

The Safe Learning Model

Teacher, Mr. John Kabira, with class 3 students Patifull Mayepuh SDA Primary, Sierra Leone 2021. Photo Credit: Michael Duff



Significant Findings

- The Safe Learning Model has positive impacts on basic Literacy skills and wellbeing, especially for girls, despite significant challenges of endemic poverty, gender stereotypes, structural problems of the educational system and the impact of school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- There is a clear link between Literacy progress and Wellbeing, particularly for girls.
- Overall, improvements in Literacy are present for both boys and girls over time.
- Literacy skills of children in the Safe Learning Model, in particular girls, generally improve more quickly than children not receiving the intervention.
- On average, boys perform better than girls across subtasks, but girls in the Safe Learning Model progress faster, closing the gender gap.
- There was no differences in teaching practices of qualified and unqualified teachers.
- Teachers in the Safe Learning Model identify letter sounds as important and spend significant time teaching this, which is reflected in children's improved basic Literacy skills at an earlier stage.
- Teachers, principals and caregivers have high aspirations for the education of girls and believe it is necessary, but have lower expectations for their success in school with the majority believing boys are more brilliant than girls.
- Children's psychological wellbeing, specifically 'feeling good' declined during COVID-19, however girls receiving the Literacy component of the Safe Learning Model show significant increases in 'feeling good' at the end of the intervention.
- Children that feel safer with a teacher are more likely to report having been whipped or caned by a teacher.



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 communities. The model combines a comprehensive educational programme with interventions that support teaching practices, as well as gender-based violence prevention and response.

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

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of this integrated model, University College Dublin (UCD) School of Education conducted a three-year longitudinal study with approximately 3,000 children, their teachers and caregivers from 100 primary schools in Tonkolili, Sierra Leone. The randomised control trial utilised a mixed methods design that included; 376 semi-structured interviews and group discussions along with participatory approaches such as photo voice, 42 hours of classroom observational data, analysis of school records, annual Early Grade Reading Assessments (EGRA) and the Child and Adolescent Personal and Social Assessment of Wellbeing (CAPSAW). The study examined wellbeing, gender equality and literacy development of a cohort of pupils and their everyday experiences in school and at home and ultimately how this may be affected by the programme. This brief presents key findings from the study (2018-2021), providing an overview of the general findings related to children's lived experiences. Additional thematic briefs that include more detailed information and interpretation of the key findings as well as the intervention and research design are available².

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

² More information on the Safe Learning Model and study is available at <https://www.concern.net/knowledge-hub/education-safe-learning-model-research> or contact: Amy Folan, Senior Education Advisor, Concern Worldwide amy.folan@concern.net

Key Findings

Socio-Cultural Dynamics in Everyday Life in Rural Sierra Leone

Children in Tonkolili are immersed in a rich cultural and multi-lingual world, characterised by distinct gendered and spiritual norms that frame their experiences of living and learning. High levels of structural poverty predominate, exacerbated by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet despite these challenges, the research highlighted the high value placed by families on education, in addition to the importance of children's early literacy experiences in the family and community. These included informal learning that occurs through children's daily contributions to family practices and livelihoods, in addition to wider community and social activities. Trading, farming, cooking and cleaning are important frames of reference for children as culturally valued activities and a core part of the family economy. Through these activities children engaged and interacted with adults and older siblings, learning key skills for survival and adaptation. As children aged, gender differences became apparent with girls significantly more likely than boys to state they were involved in domestic chores including washing clothes, cleaning the house and caring for younger siblings. Girls along with boys were also involved with chores outside the home (mining, farming, trading and hunting), but it was only boys in the control group who were significantly more likely than girls to be engaged in these activities. Findings highlighted the strong social networks and solidarities across kin, and the important role of elders and wider community members as a key and rich source of oral language for children through traditions of storytelling and singing. Multilingualism was evident, with fluency in local languages central to children's evolving language skills. While English was taught in schools, children rarely spoke it out of school. Older siblings were especially important in supporting more formal learning (reading, writing, and counting) including helping with homework and during the pandemic school closures.

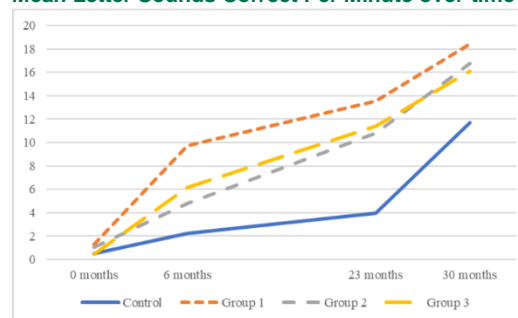


Literacy, Learning and Teaching

Early Grade Reading

As anticipated, EGRA scores improved for all groups over time as children progressed through the first three years of primary school, however boys performed better than girls on average across all subtasks. Improvements over time were highest among lower order skills that are more readily learnt, than more complex higher order skills. However, children in intervention groups, in particular girls, generally improved more quickly than children in the control groups, developing basic skills earlier and establishing stronger foundations for future learning. In basic subtasks (Letter Names and Sounds), girls receiving just the Literacy intervention showed better performance relative to girls in the control group thus reducing the gender gap. In more complex sub-tasks (Invented Words and Oral Reading), girls in both the Literacy and the Literacy plus School Level SRGBV prevention and Response groups demonstrated a more significant improvement over the trial relative to girls in the control group, reflecting the importance of early basic skill development for building competencies to achieve more complex skills as they move through their education.

Mean Letter Sounds Correct Per Minute over time



Teaching Practices

Qualitative interviews with teachers, head teachers and children along with systematic structured classroom observations provided further insights into the impacts of the intervention and highlighted key elements of teacher practices that contextualise aspects of the EGRA findings. For example, observations of teachers point to moderate levels of classroom organisation, emotional support for children and engagement by children with their learning with no observed differences in the teaching practices of qualified and unqualified teachers across all schools. These observations confirmed teachers preferred didactic and teacher centred methods, focusing on repetition, recitation and copying of tasks from the blackboard with these patterns applying to all teachers irrespective of qualification. From a literacy perspective however, evidence from the intervention schools indicated that teachers identified knowledge of letter sounds as an important skill for children, whereas teachers in the control school did not and this was reflected in teachers in intervention groups spending a significant amount of time teaching letter names and letter sounds highlighting the direct and positive impact of the literacy intervention on what teachers emphasise in their teaching. While most head teachers across the 100 schools indicated that their schools were affected by a shortage or lack of instructional materials (e.g., textbooks), head teachers in the control group declared being more negatively affected compared to those in the intervention groups who received teaching and learning materials including books through the intervention. Teachers interviewed also confirmed the shortage of textbooks and even where textbooks did exist, they were frequently locked away, unavailable for use.



Gender Attitudes to Success in Education

Gender norms and perceptions of what it means to be a boy, or a girl are incorporated in the everyday life of children in Sierra Leone and underpin their experience of childhood, including work, play and classroom life. These perceptions of fundamental differences between men and women became clearly visible in attitudes and practices related to education and in expectations for girls' success. The study identified that teachers' attitudes were deeply gendered with some contradictions evident in their views on the learning of boys and girls. Across the study, teachers and principals highlighted their high aspirations for the education of girls and their belief in the necessity of education for girls. Observations in case study intervention schools highlighted teachers' emphasis on the active involvement of girls in lessons. However, interviews with teachers also confirmed their lower expectations for the success of girls in school and across both intervention and control schools, with most principals and teachers stating they believed that boys were more brilliant than girls and that girls usually needed more help in class.



Similar gendered views were evident among case study families. In general, parents (and elders) aspired to educate girls and believed that girls more than boys will use their education to help their family out of poverty. The study also showed that most of the children's extended family believe that "mainly girls" are going to use their education to get a better job in the future. However, parents and elders also have lower expectations for girls' success connecting this to sexuality, pregnancy, and girls' "poor" moral character. Further the study showed a progression in these gender stereotypical views over time and its negative impact on girls themselves. It was found that children's views on gender differences deepened over time, with increasingly negative views of girls' capacities evident, especially among boys as they got older.

Children's Wellbeing

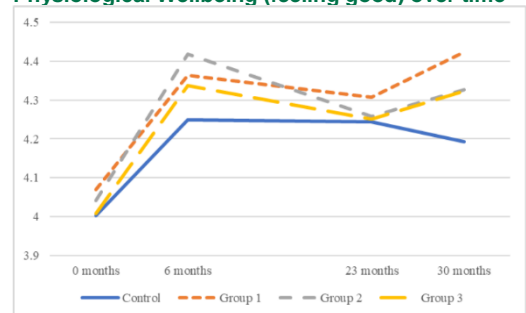
To assess children's wellbeing, the CAPSAW instrument, developed by the Safe Learning Study team, was used. Throughout the evaluation, the measurement of wellbeing was approached through understanding children's subjective wellbeing (feeling good and doing well), complemented by objective indicators of wellbeing including food sufficiency.



Psychological wellbeing (doing well and feeling good) initially increased for all groups at 6 months but decreased during the pandemic. 'Feeling good' increased for all groups at 6 months, more so for intervention groups than control. Scores then declined during COVID-19 school closures for the intervention groups and remained relatively stable for control groups. At 30 months, all intervention groups reported higher levels of 'feeling good', while scores decreased for the control group. Only girls in the intervention group only receiving Literacy support

showed a significant increase in 'feeling good' scores at 30 months, with a medium effect size. Significant intervention effects were found for 'feeling good' for girls in this intervention at 6 months and 30 months. There were significant intervention effects for boys in intervention groups receiving Literacy, School and Community Level SRGBV prevention and response support at 6 months. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is also of note. Qualitative data confirmed an increase of hunger and children's work during this period and heightened poverty in case study communities. Reports from interviews on the negative experiences of COVID-19 correspond with the reduction in psychological wellbeing at 23 months reported by children.

Physiological Wellbeing (feeling good) over time



Relationship Between Literacy, Wellbeing and Gender

There was a significant positive correlation between EGRA scores and levels of 'feeling good' demonstrating a clear relationship between children's literacy progress and their feelings of wellbeing. This was especially the case for girls. This suggests that apart from any direct effect the intervention may have had on 'feeling good', improved academic performance enhances this.



These patterns can also be understood in the context of socio-cultural norms related to wellbeing and realising a 'good life'. Aspirations for girls reflected local understandings of wellbeing as freedom from poverty (a 'good' life) and girls' education as good for the family (a 'good' life). Doing well in literacy thus heightens the value of, and aspirations for girls, which may positively influence girls' wellbeing, suggesting that targeted support for girls in their academic progress may also support their levels of confidence and happiness.

Experiences of Violence

The Safe Learning study adopted a three dimensional construct of violence:



- **Direct**- relating to self-reported experiences of physical and psychological violence;
- **Structural**- specifically child reported suffering on account of a lack of resources
- **Cultural**- reported cultural norms that perpetuate direct and structural violence in society

The study indicated that the intervention does not appear to have any effect in relation to reports of direct, structural and cultural violence. All groups reported experiencing substantial increases in direct violence from 0 to 23 months, and this declined at 30 months. While boys and girls followed similar trajectories in terms of reporting direct violence over time, the proportion of boys reporting was higher than girls in all groups, at every time point. One interpretation of these findings is that this may signal a higher awareness of violence (and thus reporting of it) among children in intervention schools, following the intervention itself.

Further analysis indicated that if a child felt safer with a teacher, they were also more likely to report having been whipped/caned by a teacher. This suggests that children who do not feel safe may not report violence leading to silent victims and distortions of actual prevalence rates. Therefore, while the study did not identify significant differences in children's reported experiences across the intervention groups, increases in children's perception of safety and therefore greater tendency to report as a result of the intervention must also be considered when interpreting the results.



The study highlighted a nuanced understanding of violence in communities with a clear differentiation between 'severe' violence which was perceived as harmful, and 'light' flogging which was viewed as necessary to discipline children. Intergenerational differences in attitudes towards corporal punishment were evident with older generations being more likely to indicate that flogging children was necessary. While there appeared to be growing awareness among adults of the prohibition of corporal punishment, the research highlighted the prevalence of gender-based violence. Children, especially but not exclusively girls, reported sexual harassment and bad touches happening between children and adults (usually men) in their communities, while at school this was reported as occurring mainly between children themselves. Local responses to the prevention of SRGBV relied predominantly on restrictions and control of girls rather than transforming negative norms and practices, highlighting the importance of whole school and community based approaches to holistically transform negative societal and gender norms.

Recommendations Emerging from the Research

- Prioritise continuous teacher professional development including review of pre- and in-service teacher training to include increased emphasis on Foundational Literacy and gender equality related to expectations of girls' learning.
- Build clearer links between children's local language/mother tongue and language teaching/learning including support to teachers in ensuring the skills and resources available to do so.
- Recognising the crucial role of community and caregivers in both formal and informal learning and language acquisition, prioritise systematic caregiver engagement in children's education.
- Incorporate and validate local concepts of wellbeing into training with teachers, caregivers and children and ensure stakeholders recognise the bi-directional link between academic achievement and wellbeing, particularly for girls.
- Further promote whole school approaches to gender based violence, including school, community and children in policy response, recognising the importance of children's feelings of safety for encouraging self-reporting of violence.



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