graduates?
 - a. Did the AEP graduate complete their level of education as listed in 2022?
 - b. Is the graduate still in school or have they progressed unto something else?
 - c. What impeded or helped the graduates to transition into the stage they are in currently?
 - d. How did gender norms and behaviour in the family help or impede their progress?
 - e. How has the knowledge and experience gained during the AEP helped or impeded them in getting to where they are now?
2. To what extent did inherent or external conditions within the community or environment help or impede the transition process?
 - a. What are the opportunities available for young people in the country as a whole and in the community specifically?
 - b. What are the challenges that young people face in the country in general and within the community in particular?
 - c. What kind of activities do most young people in the community engage in?
 - d. How have these conditions (opportunities and/or challenges influenced AEP graduates and the decisions they made to get to where they are currently?

1.5 Report Structure

Following this introductory chapter, the next section presents a description of the methodology and limitations of the study. The remainder of the report presents the findings, including the demographics and background of beneficiaries who are either still in school, in the world of work or have dropped out of school. Their life trajectories, including the completion and transition levels for those who are in school and the contributing factors to their current situation. This also includes their perspectives of the AEPs and their experiences and how these have influenced them and contributed to their current situation. The final section focuses on the conclusions and recommendations.

2.0 Research Design and Methodology

2.1 Study Design

In 2022, a prelisting database of learners classified as AEP beneficiaries who had enrolled in the programmes implemented by three target innovators, in Sierra Leone (BRAC, MBSSE, and Save the Children International) was created. Over a thousand beneficiaries were listed for the implementing partners across 3 districts – Pujehun, Kambia and Port Loko. A telephone interview was undertaken in 2024 to reach at least 10% of beneficiaries in the prelisting database for each implementing partner, to capture their demographic details, discuss current situation including influencing factors and their immediate goals.

A retrospective cohort study designed was employed, in which a cohort of individuals – in this case learners who had graduated from the AEP were identified and their current situation observed. The focus was on individuals who had been exposed to the accelerated education programme, had graduated, after which had taken different pathways. This study employed mixed qualitative techniques to achieve its objective and to answer the research questions. Face-to-face interviews were also conducted with a sample of the AEP beneficiaries from the Ministry of Basic and Secondary School Education (MBSSE) and the 2 education innovators – Save the Children International and BRAC, which used different AEP models and approach. The face-to-face interviews were also conducted with selected stakeholders, in the form of in-depth interviews.

2.2 Sampling Framework

The prelisting database included over a thousand (1380) AEP beneficiaries in total from the 3 implementing partners – 106 beneficiaries from the MBSSE, 372 beneficiaries from Save the Children and 902 beneficiaries from BRAC. Using purposive sampling strategy, two hundred and forty (17.4%) were reached through telephone interview survey, in order to measure rates of completion, transition and retention over time. The main areas of focus were to establish the proportion of AEP graduates who completed the class level in 2022 at the time of prelisting, transitioned to another level, completed JSS or SSS levels, still in school, those who dropped out of the formal system and those in the world of work.

2.2.1 Telephone Interviews

The prelisting database included over a thousand (1380) AEP beneficiaries in total from the 3 implementing partners – 106 beneficiaries from the MBBSE, 372 beneficiaries from Save the Children and 902 beneficiaries from BRAC. Two hundred and forty (17.4%) were reached through the telephone interview survey, in order to measure rates of completion, transition and retention over time. Challenges in reaching some of the telephone numbers and the participants were encountered during this process. An attempt was made to overcome these challenges by trying as many of the phone numbers acquired during the prelisting to get the target number of participants.

2.2.2 Field Engagement

A follow up study was conducted with a selection of the beneficiaries interviewed by telephone to allow for face to face interviews to delve deeper into the findings from the telephone interviews. The field engagement targeted 15% of the total number of beneficiaries reached through the telephone interviews. Table 1 provides the breakdown of the coverage achieved for the telephone interview survey and for the follow up at field level. The follow up sample included 8 beneficiaries from MBSSE, and 14 beneficiaries each from Save the Children International and BRAC, giving a total of 36 beneficiaries from across the 3 innovators.

Table 1: Sample of Beneficiaries

IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS	PRE-LISTING (Total) (a)	Telephone Interviews (Total) (b)	Telephone Interview Coverage (%) (c) (b/a x100)	Sample for follow up at Field Level (d) (15/100x b)	Coverage (%) (e) d/bx100
MBSSE	106	59	55.7	8	13.6
SCI	372	90	24.2	14	15.6
BRAC	902	91	10.1	14	15.4
Total	1380	240	17.4	36	15

Table 2 provides breakdown of the 36 beneficiaries targeted for In -Depth Interviews, focus group discussions. A few of the target audiences were identified to conduct a more in-depth discussion with, to be able to build some case studies on specific individuals. The target participants for these case studies are also shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Sample Size Face-to-Face Interviews (36 beneficiaries)

Categories	Implementing Partners	Focus Group Discussions	In-Depth Interviews	Case Studies
AEP Beneficiaries	MBSSE	1 (5 participants)	8 (2 male and 6 female participants)	1 (female participant who dropped out of school)
	SCI	2 (4 participants each) – 1 FGD with females and 1 FGD with males	14 (8 females, 4 males and 2 drop outs)	2 (1 female and 1 male who dropped out of school)
	Brac	2 (4 participants each) – 1 FGD with females in Kambia and 1 FGD with females in Port Loko	14 (females)	2 females – 1 who is in the World of Work and 1 who is in formal school)

A total of 17 stakeholders were also selected to participate in the key informant interviews. These were distributed across the 3 innovators, ensuring that there is a representation from each innovator for the different categories. Stakeholders were engaged in order to get their views on the AEP, the beneficiaries and their chosen path following graduation and the broader context on the influencing factors within their respective communities and learning environment of the beneficiaries.

These took the form of key informant interviews (KIIs) with Innovator Leadership, AEP Facilitators, Head teachers/Teachers, Parents/Guardians, Social workers and Community Leaders - namely chiefs, women leaders and youth leaders.

Table 3: Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with Stakeholders (17 participants)

Implementing Partners	District	Category of Stakeholders				
		Innovator Leadership (1)	AEP Facilitator (1)	Social Worker (1)	Parent/Guardian (1)	Chief (1)
MBSSE		Innovator Leadership (1)	AEP Facilitator (1)	Social Worker (1)	Parent/Guardian (1)	Chief (1)
SCI	Pujehun	Innovator Leadership (1)	AEP Facilitator (1)	Teacher (1)	Parent/Guardian (1)	Women's Leader (1)
Brac	Kambia	-	AEP Facilitator (1)	Social Worker (1)	Parent/Guardian (1)	Youth Leader (1)
	Port Loko	Innovator Leadership (1)	-	Head Teacher (1)	Parent/Guardian (1)	
Total Interviews		3	3	4	4	3

2.3 Data Collection Instruments

Semi-structured interview guides were designed to capture relevant information under different thematic areas, including Life trajectories, Support systems, resources and challenges, Gender and Social Inclusion (GESI), Experiences before, during and after the AEPs and the larger context, focusing on external factors within the community or environment. These tools were used to conduct the focus group discussions and the in-depth interviews with beneficiaries and the key informant interviews with stakeholders.

The interview guides were designed for the following categories:

- AEP Beneficiaries in Formal/Vocational School
- AEP Beneficiaries in World of Work
- AEP Beneficiaries who dropped out of school
- Case Study guide for AEP Beneficiaries in Formal School System/World of Work/have Dropped Out
- Key Informant Interview (KII) Guide for Stakeholders

The research instruments were developed in collaboration with Associates for Change (AfC) and Centre for the Study of African Economies (CSAE) through initial discussions, after which each country team went on to further develop the guides to suit their respective country context. These instruments were then shared with experts in the Ghana and Nigeria teams for review. These were then modified and used during the training of enumerators and the guides were pre-tested among the team, allowing us to validate the guides for accuracy and flow of content. Further modifications were made on the instruments based on the feedback before employing them for data collection.

2.4 Data Collection Process

2.4.1 Enumeration Recruitment and Training

Experienced enumerators from Dalan’s database were recruited to undertake the fieldwork. The selection of data collectors was based on their data gathering experience, especially qualitative research and their proficiency in the languages in the communities included in this study. A total of eight data collectors were recruited, comprising of four males and four females.

A three-day training was held from 24th – 26th September 2024 at Dalan premises. Data collectors were trained on the research project, research questions, methodology and study design, the administration of the data collection tools, research ethics and data collection protocols, including safeguarding protocols on conducting research with children. Training on the data collection tools included a step by step discussion of the questions and role play among enumerators. The training was facilitated by Dalan Associates working on the project.

2.4.2 Data Collection

Data collection took place between October 2nd to October 11, 2024. The data collectors were grouped into 2 teams with one team covering the Pujehun in the South and the other team covering Kambia and Port Loko in the North.

2.4.3 Quality Assurance and Ethical Consideration

The Dalan team ensured high quality standards at all levels. The in-depth training of data collectors ensured that the questions and the nuances of the study were well understood. Significant efforts were made to avoid missing data by reframing the questions and doing further probing to elicit the right information. A WhatsApp group was created for the data collectors and the core Dalan team on the project, where all challenges encountered during fieldwork were reported, discussed and real time solutions provided. Another layer of quality assurance included debrief meetings, during which each field team organized daily debrief meetings to identify gaps and ensure these were addressed in the subsequent days’ work.

The Dalan team sought ethical clearance from the Ministry and an informed consent form was designed, explaining the purpose of the research and what it entails, which were either read to the participants or given to them to read and then sign if they are willing to be interviewed. The request for consent was also included in each research guide and participants were informed of the confidentiality and anonymity with which their responses will be treated. During each interview, participants were informed of their rights of voluntary participation and withdrawal at any time during the interview.

2.5 Data Analysis Procedure

All audio files were transcribed and handed over to the analysis team. Analysis was done by thematic area, to be able to answer the research questions set out in the research guides. Gender-based analysis was also included as one of the thematic areas. The team also ensured that responses from female participants in all the interviews were adequately represented across the analysis and reporting.

2.6 Study Limitations

The main limitations to the study is that the pre-listing was done in 2022 and since then some of the learners may have moved onto something else. Also during the pre-listing exercises, most of the learners gave the contact numbers of either their parents, guardians or teachers, making it sometimes difficult to track them. Therefore only beneficiaries who were reached through the telephone interviews were included in the sample frame for the face-to-face interviews. Also, the study is purposive, so the conclusions reached should be taken with some caution.

3.0 Findings

3.1 Demographic and background characteristics of respondents

Most of the beneficiaries interviewed that are still in school joined the AEP program in 2018 and the majority of them are now in the third year of Senior Secondary School (SSS3). They are mainly between 16 and 19 years and live with either their parents or a relative.

For those in the world of work, they joined the ELA program and most of them indicated that they spent between 3 to 5 years in the program and are currently in the 18 – 27 year age bracket. All of the participants in this category had dropped out of school, with some of them already married with children. Whilst a few of them are engaged in business, with one assisting her husband in the agriculture business, one of them indicated that though she started a business after completing the AEP, she had to stop due to lack of finance.

Participants from the MBSSE and SCI accelerated education programs indicated that they returned to school after graduating from the AEP. They however dropped out mainly due to lack of finance, with all of them dropping out at the junior secondary school level. Two female participants who graduated from the BRAC program stated that they enrolled in formal school after the program but had to drop out due to lack of support to sponsor their education. One of them indicated that she dropped out in JSS 3, whilst the other dropped out in SSS 2.

3.2 Life trajectories of AEP graduates

2.2.1 Formal school completion rates

Of the MBSSE beneficiaries reached by telephone, 72.4% had completed the class they were in during the prelisting in 2022 and 22.4% were still in the same level they were in during the prelisting. Only 5.2% of them reported that they had dropped out of school following the prelisting.

Those who graduated from the Save the children programme that were reached during the telephone interview, 81% were found to have completed the class they were in during the prelisting in 2022 and about 7.6% had dropped out of school.

2.2.2 Completion

The completion rates of AEP graduates from the MBSSE and Save the Children are presented in Table 4. This looks at those who successfully completed the class or level they were in when prelisted in 2022. Those who entered the formal school system in 2020, had a completion rate of 71%, which refers to graduates who were able to complete the level they were in during the prelisting, with only about 6.5% of them dropping out of the formal school system. Of those who enrolled in the formal school system in 2021, 74.1% were able to complete the class they were in when prelisted and the drop-out rate among them was lower at 3.7%.

Table 4: Completion rate of MBSSE Beneficiaries

Year Enrolled	Completed the level they were in	Same level	Dropped out
2020	71.0%	22.6%	6.5%
2021	74.1%	22.2%	3.7%
Total	72.4%	22.4%	5.2%
N=58	N=42	N=13	N=3

Overall, of the MBSSE beneficiaries reached, 72.4% had completed the class they were in during the prelisting in 2022 and 22.4% were still in the same level they were in during the prelisting. 5.2% reported that they had dropped out of school following the prelisting.

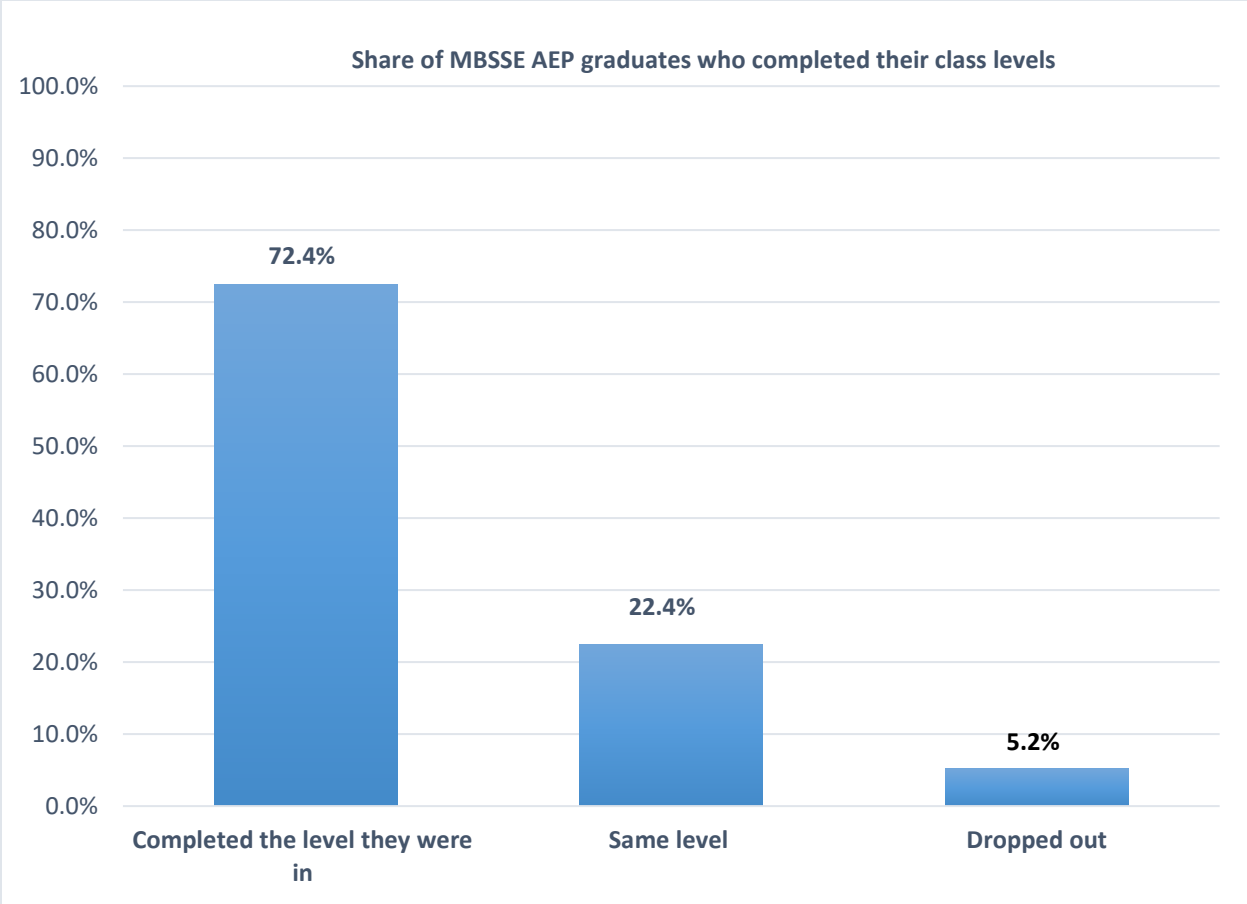


Figure 1: Share of the AEP graduates from the MBSSE Programme who completed the class levels they were in during prelisting

Table 5 presents the findings for the AEP graduates who had gone through the Save the Children program. The completion rate for AEP graduates ranged from 75% for those who enrolled in formal schooling in 2016 to 100% for those who enrolled in the formal school system in 2020. There were no dropouts among the graduates who enrolled in formal schooling in 2018, 2019 and 2020.

Table 5: Completion rate of Save the Children Beneficiaries

Year Enrolled	Completed the level they were in	Same level	Moved back a level	Dropped out
2016	75.0%	11.1%	2.8%	11.1%
2017	85.0%	5.0%	0.0%	10.0%
2018	92.9%	0.0%	7.1%	0.0%
2019	71.4%	14.3%	14.3%	0.0%
2020	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Total	81.0%	7.6%	3.8%	7.6%
N=79	N=64	N=6	N=3	N=6

In total, 81% of all AEP graduates from the Save the children programme that were reached, were found to have completed the class they were in during the prelisting in 2022. Of those who did not complete the level, 7.6% remained in the same class, while 3.8% seemed to have moved back a level from the one they were in during the prelisting. The remaining 7.6% of those interviewed reported that they had dropped out of school.

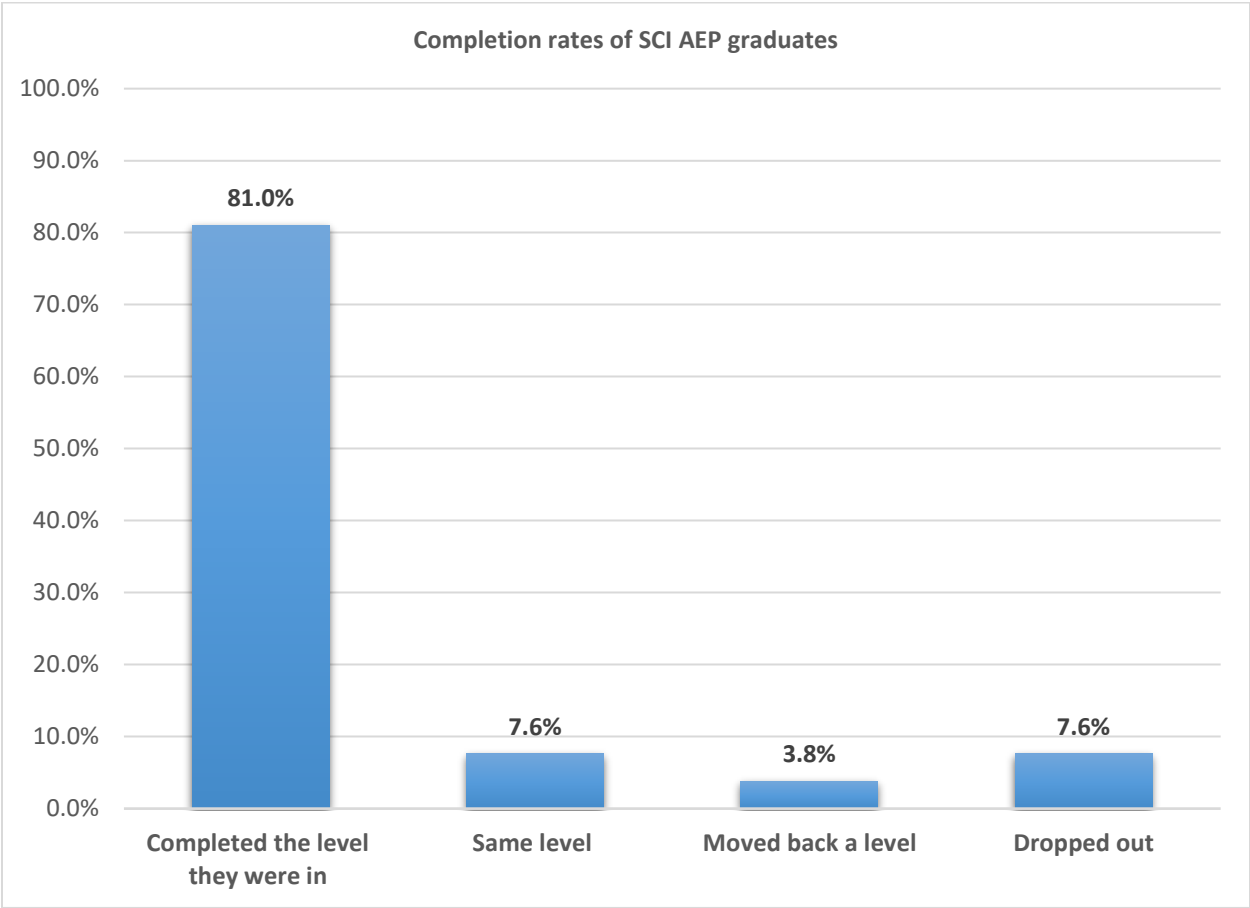


Figure 2: Share of the AEP graduates from the SCI Programme who completed the class levels they were in during prelisting

Though the BRAC model intended for graduates to proceed to the ‘world of work’, almost half of those interviewed chose the path of formal schooling with some in the JSS level and others in the SSS level.

3 Current situation of AEP graduates

3.1 In school AEP Graduates

Information from the field showed that AEP beneficiaries are either in school, are self-employed or are engaged in domestic work. Beneficiaries who are still in school are more likely to be living with relatives, whereas a few of those in the world of work live with their spouses.

Whilst at home, beneficiaries provide support in many ways to their family, whether in school or in the world of work.

The AEP graduates who pursued education are at various stages of the educational ladder. Students have persevered in spite of the challenges. Some had a straightforward route whereas others had to truncate their studies, but have returned to school.

*“I had stopped attending school previously, but joined the program that came which has been a great help for me and now I am in SSS3 and I will eventually write the senior certificate examinations.”
(Student currently in formal school, Kambia).*

It takes a lot of resilience for students to get an education; students speak of the challenges they have to go through. These include trekking long distances because of the lack of SSS schools in their immediate vicinities.

Despite some of these challenges, many AEP graduates have decided to stay in school, highlighting various reasons and their motivations for doing so. For many of them, it is the expectation of a brighter future from where they currently find themselves, whereas for some there are push factors such as expectations from their families and the fact that their peers have attained higher education. In some cases, they demonstrate their determination by strategizing to get around the obstacles in order to have an education.

“The way I survive in my environment is, during daybreak, I will take care of my child and then go to school. After school, I will go home and sell, in order to have something to eat. It is from the money I earn that I am able to buy my school materials.” (Female in formal school, Kambia).

3.2 AEP graduates in the World of Work

Among the former AEP beneficiaries who were interviewed for the study, one had proceeded beyond the secondary school, had attained a higher national diploma in human resource and is an assistant teacher.

Among those who chose the world of work path, some are engaged in agricultural production, trade in agricultural products or engage in both agriculture and trading. Respondents engage in subsistence agriculture and sell part of their produce for their daily sustenance. There are some who engage in small-scale manufacturing for their sustenance. These include processing of agricultural produce as well as making items, such as stoves for household use.

Some of these respondents who graduated from the AEP program and moved to the world of work, shared what they are currently engaged in. One of the participants in a focus group discussion stated:

“I plant pepper. It is the pepper that I harvest and sell in the market. After selling at the market, I will use the money to buy food items for us to prepare food at home. That is what we do for our survival.” (FGD with AEP graduates in the world of work, Kambia).

“I make local stoves. I buy the empty plates at Waterloo and the clay here in Bolimaya. So, when I have finished building up the stove, I now put them for sale. I locate a spot and display it. The local stove business is helping me out with my daily sustenance. For instance, I buy the plates at Le20 and the clay at Le5, which sum up to Le25 and sell the finished product for Le50, which gives me a profit of Le25 for each local stove. Therefore, I thank God.” (AEP beneficiary in the world of work, Port Loko).

3.3 Contributing factors to AEP graduates Current Situation

The study shows that all participants were faced with various factors that contributed to their current situation in one way or another. These include family factors, community or environmental factors, school factors and gender related factors. Participants also highlighted some of the support systems and the resources at their disposal and the ones they would like to have access to. These are discussed in the subsections below.

3.3.1 Family factors

Whilst some participants stated that they get the support they need or at least some support from their family members either in cash or kind, there are some who do not receive any support from family. Mostly this is due to poverty in the homes they come from, where heads of families have to make a choice on what to spend the meagre income they have.

Most of the participants state that they are experiencing challenges which affects their schooling and results in some of them dropping out of school. One participant mentioned that her family is poor and it is difficult for them to get a proper meal a day. She stated that sometimes she does not have lunch to take to school and when she has the opportunity to have lunch it will only be ‘garri’ or ‘cassava’. This disturbs her concentration in school.

The dynamics in the family also seem to be a contributing factor to the challenges young people face, especially females in focusing on school. Most of them have to do household chores in the morning before going to school and this often makes them go to school late and miss some classes or sometimes not able to even go to school at all. This seems to be a factor affecting females irrespective of the district or what they are engaged in. Similar sentiments are shared by a female who chose the path of ‘world of work’, as she had to drop out of school due to the challenges faced at home.

“I was doing everything at home. Whatsoever they wanted done, I was going to be called upon to do it. So that affected me a lot. Sometimes I am so tired and they still call me to go fetch water, clean clothes and sweep around the house and I will not be able to study at home and I normally go to school late. That is another reason why I dropped out of school.” (Female in the World of Work, Kambia).

For some, the pressures from family issues prove to be a challenge for them, as one participant mentioned that she is often ‘burdened’ with family issues and complaints when she is at school which tends to disturb her concentration.

Whilst for others, it is traditions and practices followed by family members that resulted in them getting to where they are at the moment. A young female stated that she could not continue her education as she was forced to undergo female genital mutilation during school time.

“I started going to school but my father’s elder brother later removed me from school to join society since then I did not continue my education.” (Female in the World of Work, Kambia).

3.3.2 Community/Environmental factors

Participants often live in small communities, where everyone knows each other and tend to be involved in each other’s affairs in one way or another. This to a large extent has influenced how families behave towards their children and how they react to certain situations.

Taking the girl child from school to enter into early marriage and taking them for female circumcision is something that is very common within the communities of the participants. According to most of the beneficiaries interviewed, women and girls are often left out of programs implemented in their communities as they feel that their role is at home.

The male participants also claim that they face challenges within their communities which affect their school work. Sometimes they are withdrawn out of school to carry out tasks assigned to them by the community. A male student in Pujehun mentioned that:

“This has affected my choice and progress made so far because community people will come to the school and say we need boys to go to the farm or we need boys to help fetch water.” (Male in Formal School, JSS1, Pujehun).

Those living with a disability are said to face an additional burden in some of the communities under study. They are said to be less considered compared to those living without a disability in the community. One of the participants stated:

“They treat them like out-cast, no care and no concern. The community people always refer to them as ‘devilish children and they cannot live where humans are living’.” (Male in Formal School, JSS1, Pujehun).

Another factor that serves as a hindrance to young people in terms of getting education is the lack of jobs in their communities. They claim that the only jobs available are in farming or fishing, which does not give those in school much motivation. They also see many young men going into drugs and armed robbery, whilst women go into prostitution due to the lack of job opportunities in their communities. They stated that job opportunities are mostly in the District Headquarter Towns and that one will have to migrate to get better opportunities which is not very common in their communities.

Despite these challenges, there are some positive changes in some communities. According to the female facilitator in Pujehun under the Save the Children program, members of the community in which she worked are becoming more aware of the value of education and gave their support during the AEP.

Some even took it upon themselves to go around to encourage the children to attend the AEP and also talk to their parents to allow them to attend classes.

“Everyone in this community is aware of the value of education and the chiefs and elders are ensuring that all girls and boys are sent to school. We have children who have taken the WASSCE and intending to go to University and most of them have taken the BECE awaiting result.” (Female Facilitator, Save the Children AEP, Pujehun).

3.3.3 School factors

In general, participants expressed that the school environment and the learning methods played a major role in motivating them to stay in school. They stated that their learning environment is 'clean and tidy' and that the teachers teach well and prepare students to pass national examinations. They also commended the water facility in the school, stating that drinking water is available and that the toilets have running water. Some schools also cater for scholarship for their students, which help them to continue their education.

Some however complain of the distance to the school and how this affects them especially since they do not take lunch to school. The district learning officer in Kambia mentioned the poor road network as a negative factor making it difficult for learners to get to their schools. He stated:

"The poor road network system is a challenge affecting the distance to schools." (Male, DLO, Kambia).

Some of the participants reported that the school they attend is still under construction, making it small and tight which is very inconvenient. They stated that in most of the schools in their communities, they do not have enough chairs and they have to get to school early if they want to secure a seat and preferably a front seat. Teachers are also not very regular in school as most of them claim that they are not being paid.

According to one of the innovators implementing AEP in Pujehun, they express that there is still a lot to be done if children living with disabilities are to have the opportunity to be educated. He stated that the schools lack the appropriate facilities and learning equipment to cater for children with disabilities.

"Most of the academic support do not capture children with disabilities. This is one of the issues we are having, because their needs cannot be met. They need certain educational tools and expertise, so learning will be made easier for them, which is lacking. In the rural settings like Pujehun and other districts, there are no success stories of persons with disabilities who have acquired education to a certain level." (Male Representative, Innovator, Save the Children, Pujehun).

3.3.4 Gender related factors

There exist practices within families and communities that are discriminatory and gender biased. The study shows that there are prescribed roles and responsibilities tagged to the different sexes and this the participants claim have affected them in their pursuit for a better future. Whilst in most instances women are at a disadvantage, there are cases where men also feel the brunt of these biased practices.

Boys are often given priority in terms of education within families and even among members of communities, this seems to be endorsed as the general notion is that boys are more serious and should therefore be educated. Girls are perceived as not very serious. This has had negative repercussions as one participant describes her experience:

"They said the boys are serious, let them go to school and learn and the girls are not, so let them sit at home without learning; this has affected me because these were some of the things that led me to become pregnant which forced me to drop out of school." (20 year old female in the World of Work, Port Loko).

The belief is that boys have to take care of their families, whereas girls will grow up, get married and have their husbands take care of them. This has influenced the way male and female children are trained in the home and has often resulted in parents forcing their daughters into early marriage. This demonstrates not only the beliefs some families have when it comes to female members, but also reflects those of the community members as well. This makes girls feel inferior and less valued in comparison to their male counterparts. This affects their self-confidence and the way they approach things, as one participant stated:

“This perception has weakened most of us the girls to further our education. It appears as if we the girls are not relevant in society. That is why they put more premium on boys’ education.” (Female who have dropped out of school, Kambia).

Girls still continue to face challenges, which many claimed have contributed to their current situation. According to the innovator in Pujehun, girls miss out in school because of the prescribed roles society has laid down for them. They are required to do house chores and cook meals before and after school, making it difficult for them to study and maintain a focus on their education.

A social worker interviewed further went on to narrate that girls are under a lot of pressure from the opposite sex and this sometimes lead them to compromising or dropping out of school. The distance to schools faced with their economic situations, make them rely on bike riders for transportation, which exposes them to some of these issues. He further mentioned that girls even face these challenges with their teachers in school, who harass them for a relationship. This the girls claim put them in a difficult situation that sometimes they may decide to drop out of school to avoid such situations.

Despite these glaring gender specific biases, there seems to be a growing awareness of the importance of education for the girl-child and in some communities, families and community members are starting to change their attitudes towards girls. Some parents maintain that they encourage the girls who are willing and ready to learn. The study found that in some communities, they ensure that the girl-child is supported to get a scholarship to pursue their education. Among those who stay in school and are excelling, they expressed that they are often faced with criticisms for getting good grades, with the boys often insinuating that they are having an affair with the male teachers.

3.3.5 Support system and access to resources

Interviews with the participants reveal that for most of them, their family is their main support system. This assistance mainly comes in the form of educational items, food and other material things. Some also stated that they do also receive support from others who are not family. Some on the other hand stated that they have no support system and therefore rely on finding money for themselves to go through school or for their daily needs.

Participants who are in school and even those who have dropped out, emphasized that there is the need to make scholarships available to students who are ready to learn. This extra support is needed for them to take extra classes and buy their school materials. For those in the world of work, engaged in businesses, they stated that lack of finance is a major hindrance for them to expand their business and that they would appreciate such support.

For the young girls, they expressed the need to be supported with sanitary pads as this is one of the challenges they face that prevents them from going to school or feeling inconvenient when they are in school. One of the parents that participated in the study supported this, stating that:

“Most of these girls also need support in the area of sanitation including sanitary pads, because these are expensive packages.” (Single Parent, Female, Kambia).

Those living with disabilities require schools that provide them with the right facilities and the conducive environment. They need support to get crutches and wheelchairs for those not walking, hearing aids for those not hearing and glasses for those with eye issues.

In Port Loko, the lack of schools is reported to be one of the major challenges. Most participants therefore expressed the need for government to build more schools. Though there are vocational schools where those who do not want to go through formal schooling can go, these are limited.

Despite the lack of jobs for young people in the community, most of them tend to stay and only a few migrate to seek better opportunities.

“Only few have left the community and gone to Freetown and Bo, but most of them are in this community with us. Some are married and some are working in their farms.” (Male who has dropped out of school, Pujehun).

3.3.6 The Influence of Accelerated Education Programme on Life Trajectories

3.3.6.1 Perspectives About the AEP

Respondents have positive perceptions about the AEP programme, including changing negative perceptions about pregnant girls and providing skills and knowledge in hygiene to young girls. Furthermore, the AEP programme ensured that community members took part in their activities. Beneficiary communities were sensitized against early marriage and other traditions that negatively affect girls in particular and this seems to have made a difference. Respondents indicated that they have seen a drop in the number of early marriages as one of the participants stated:

“Before the AEP, there were children in this community that were below 18 years, for instance, 15 years or 14 years who were married. Since this program came into this community, all that has changed, now there is not much underage or early marriage in this community.” (Student in formal school, Kambia).

Female beneficiaries were appreciative of the lessons they learnt in personal hygiene and the supplies they received. Participants mentioned that they were supplied with sanitary pads and this helped them to better take care of themselves properly.

Most of the communities participated actively during the AEP. They gave their support in different ways demonstrating their willingness to educate their children. The beneficiaries and the community members in Kambia and Port Loko expressed their appreciation of the AEP, though their expectations were slightly different. They hoped that the AEP program will train all the children who are out of school to be able to return to school rather than just giving them skills, which mainly lead to the world of work.

3.3.6.2 Experiences during AEP

AEP beneficiaries report of very positive experiences during their studies in the AEP. They speak of the play based method of teaching, and the support that they received from the programme. They also speak of challenges they faced during their time on the programme.

Beneficiaries stated that the programme gave them hope for the future, giving them something to look forward to. Many of them stated that they were not literate when they joined the AEP but after the time spent in the program, they were able to read and write well. Some mentioned that the fact that they were allowed to speak in their native languages, built their confidence and they were able to participate fully in class.

Beneficiaries received counselling and encouragement from their mentors including counselling on relationships, hygiene and how to comport themselves in the community. They expressed that the encouragement they received from their mentors went a long way in helping them stay focused on their education and steering them towards the path they chose.

In addition to menstrual hygiene, those 18 years and older received guidance on family planning and prevention mechanisms. Through the programme, they were able to understand the need to not rush into sexual relationships and this may result in outcomes that may deter their plans.

“One major encouragement I got was the fact that I should not drop out, no matter the circumstances and motivated me to work hard. We girls are very vulnerable to men. These are all things I learned. Sometimes I was losing hope because I did not have a helper. Even those who had dropped out earlier were encouraged to enrol and learn something.” (Student in Formal School, Kambia).

As with every other programme, beneficiaries were faced with challenges. These include timing of the classes, going to school without lunch and the fact that some children had to walk long distances in order to access learning centers. One of the AEP beneficiaries who is currently in school stated that despite her positive experiences during the AEP, the schedule for classes was her main challenge. She maintained that she had to go for classes in the afternoon and she was often tired from all the housework she does in the mornings.

According to the mentors, one of the main challenges they noticed was that the children come to school hungry and without lunch and this was a hindrance for them in delivering the lessons.

“The only problem is when we are teaching them they are complaining that they are hungry and that they want to go home. But they usually make provision to serve them with biscuit. But a colleague of mine just wish they could make provision for food.” (Mentor, Kambia).

3.3.6.3 AEP contribution to current situation

Beneficiaries speak of the way AEP has changed their lives by giving them a second chance at education. For some of the participants, the AEP saved them from being pushed into early marriage. One of the participants shared how she was able to enter into formal school after graduating from the AEP program. However, she had to drop out due to lack of finance and went into the world of work.

“AEP educational program was the best thing that happened to Pujehun District. I will never forget AEP for the support because by now I would have married and given birth to children.”(Student in formal school, Pujehun).

A female who is currently in formal school, stated how she was initially doing farm work and enrolled in school only when the AEP came. She was able to succeed in the programme and decided to proceed with formal education. She plans to continue and pursue a tertiary education. An AEP beneficiary who is currently in the world of work and teaching, explained how the AEP mentored and shaped her into becoming what she is today. She was able to go through her education and earn a diploma which has enabled her to get a teaching position. She stated:

“I am a teacher at the Da-re-Salam community junior secondary school. I am 24years old. I have attained my higher national diploma in human resource. Ella programme helped me attain this level. We had a mentor who always advised and counseled us about the relevance of education. They advised us that we should abstain from early marriage and teenage pregnancy and mentioned the challenges teenage mothers go through. With such advice I was determined to pursue my education. The only thing my family provides for me is the finance, but Ella provided me with the mentorship needed to become successful in life.” (Female in the world of work, Kambia).

The stakeholders in a community in Pujehun, shared what they think of the AEP and how it has shaped and transformed their children positively. They expressed how proud they are of them and what they have achieved as a result of going through the AEP. They indicated that the program have boosted their confidence and that they can now talk in public and express themselves in English.

The AEP has created a lasting impression on beneficiaries and their communities and they are happy to recommend the programme to other people who have dropped out of school. A former beneficiary however cautioned potential beneficiaries of the programme, to understand what they program is about and what it offers so as to manage their expectations. She also stated that she would advise them to exercise patience when they enter the program.

3.4 Future plans and prospects

In most cases, the AEP beneficiaries who have stayed in school, aspire to continue their education to the tertiary level and acquire a professional certificate or degree. The professions are varied including law, the military and medicine. The reasons for which they chose such professions include providing service to the country and supporting their families and communities.

“I hope to complete studies, get a good senior secondary school certificate result. After that I would like to enrol in university to pursue my degree, graduate and get a job. My parents are going through lots of constraints. They are suffering too much to take care of my needs. Their only livelihood and source of income is the farming activities they are engaged in.” (Student in formal school, Kambia).

AEP beneficiaries in the world of work dropped out of school at different stages such as primary, JSS and SSS. In many cases the reasons for which they dropped out of school even after completing AEP and transitioning to formal school is lack of funds.

Whereas those students who continued their education have a clear direct path and know where they are heading to, for those who entered the world of work, the path is not so clear. In most cases, beneficiaries who are in the world of work see education as the only thing that can give them a prosperous future and so in spite of the fact that they might be engaged in businesses which when properly managed can give them a good future, the desire to further their education still persists.

Some of the respondents do not seem so positive about their future. They feel that they are bound to continue struggling as long as they do not have a good education. One of the participants expressed that this becomes more of a challenge for a girl child, stating:

“I do not see a bright future for myself because I am not fortunate enough to continue going to school and if a girl child does not go to school it is difficult for her to become a successful person and I am not feeling good about that.” (Female participant in the world of work, Kambia).

4 Conclusions and Recommendations

4.3 Conclusions

Retention, Transition and Completion

The majority of the AEP graduates interviewed across the programmes implemented by the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education and the innovators, were successful in moving from the class they were in during prelisting and in staying in the formal school system.

Though a few of the AEP graduates remained in the same level, a larger proportion were able to complete the class they were in when prelisted.

The transition rates showed that graduates were successful in the junior secondary school (JSS) exams and were able to move to the senior secondary school (SSS) level.

Retention rate in the formal school system was high among the AEP beneficiaries interviewed across all three programmes, with over 90% of beneficiaries interviewed still in school.

Dropout rate from the formal school system among those interviewed was under 8%.

Though the BRAC model intended for graduates to proceed to the ‘world of work’, almost half of those interviewed chose the path of formal schooling and all of them have been retained; whilst some are in the JSS level, others are in the SSS level, and one has completed tertiary education and is a teacher.

Life trajectories of AEP graduates

The study found that most of the AEP beneficiaries chose the path of formal schooling after graduation, with most of them still in school. Some of them chose the world of work and are either self-employed or

engaged in domestic work. A few who started formal schooling after graduating have had to drop out mainly due to lack of finance or sponsorship.

Those who pursued their education are currently at various levels with some at the junior secondary school level, others at the senior secondary school level and a few who have achieved a tertiary education. Whilst some were able to go through their education without any breaks, there were those who had to stop and later return due to several challenges. One of the main challenges they faced included having to walk long distances to get to school as there are no senior secondary schools within their immediate vicinity.

The expectation and hope for a brighter future inspired many to stay in school and pursue an education despite the challenges. Some were motivated by their peers who had attained higher education, whilst for some it is the expectation from their families. Students aspiring to further their education express interest in professions such as law, medicine and the military.

Among the AEP graduates who were trained in BRAC's Empowerment and Livelihood for Adolescent program (ELA), one chose the path of formal school and was able to earn a tertiary diploma. She is currently working as a teacher. Others mainly find themselves in agricultural production, trading in agricultural produce and engaging in small-scale manufacturing of items for household use. However, many beneficiaries currently in the world of work, express interest in continuing their education as they see it as the best option for a prosperous future.

Influencing/contributing factors to their current situation

The study shows that participants were faced with various factors that contributed to their current situation. These include family factors, community or environmental factors, school factors and gender related factors.

Most of the beneficiaries come from poor background which limits the contribution of family members towards their education. Families in most instances have to make a choice with the limited resources they have. As a result, those who go to school cannot afford to take lunch to school and this affects their studies as they are not able to concentrate.

Family dynamics also contribute to the challenges young females face in focusing on school. Most of them have to do household chores in the morning before going to school and this often makes them go to school late or sometimes not able to go to school at all. Some of the beneficiaries also stated that they are often burdened with family issues which tend to interfere with their school work.

Community and environmental factors also influence how families behave towards their children. Sometimes family members take the girl children from school to initiate them into secret societies or to enter into early marriage, mostly succumbing to community pressures. Male beneficiaries also get pulled out of school to carry out various tasks in the farm or tasks assigned to them by the community. Those living with a disability often face an additional burden as they are looked down upon in the communities and excluded from most activities.

The lack of jobs within communities is also a demotivation for AEP graduates to pursue their education as most of the jobs available are either in farming or fishing.

Despite these challenges, communities are becoming more aware of the value of education and demonstrated this by giving their support during the AEPs.

In general, the school environment, the water facility and the learning methods played a major role in motivating them to stay in school. Some however complain of the long distance they have to walk to get to school, the lack of adequate space and the irregularity of the teachers were some of the challenges they faced in school. The schools lack the appropriate facilities and learning equipment to cater for children with disabilities making it difficult for them to be a part of the formal school system.

The study found that there are prescribed roles and responsibilities tagged to the different sexes and though women are mostly at a disadvantage, there are cases where men also feel the brunt of these biased practices. Boys are often given priority in terms of education within families and even among members of communities. The belief is that boys have to take care of their families, whereas girls will grow up, get married and have their husbands take care of them. Girls are also under a lot of pressure from the opposite sex and this leads to them compromising or dropping out of school. Females performing well in school are often labelled as having an affair with the male teacher, receiving no credit for their hard work. Despite these glaring gender specific biases, there seems to be a growing awareness of the importance of education for the girl-child.

The positive role of the AEP

Respondents expressed their appreciation of the AEPs, commending the positive changes they have brought to their communities, including changing the perceptions about girls who are pregnant whilst in school, bringing community members together and sensitizing them on the negative effects of early marriage and other traditional practices. The AEPs seem to have saved many of the female beneficiaries from being pushed into early marriage, exposing them to opportunities through which they can empower themselves.

4.4 Recommendations

Government/Policy makers

There is a need for government to build more schools in communities in the outskirts of the district headquarters. Focus can be more on secondary schools which participants claim to be very limited and far.

There is also the need to prioritise the building and funding of vocational schools that can cater to various skilled trades or artisan jobs.

Ensure schools are provided with the appropriate teaching aids and the conducive environment to cater for learners living with a disability.

Ensure that sanitary facilities in the school cater for the needs of female learners, to allow them some amount of privacy, to make them more comfortable at school.

Making scholarships available to assist learners, especially female learners who want to pursue their education.

Job creation in communities to provide an incentive for learners to pursue formal education, especially as many do not seem to want to migrate outside of their communities.

Education Innovators

The need to ensure that all accelerated education programs have a component on skill training, giving AEP graduates the option to pursue either formal education or enter the world of work. Additionally, the skill training will enable beneficiaries to support themselves in formal school and prevent the situation where they drop out of school because of lack of finance.

Work with micro-finance institutions to be able to provide start-up capitals for AEP beneficiaries choosing to go into the world of work and engage in business.

Community/Stakeholders

Community members and stakeholders in communities should continue to advocate for parents to send their girl child to school and sensitize them on the need to allow female learners time to study and prioritise their school work.

The need to secure funds to support female learners with personal hygiene items including sanitary pads.

They need to lobby to get support to provide crutches and wheelchairs, hearing aids, glasses or any other aiding-device for learners living with a disability.

Community members need to own AEPs such that they are able to support AEPs to thrive even in the absence of implementing partners. This way, the programs will run continuously to ensure that all OOSC have the chance to enroll.