Understanding and Classifying Parent Engagement: Insights from Côte d'Ivoire

Abstract

Interest in remote learning and the use of educational technology increased dramatically in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, but a key theme across a wide range of interventions has been the importance of parent engagement. Whether it was SMS or television or radio, education programming during school closures was often dependent upon parents and other caregivers to facilitate children's educational experience. Moving forward, many education systems are interested in improving parent engagement, but it will be important to learn from parent's perspectives and experiences over the past couple years. This study uses quantitative and qualitative surveys with parents and other caregivers in Côte d'Ivoire to investigate how parents' engagement with their children's education during the period of school closures can help inform future policy and intervention. The study also reflects on how parent engagement interventions can be classified and understood and whether existing classifications reflect parents' perspectives. Findings related to "house teachers" and parents' understanding of the learning process suggest how varying levels and types of parent engagement might drive educational inequality in Côte d'Ivoire.

Exploring Distance Learning Options:

Insights from Qualitative Research in Côte d'Ivoire

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Introduction

Around the world, more than 1.5 billion students have been affected by school and university closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic.[i] Efforts to advance distance learning have increased exponentially in response. Investigating these initiatives and how they have been received by children, caregivers, and communities can help inform the return to school and efforts to mitigate the effects of the closures.

In June and October 2020, IPA conducted two quantitative surveys in Côte d'Ivoire as part of its RECOVR initiative, both of which included a section focused on education. In addition, IPA conducted a qualitative survey in December 2020 focused exclusively on educational issues. This brief summarizes key insights from this qualitative survey but draws in results and findings from the two quantitative surveys as well.

Key Findings from RECOVR Côte d'Ivoire Qualitative Survey

- **Parent or caregiver involvement is critical to distance learning and likely a key driver of educational inequality.** Almost all parents and caregivers felt that children and especially young children needed support and supervision in order to meaningfully engage with distance learning. Caregivers with higher socioeconomic status are likely able to provide more and better support for children's learning.

- **Adult supervision is important not just for children's learning, but their safety and security as well.** Several survey respondents reported that their biggest concern when schools were closed was children's safety and security. A key benefit of education and schooling is keeping children occupied, and accordingly safe and secure.

- **"House teachers" and private tutoring are also likely to drive educational inequality.** More than 20% of respondents reported that they engaged a "house teacher" to supervise and tutor children. The prevalence of house teachers and reinforcement courses in Côte d'Ivoire suggests that these practices might be further privileging those who can afford these services

- **Parents and other caregivers are open to the concept of educational media.** All respondents viewed radio and TV programs as educational, not just entertainment, but beliefs varied in relation to the type of content that would best support children's learning. Media was also seen to be an effective strategy for disseminating important information such as public health guidance.

- **Pacing of radio and television content might be too fast.** Of the respondents who reported that they meaningfully engaged with radio and television programs, many felt that the instruction was too fast, and it was hard for children to keep up.

- **Respondents expressed mixed views on whether services should continue.** Parents and other caregivers were split on the question as to whether distance learning initiatives should continue once schools have reopened. Approximately a third of respondents felt that these interventions were only necessary because schools were closed while the other two thirds believed they could still prove to be useful.

Background

Côte d'Ivoire instituted a number of measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, aiming to minimize the spread of the virus while also sustaining the economy. This included a nationwide curfew, border closures, and economic stimulus measures. In addition, educational institutions were closed for over two months from March 16 to May 25, 2020. A couple months later, following the Ivorian scholastic calendar, schools were again closed for the summer holiday (July and August, 2020). The 2020 scholastic year accordingly included multiple periods of school closures and subsequent reopenings.

In order to support children's learning during this time, the Ministry of Education and other actors worked to provide several different distance learning options. These were implemented at various points over the year, some during the pandemic-related closures and others during the summer holiday.

Schools in Côte d'Ivoire fully reopened in September 2020, but investigating the implementation of distance learning interventions and their reception by children, caregivers, and communities can be used to inform future decision making, specifically in relation to the continuance of these programs and services but also for education policy and practice more generally. Though the scope and scale of the disruption brought on by the pandemic has been unprecedented, lessons learned during this period can provide critical insight into improving education policy and practice moving forward.

First, in almost all contexts, school closures are a regular occurrence, whether due to summer holidays, protracted conflict, or events such as elections and natural disasters. Research has shown that learning loss during these periods can be a recurring challenge.[ii] Strategies for addressing this learning loss could be used as part of regular education programming. Second, recent school closures have drawn attention to the importance of caregivers in supporting their children's education. Even when schools are fully operational, children still spend the majority of their waking hours outside of school.[iii] Learning from this recent period of school closures will provide important insight for the future, advancing our understanding of the home-learning environment and how to better support children's learning outside of school

Sample and Methods

Through IPA's partnership with the Ministry of Employment and Social Protection in Côte d'Ivoire, IPA was able to access basic data from the Integrated Regional Survey on Employment and the Informal Sector (ERI-ESI 2017). These data were originally collected in order to investigate issues such as the national level of unemployment in Côte d'Ivoire and the scope of the informal sector, as well as attitudes and perceptions towards democracy and governance. The total ERI-ESI sample was generated using two-stage probabilistic sampling and included 12,912 Ivorian households.

For the quantitative RECOVR surveys, IPA used the ERI-ESI to generate a random subsample of 3,022 households, approximately third of which were located in Abidjan. With information on the address of the household, the name of the household member, and the household phone number, IPA conducted an initial phone survey in June, 2020 to investigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the various measures designed to respond to it. Out of 3,022 call attempts, IPA was able to reach and interview 1,329 respondents. In October, 2020, IPA conducted a second phone survey with the same subsample. Out of 1,287 call attempts, IPA was able to reach and interview 994 respondents a second time. Both of these phone surveys were standardized quantitative instruments covering a range of topics from health and COVID-19 mitigation to economic activity and food security. The survey instruments and data can be found on IPA's RECOVR website.

Both of Côte d'Ivoire's RECOVR surveys included questions on children's educational activity. Respondents were asked about the educational experience of the children in their household, the kinds

of educational activities they completed, and their assessment of those activities. In the second survey, several questions were explicitly focused on radio and television programs implemented by the government, specifically "Mon radio école avec Tonton Jojo" and "Mon ecole a la maison, Classes fermees, cahier ouverts."

To more deeply investigate experiences of distance learning, IPA conducted an additional qualitative survey focused explicitly on education. This survey was completed in December, 2020 and was also conducted over the phone, but used a semi-structured interview protocol rather than a standardized survey instrument. In order to develop a sample for this qualitative survey, IPA referenced the results of the second quantitative survey.

Figure 1. Between June and the start of this school year in September, which of the following tools were primary school-aged children in your household using to help continue their education?
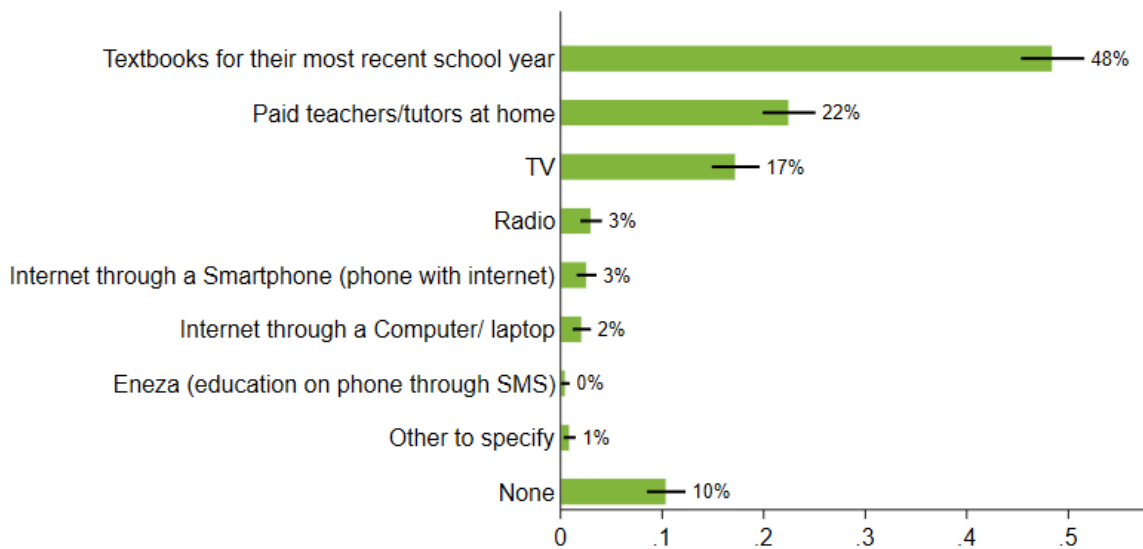

Figure 1 illustrates that reviewing textbooks was the most popular educational activity reported by respondents in the second quantitative survey, followed by paid tutors and television. In addition to asking what tools respondents used, the survey also asked for feedback on their experience, particularly with TV and radio.

The goal of the qualitative survey was to explore multiple different user experiences and to get feedback on the distance learning programs. For this reason, rather than using a representative sample, the qualitative sample was designed to capture a range of different experiences. Analysis of the responses to the second quantitative survey were used to define different user profiles, for example, a respondent that reported that children used their own school books to study or a respondent that said that they listened to the radio program but did not find it of any great interest. Within each user profile, respondents were randomly selected to be included in the qualitative survey.

Table 1. Generating Qualitative Survey Sample from Responses to Second RECOVR Survey

	Reported Educational Activities & Experience	No. Respondents
	No educational activities	3
	Tutoring external	2
	Household member tutoring	3
	Using books provided by school	2
	Using own schoolbooks	2
	Using household books	3
	Eneza	2
	Heard of but did not listen	2
	Listened but was not of any interest	2
Radio	Listened but was not of any great interest	1
	Listened and found engaging	2
	Listened and found highly engaging	4
	Heard of but did not watch	1
	Watched but not of any interest	3
TV	Watched but not of any great interest	4
	Watched and found engaging	2
	Watched and found highly engaging	1
	Total Respondents	39

Table 1. illustrates how the final qualitative sample was distributed across the different user profiles. Though respondents were originally defined and selected based upon their responses to the quantitative survey, in many cases, respondents were able to comment on multiple learning options. For example, though only two respondents were intentionally sampled for their responses about Eneza, ultimately 10 respondents in the qualitative sample had at least heard of Eneza and were able to discuss it.

All surveys were recorded, transcribed, and translated. A process of open-coding the transcriptions was used to identify key themes and organize the data. Themes were reviewed and analyzed in consultation with the team in Côte d'Ivoire, specifically for issues such as translation and interpretation. This brief focuses on some of the general insight listed at the beginning of the brief that applies to all forms of distance learning, and also provides some specific feedback on radio, television, and Eneza interventions.

Key Conclusions from Qualitative Interviews

An important starting point is considering the identity and relationships of the survey respondents. While in most cases respondents were the parents of young children and were able to comment on the educational experience of their own biological children, our sample also included older siblings, aunts, and uncles, etc. and many extended family networks. Households typically included more than a single nuclear family and the movement of children between different households seemed fairly common, both in relation to the COVID-19 measures and more generally. For example, a father described living with his daughter during the lockdown, but "when classes resumed, the girl went to her mother's house, which is in another district." Another father explained that certain children lived with him in town because "in our village there is no secondary school." In addition, several respondents described interacting with neighbors or those living around a "common yard."

Recognizing the diversity of family and household structures is important for understanding how children are supervised and supported. Supervision and support are critical for education, but also for safety and security. When asked "What worried you most during this period when the children were not going to school" one respondent answered by saying "My concern was the children who didn't go to school, we had to keep an eye on them so that they didn't go out to go anywhere."

A colloquial expression used by many respondents in Côte d'Ivoire was that children would go for "walks" – meaning that children were unsupervised by adults and potentially unable to be located. The following quotes illustrate this language and that educational activities are seen not just in relation to learning and children not falling behind in their schooling, but also for keeping children occupied, supervised, and secure.

> Respondent: The best way to educate your child is not to leave him with his friends for unnecessary walks and often play dangerous games. So when the house teachers occupy their time, we parents have more time to follow their study. It is a way to support the house teachers and to supervise the child at all times.

> Interviewer: What was most important to you when you saw the children studying?

> Respondent: Their security; they were always at home; they didn't go out for walks.

> Respondent: We needed to have someone to teach them to study at home when the children are not in school. I used to do that, but when I'm busy with other things, they go for walks.

Though attention to children's safety and security is always relevant, it was of heightened concern because of the pandemic. Caregivers were concerned about the lockdown restrictions and the spread of the virus. As one respondent answered when asked about children's activities during lockdown, "Well there wasn't too much activity because sincerely with the Covid, we were wary."

While these security concerns were mentioned by several respondents, nearly all respondents discussed the importance of supervision as it relates to education. In the first quantitative survey, a lack of supervision from adults in the household was identified as one of the reasons why children were not spending more time on education. "A lack of motivation" was cited as the most popular reason why children were not spending more time on education, but the issue of motivation might be related to supervision.

Figure 2. What are the main reasons children in your household are not spending more time on education during this time while schools are closed?
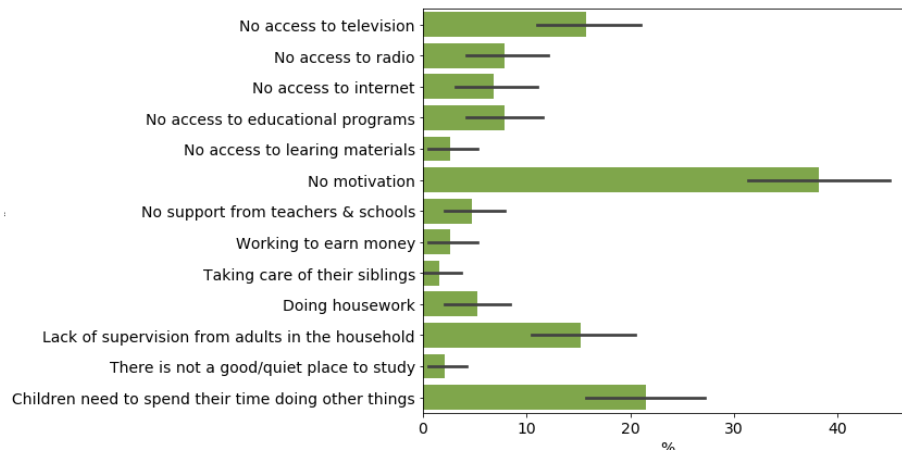
The issue of child motivation was elaborated in the qualitative surveys, where caregivers described that "when the children are at home and they don't study" and "the children, you know, the children once they get out of school, they come home, it's a total abandonment."

Respondents recognized that parents were critical to addressing the challenge of motivation. As one parent described "It must be said that the period of confinement was not easy: the children were no longer interested in studies, so if you don't follow them closely, they will forget everything; it's a parent's duty to follow their children. It all depends on the parents."

Parent or caregiver involvement is critical to distance learning and likely a key driver of inequality

The reliance on parents to manage children's education draws attention to key issues of equity. Some parents or caregivers are able to devote more time and resources to children's education. In addition, certain parents are able to reference their own education to support children, while others have less experience to rely on. The issue of adult supervision is accordingly not just whether an adult is present in the household, but also their ability to convey the importance of education to children, actively support their educational activities, and understand something of the learning process. Put another way, certain parents are better able to address children's motivation than others.

This is clearly illustrated when responses to the question, what are the main reasons children are not spending more time on education are disaggregated by poverty status. Nearly 20% more poor households identify "no motivation" as compared to non-poor households.

Figure 3. By Poverty Status: What are the main reasons children in your household are not spending more time on education during this time while schools are closed?
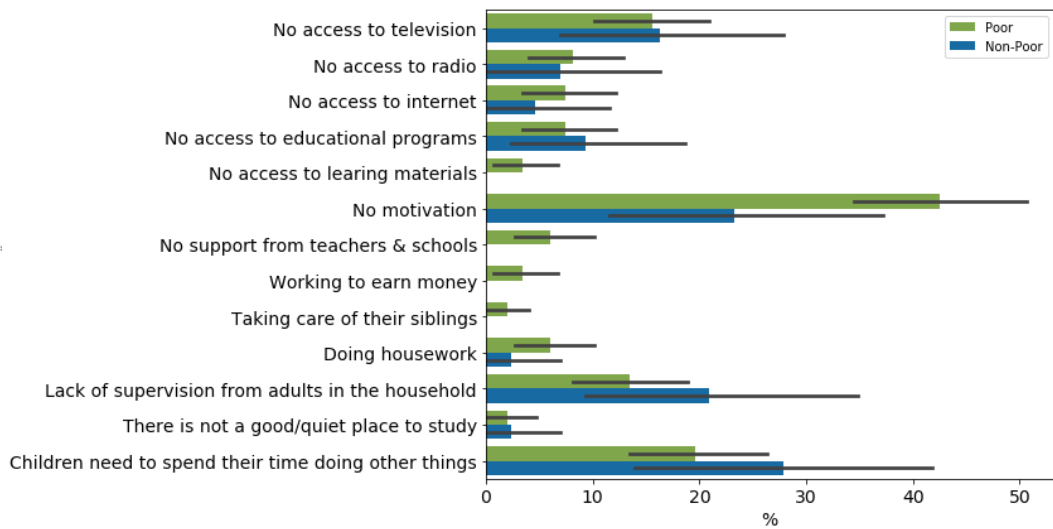
Not all parents expressed concern about their own educational experience. One parent described supporting his child's education in spite of his own limited education, and even seemed inspired by it, stating:

> I didn't have the means to engage a house teacher, so often if I'm at home, I tell him to study even if I cannot read. I sit next to him, he reads, and he starts memorizing so that he doesn't forget what they learned at school … We don't know what the future holds. My son I say to him "as long as I have money to pay for your studies you will go to school because I didn't attend school, you will.

But other parents described being limited or constrained by their own educational background saying "No, I can't read, so they [children] taught each other" and "As I don't have the required academic skills, I was unable to control their work, let alone teaching them anything." Other parents simply have limited time and energy to be able to supervise children and support their learning.

Children with parents and caregivers who have the time, resources, and educational experience to support children's learning, or to pay someone else to do so, will likely be able to gain more from distance learning activities. However, as illustrated by the illiterate parents who were very committed to and actively involved in their children's education, it is not simply that wealthier parents or more educated parents will better support children's education by default. There are many factors which influence parents and caregivers' knowledge, attitudes, and behavior towards their children's education and it is possible that some parents' hesitancy or insecurity could be addressed. Parents with limited educational experience can still play an active and supportive role in children's learning, especially addressing challenges such as child's motivation.

"House teachers" and a "shadow education" system are also likely to drive inequality.

Complementing the role of parents and other caregivers were private tutors, typically referred to as "house teachers" in Côte d'Ivoire. This practice ranged from paying a child's teacher from school for extra lessons, to engaging a freelancing teacher, to paying a relative with educational experience to tutor children. Some households paid for one-on-one tutoring, others had a teacher support the 5 or 6 children living in the same household, and in some cases, teachers were engaged to tutor multiple children in the neighborhood.

In the second quantitative survey, 22% of respondents reported using house teachers to support children's education, making it the second most popular educational activity during this period. A couple respondents mentioned that while they had previously engaged a house teacher, they stopped during the COVID period, either for financial or health concerns; a couple other respondents engaged a house teacher specifically because schools were closed, but the majority of respondents seemed to contract house teachers as a regular practice, independent from the pandemic. Multiple respondents also said that they wished they could afford to engage a house teacher.

> It's not good because when the children are at home and they don't study. They forget what they have learned. I don't have the (financial) means to engage a house teacher when I needed one for the children. It's embarrassing not to be able to afford a house teacher for our children.

Though they were not mentioned in relation to the school closures, as they likely were suspended as well, discussing education also brought up the issue of "reinforcement classes," in which children meet with teachers to review coursework and are often regularly scheduled. As one respondent noted, on Wednesday and Saturdays. These classes are used to supplement and further support children's official time in school and are privately financed. These different practices can be expected to seriously advantage more affluent children and children from more educated households.

Around the world, the term "shadow education" is used to refer to various forms of private, supplemental tutoring that in certain contexts can be prevalent enough to be considered a "shadow educational system."[iv] These practices are seen to be a key driver of educational inequality. While much of the research on shadow education has focused on Asian contexts, the extent of "house teachers" and "reinforcement courses" in Côte d'Ivoire suggests that these private tutoring practices might be further advantaging those who can afford these services, both when schools are open as well as closed.

Parents and caregivers were very open to the idea of educational media but meaningful engagement with the programs could potentially be improved

Television and radio were important sources of information for respondents. Policies and protocols related to the pandemic, as well as more general information such as "they talked about compulsory schooling and its benefits" was successfully disseminated by the media. Many respondents heard about radio or television programming for children through those same media and respondents also reported that they often discussed what was heard over the radio or through television with neighbors, family, and colleagues.

When asked if the radio and television programs were entertainment or learning, all respondents responded that these programs were educational, and several respondents equated them with schooling, as in "It's the same that children learn at school. It is a learning." With television, the visual of having a teacher at a blackboard was a clear signal that the program was educational.

However, respondents were not able to describe any specific lessons, skills, or content from the programs. The following exchanges illustrate how parents view educational programming in only the vaguest terms and connect learning to memorization.

> *Interviewer: What do children learn from watching the show?*
>
> *Respondent: I'm the one who makes them watch the show.*
>
> *Interviewer: No, I mean what do they themselves learn by watching?*
>
> *Respondent: They learn to remember what the teacher says.*
>
> *Interviewer: ok*
>
> *Respondent: They learn how to memorize the principal parts of the courses taught.*
>
>
> *Interviewer: What do children learn from watching the program?*
>
> *Respondent: Sorry?*
>
> *Interviewer: What do children learn from watching this program?*
>
> *Respondent: I didn't hear*
>
> *Interviewer: I'm asking: What do you think children learn from watching this program?*
>
> *Respondent: [long silence]*
>
> *Interviewer: Hello*
>
> *Respondent: Yes, they learn the courses, what they watch on TV; that's what they learn.*

In some cases, this might relate to caregivers' own limited educational experience. For example, one caregiver said that he had watched the television program "several times," but when asked if he found it interesting or boring he responded "I didn't go very far in my studies, I followed but it's really like a blind man looking at himself [he laughs]. I just tell them to study and don't go out of the house."

Other respondents explained that they didn't watch or listen to many episodes. Some respondents viewed the program as beneficial explicitly because it didn't require their involvement. For example, a caregiver explained that they felt the television program was good because "Because I don't have the time to stay at home to look after the children."

This again introduces the idea of equity. Research on educational media highlights the importance of co-viewing, especially for young children, and having adults support children's engagement.[v] Those caregivers who are able to facilitate children's listening and watching are likely able to make the experience more effective. Even though this father isn't able to name specific skills, he describes writing out and completing exercises with children:

> Interviewer: When children are in front of the TV, what do you think they learn?

> Respondent: Whether it's in French or in math, I write down what the program says and then I do exercises with them.

> Interviewer: So what do you think they learn?

> Respondent: I write down what the program says and then I make them do exercises at home.

> Interviewer: So what were they learning?

> Respondent: To study!

> Interviewer: Okay

> Respondent: I can't remember all that. That's all they did.

One rural respondent explained that these programs would be more useful for urban families, not just because remote places often don't have access to television or radio but because in urban settings "parents had the opportunity to assist and watch over their children with these things." This same respondent, who identified himself as a Village Chief explained "We were not interested, because on the one hand, we were not informed in the village. We had no inspector, no Regional Director, no pedagogical adviser to inform villagers about the existence of such programs." This respondent seems be assuming that these actors were involved in distance learning initiatives in other areas. Extra communication and support might be needed for the most remote locations, not just to address challenges related to access to electricity, television and radio, but to overcome the perception that remote populations would not have been considered in the design of these interventions in the first place.

Pacing of radio and television programming was seen to be too fast

Television was much more popular than radio, both in relation to how many respondents were aware of the programming and how many engaged with it, but respondents described the two programs in very similar ways. Only a couple distinctions were made. Two respondents described their preference for television by emphasizing its visual nature, "This [TV] is more important than for radio because it's visual"; "Our problem is that ideally we are more audio-visual. We don't listen to really the radio. I know that I once listened to the show about education; but since I had the opportunity to follow it on TV as well, we tried to focus on the visual;" but another respondent described how children were able to listen to the radio while working in the field. Otherwise, descriptions and assessments of the programs were similar.

Many respondents expressed concerns that the programs were too short and moved too quickly for children to be able to follow. The programs were also seen to require active engagement, as one respondent described "If you're not focused it's difficult. The radio doesn't talk twice . . . You have to take notes. If you do not have your notebooks and your pen during the radio talks, you may not understand."

For television, there was lots of feedback on the time and pacing of the program such as, "TV they don't explain so good and the show is short . . . It's fast, as soon as it starts it's over" and "the children found

these programs too fast, the explanations were insufficient, we had no other choice but to comply since there were no other alternatives."

This might relate to caregivers' interpretation of how children learn. One respondent described "It's fast for a little girl, she can't memorize." If caregivers are expecting children to memorize or copy down teachers' words verbatim, it's easy to see how the program might be considered impossible pacing.

Mixed views on whether services should continue

Approximately a third of respondents felt that distance learning would not need to continue once schools were reopened. This might be because they misunderstood the question, as in the respondent who said "No, we have to leave all this and go back to the normal school program," perhaps thinking that they were choosing between distance learning and traditional schooling. Another respondent felt that if children aren't able to learn in the classroom, distance learning won't be able to help them either, saying, "Because, even in classroom, children don't often follow and can't understand; and then on the radio; I don't think it can help them."

Timing is an important issue, as respondents noted, "Now that the schools are open, students will not be watching these programs." Many parents and caregivers noted that children need breaks and time for themselves, in addition to their household responsibilities. When schools are open, it might be difficult to include educational media along with children's other activities. Some respondents suggested that these interventions could be revived during holidays and school vacations or as one suggested, "these programs can continue, but on children's days off while making sure to define a precise schedule of presentations on either radio or television."

Alternatively, another perspective was informed by respondents' belief in the importance of repetition and revision. Seeing educational content multiple times was believed to support children's learning, which is the role they envisioned for the distance learning initiatives moving forward. "If it continues, it can help those who haven't done the courses to get up to speed. What some people didn't understand in the course may be something they can understand on TV or radio." Some respondents felt that this could be used to help address issues of equity:

> Because not everyone can afford a house teacher. Often when the child comes home from school, he works alone and he doesn't understand, no one in the family has been to school so if there are TV programs it can help him even if the teacher is not in front of him.

Policy Implications

- Radio and television seem to be effective strategies for disseminating information in Côte d'Ivoire. Sharing key insights through these mediums – from public health practices to emphasizing the importance of education – should continue.

- Radio and television could also be used to experiment with new content – such as emphasizing the importance of parental engagement – and new messaging strategies – such as encouraging debate – to build on existing communication networks, generate discussion, and involve the family, neighbors, and colleagues of radio and television owners and not just the owners themselves.

- Additional strategies for reaching and supporting the most remote populations should be explored so that there are interventions that are appropriate for these contexts and also so that these populations feel like they are the intended audience and not overlooked.

- Programming for radio and television should be adjusted so that the pacing and content are easy to follow. These programs could also consider including explicit instructions for older siblings or caregivers to support children's participation or for children to be prepared with a pen and paper in order to listen or watch.

- The rise of private tutoring in Côte d'Ivoire should be further explored. Strategies for mitigating educational inequality should be investigated in tandem.

- Strategies for increasing parental involvement should be developed with a particular focus on communicating that even if parents have limited educational experience themselves, they still play a very important role in their children's education.

- Caregivers and other stakeholders' understanding of the learning process should be further explored and it might be useful to consider ways to combat the perception that learning is memorization.

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