

The Safe Learning Model



A pupil at SLMB Masaba Primary School, Kunike Barina Chiefdom in Tonkolili, Sierra Leone, engages in a Literacy class.
Photo Credit: Michael Duff, 2014

Significant Findings

- Most Class 1 children engage in domestic work with evidence of gender labour division.
- There are differences in expectations for schooling for girls and boys, with lower expectations for girls.
- Girls have lower expectations for their own 'brilliance'.
- About 70% of respondents (boys and girls) are whipped or caned regularly by parents and teachers.
- In spite of the levels of corporal punishment, an overwhelming majority of teachers identified schools as spaces where both boys and girls are 'very safe' or 'somewhat safe' (e.g. free from bullying, intimidation, physical violence, etc. in school or on the way to school).

Context of the Research

Developed by Concern Worldwide, the 'Safe Learning Model' adopts a holistic approach to the education of children in extreme poverty, in order to realise sustainable improvements in children's literacy, wellbeing and gender equality (including gender-based violence) in schools and local communities. The working assumption behind the Safe Learning Model is that children's educational progress will be enhanced when they live in communities that are underpinned by support for gender equality and children's wellbeing. The model also combines a comprehensive educational programme with interventions that support teaching practices, as well as address gender-based violence.

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

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of this integrated model, a three-year randomised control trial (involving tiered levels of intervention across four community clusters) across 100 rural communities in the Tonkolili district of Sierra Leone is being conducted. The recent history of Sierra Leone is associated with a decade long civil war and an Ebola epidemic, which significantly affected educational provision, especially in rural communities. The Safe Learning Model intervention is being evaluated by University College Dublin (UCD) School of Education and involves tracking the same children (and their communities clustered into four groups of tiered level of intervention) over a three-year period. It includes the administration of structured questionnaires and assessing children's literacy levels using an Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) to 3,000 children (beginning in Class 1) each year of the intervention, along with their teachers and headteachers (100). It also includes an in-depth exploration of four case study communities (drawn from the four arms of the trial) to include Class 1 children, their teachers, headteachers and a selected subsample of 16 children and their extended families (parents and elders / grandparents). Combined, this mixed methods approach, will provide a comprehensive overview of the socio-cultural and gendered dynamics in the children's everyday lives, including in school; their patterns and experiences of wellbeing; their literacy attainment, and teacher/headteacher perspectives and practice and over time how/if these are influenced by the model. This executive summary presents the outline findings of the first year, providing baseline data which will be built upon over the subsequent two years of the study.

Key Baseline Findings

Socio-Cultural Dynamics in Everyday Life in Rural Sierra Leone

Patterns of learning and engagement with schooling, gendered dynamics and inequalities are all shaped by the economic, cultural and social context in which children live. Within the study sample, subsistence farming predominates, children live in extended families (often characterised by polygamous marriage) and poverty is experienced as an everyday reality, in spite of some differences evident across Chiefdoms. While most of Class 1 children in the Tonkolili district are engaged in domestic work and farming activities, they also have time to play. A rich cultural world for the children is reflected in the mythical reality lived by them providing an important framework within which they regulate and interpret their interactions with others, including in terms of gender and expectations around school and learning.

Low levels of parental literacy predominate and most parents of our study children have not attended any formal education. Yet education is highly valued. Across the sample most of the Class 1 children have at least one elder sibling/ cousin who attends school (primary or secondary) or attended school in the recent past. However, also evident are inter-generational patterns of school dropout, as many Class 1 children had siblings who had left school early because of poverty and inability to cover school costs and/or teenage pregnancy.

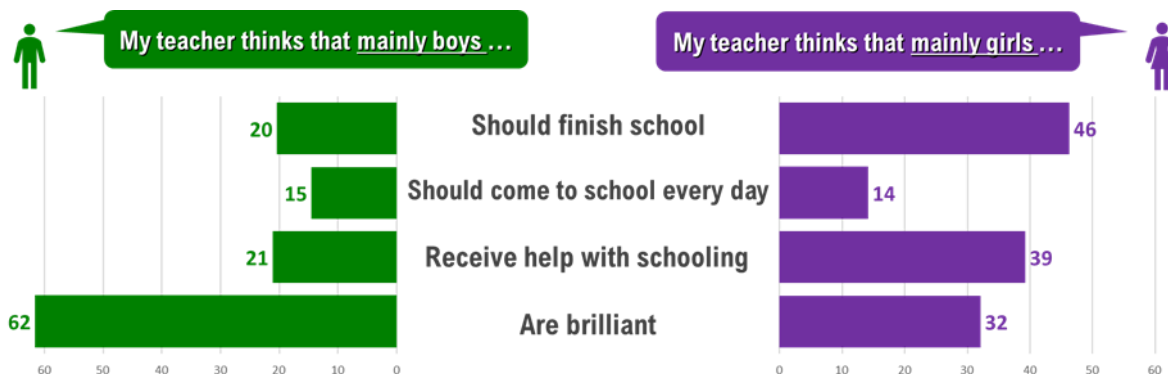
Findings also suggest that in spite of religious and ethnic heterogeneity across the region, there is a high level of cultural/religious tolerance in our study communities. Local beliefs and religious practices coexist with institutionalized religions (Islam and Christian) with Muslim communities predominating. A key element of sustaining local beliefs is membership of secret societies which play a central role in socializing children and young people into dominant cultural, social and gender norms. Communities also vary in languages spoken with Temne the majority, followed by Krio and Kuranko.

Gender Dynamics in Everyday Life in Rural Sierra Leone

Gendered norms were evident across the study communities in the expectations key adults had for the contributions of boys and girls to family and community life. Children are actively involved in contributing to the household, with household chores an integral part of the everyday life of Class 1 children. While both boys and girls complete domestic work, girls tend to spend more time (mornings, afternoons and weekends) doing so. Qualitative fieldwork suggests that longer working hours may lead to the reduction of time girls spend doing homework and studying at home. Early pregnancy was evident across the Tonkolili district and emerged as a consistent area of concern in our qualitative fieldwork. In spite of being illegal in Sierra Leone, physical violence/corporal punishment is a feature of children's everyday lives and appears equally widespread for both boys and girls.

With respect to education, Class 1 boys were found to be consistently more positive in their perception of family/parent expectations for their education, while Class 1 girls were more equivocal. Similarly, boys perceived teachers to have more positive expectations of their ability / 'brilliance' in school. The data is contradictory however, with mixed messages evident. In this respect, both boys and girls also suggested that teachers were more inclined to prioritize girls' completion of schooling.

Percentage of children saying that their teacher prioritises their own gender



Children’s Wellbeing

Assessing both the physical and psychological wellbeing of children is important to the evaluation of the implementation of the Safe Learning Model. In relation to physical wellbeing, findings highlight both the incidence and negative impact of poverty, including for example in/adequate levels of nutrition, access to clean water and appropriate access to medical care. Gender differences were evident, with Class 1 girls more likely than boys to declare that they have enough to eat, felt healthier and took more care of their hygiene. Corporal punishment is also a significant component of wellbeing with, and as indicated previously is widespread in our study communities, with an overwhelming majority of Class 1 children reporting having been whipped or caned by their parents and teachers.

Drawing on a measure of psychological wellbeing developed by UCD School of Education for the purposes of the evaluation (CAPSAW: Child and Adolescent Personal Wellbeing) findings indicated relatively positive patterns among our child cohort in relation for example to experiences of love and care, and enjoying life.

Findings also highlight the intersection between socio-cultural dynamics; children’s wellbeing and learning readiness among Class 1 children, especially with respect to the impact of language spoken in the community, as well as socio-economic status. Children who speak Temne at home tend to present lower levels of wellbeing (both physical and psychological), whereas Kuranko speakers tend to show higher levels. Among households who speak Kuranko, we also found the lowest proportions of Class 1 children who scored zero on EGRA assessments. These differences, however, may be related to socio-economic differences among Chiefdoms and requires further investigation in subsequent data waves.

Education/Schools, Teaching, Leading and Learning

A key goal within educational policy nationally in Sierra Leone is upskilling of the teaching workforce, addressing the significant shortage of qualified teachers. The prevalence of unqualified teachers (called ‘community teachers’ and most likely in the study to be male) in rural communities is especially stark and confirmed in the study. Just under half of teachers of Class 1 children were qualified. Importantly these community teachers are unpaid, with 2/3 of teachers in our sample working with Class 1 children on a voluntary basis. On-site training and support for teachers is a key platform of the Safe Learning Model Intervention.

A related issue is the approved/unapproved status of schools and the direct cost of schooling (payment of teachers) being borne by parents through school fees and/or providing teachers with rice and beans. The cost of schooling emerged as a significant issue of concern across our study sample, not only for parents, but also for headteachers who reported inadequate learning materials (lack of desks, books and basic equipment); lack of access to electricity (only 5% of schools have electricity) and poor sanitation (including the sharing of toilets by children and staff). Large class sizes compound the challenges. Among the 100 schools selected for the study, just under one fifth have more than 40 pupils attending Class 1. The largest class has 116 students enrolled.



A class 1 blackboard in Tonkolili,
Sierra Leone
2019

Safety at school is an important indicator of wellbeing, and here we note contradictions between the perceptions of teachers and children over the safety of the school environment. In spite of the levels of corporal punishment inferred from interviews with children, an overwhelming majority of teachers identified schools as spaces where children (both boys and girls) were 'very safe' or 'somewhat safe' (e.g. free from bullying, intimidation, physical violence, etc. either in school or on the way to school). This suggests deeply embedded cultural norms at local level which, in spite of legislative changes, do not perceive the physical punishment of children as a matter of safety.

Children's Literacy Attainment – baseline patterns

The performance of Class 1 children on the Early Grade Reading Assessments (EGRA) were generally poor, though not unexpected given that assessments were conducted during the first term of Class 1. Just over half of the children had at least one correct answer for the section "letter identification"; the other half did not identify any letter. Most Class 1 children could not say correctly the sound of any letter.

Children's own perception of their ability (what is termed locally as 'brilliant') is significantly related to their EGRA scores with more positive self-perceptions connected to higher EGRA scores, and conversely lower perceptions of 'brilliance' connected with zero scores. This association is especially pronounced among girls suggesting socio-cultural influences, especially related to gendered expectations noted previously.



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