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LEARNING AND RESILIENCE: THE CRUCIAL ROLE OF SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING IN CONTEXTS OF ADVERSITY

Children with social and emotional skills do better in school, have improved relationships with peers and adults, are better adjusted emotionally, and have improved mental health.

In contexts of violence and conflict where children and youth are disproportionately and uniquely affected, their resilience and social emotional well-being are essential to any post-conflict long-term reconstruction, development process or long-standing peace.

Social and emotional learning competencies often serve as the core competencies outlined in most programs intended to build social cohesion before, during and after crisis and conflict. Although each program model might vary slightly, many of the most effective evidence-based programs such as conflict resolution, life skills, character education, violence prevention, civic education or peace education are designed to empower children and youth to have improved academic, social and emotional learning outcomes. In contexts of adversity, education systems are well advised to integrate social and emotional learning (SEL) components and processes into their academic programs.

What is SEL?

Social and emotional learning *involves processes through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions* (CASEL 2013).

Photo: Research shows strong peer-to-peer support among Palestine refugee students enrolled in the UNRWA school system. © UNRWA

Social and emotional learning helps children develop the skills, attitudes and behaviors needed to foster healthy relationships with peers, manage conflict with others, express care and concern, and work effectively with peers and teachers. Common examples include empathy, respect, cooperation, managing emotions, critical thinking, self-control, goal setting, problem solving, among others. The resulting *social and emotional competencies*, shown in the figure below, contribute to the overall well-being of children and youth, improved academic performance, healing and coping with chronic exposure to violence.



Social and emotional competencies help to prevent aggressive behavior and conflict inducing behavior at later ages, and are critical to healthy and positive child development (Aber, Brown and Jones 2003). Learning environments such as schools are a natural medium through which to support social and emotional skills development. Research suggests that this is best accomplished through integrated SEL classroom instruction, student engagement in positive activities in and out of the classroom, and broad parent and community involvement in program planning, implementation, and evaluation (Weare and Nind 2011).



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SEL, Academic Outcomes and Supportive Learning Environments

Social, emotional and academic skills are inter-related. Research suggests that when students' social and emotional skills are supported through instruction and a caring and safe learning environment, their well-being is enhanced as well as their academic achievement (Durlak et al. 2011).

In the United States, significant research has been conducted on the inter-connected relationship of social and emotional learning and academic outcomes. Supporting evidence suggests that when teachers implement interventions such as proactive classroom management, interactive teaching methods, cooperative learning techniques, and interpersonal skills instruction, students' positive attitudes and commitment to school significantly increase (Hawkins, et al. 2001). This type of teacher support increases students' desire and ability to engage in learning, participate in class and complete homework (Murdock 1999). Other evidence suggests that with the integration of SEL in schools—such as cooperative, safe and caring classrooms—students score significantly higher on measures of cognitive problem-solving skills, and use more conflict resolution strategies than comparison children (Battistich, Solomon, Watson and Schaps 1989). Similar SEL interventions at the classroom level, including smaller learning environments, stable peer relations during school transitions, and the supportive role of teachers, result in higher attendance rates, lower dropout rates, increased test scores, and better grades among students in middle and high school (Durlak et al 2011, Felner et al. 1995).

Teachers and principals play a key role in SEL promotion, such as Hasira Basiratka, principal of the Female Experimental High School in Herat, Afghanistan. © Graham Crouch / World Bank



Children learn to work together at school in Villa Nueva, Guatemala. © Maria Fleischmann / World Bank

Why SEL is Important in Contexts of Violence and Conflict

The negative impact of natural disasters, political crises, health epidemics, pervasive violence and armed conflict on the mental as well as physical well-being of children and youth has been well documented (Machel 1996, Summerfield 1991, Apfel and Simon 1996, Bernard van Leer Foundation 2005). Such adversities and the associated detriments they cause impact not only well-being but also learning outcomes (Kostelny and Wessells 2010). Schools are often seen as a means of ensuring children's safety and well-being (Alexander, Boothby, and Wessells 2012). Education programs that incorporate SEL can play a crucial role in developing protective factors in youth which mitigate the negative developmental and behavioral effects of exposure to conflict. This is achieved through building intrapersonal and interpersonal skills that are necessary for managing emotions and building healthy relationships. SEL strengthens the healing and coping mechanisms needed to deal with adversity, violence and suffering, essential for healthy development (Wessells and Edgerton 2008), and contributes to academic success at school. Supporting both the SEL and academic achievement of children and youth in education systems—in an integrated way—can also contribute to answering the World Bank's call for halting the repeating cycles of violence and conflict (World Bank 2011).

Social and Emotional Learning is Measurable

Just like academic outcomes, social and emotional competencies are measurable. Valid and reliable instruments exist to monitor the progress of social and emotional knowledge, skills and attitudes and the quality of SEL programming.

For example, the University of Washington conducted a review of SEL assessment measures for middle school-aged children (Raikes Foundation 2011), which categorized three rating types: self, teacher/staff and parent/guardian. The following tools were used to measure one or more of the core competencies identified by CASEL, and provide an idea of the range of self-assessment scales available. The last four scales are also frequently used but were not part of the Raikes study.

- Achenbach System of Empirically Based Assessment: Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL)
- Youth Self-Report (YSR)
- Teacher Report Form (TRF)
- Behavior and Emotional Rating Scale (BERS-2)
- Developmental Assets Profile (DAP)
- Devereux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA)
- School Social Behaviors Scale, Second Edition (SSBS-2)
- Social Skills Improvement System Rating Scales (SSIS-Rating Scale)
- Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)
- Washington Healthy Youth Survey (HYS)
- Middle Years Development Instrument (MDI)
- California Health Kids Survey (CHKS)
- Resilience and Youth Development Module (CHKS supplement)
- Grit Scales (Duckworth)

In addition to self and informant reporting, SEL can be measured with direct behavioral observation using the Peer Interaction Observation Schedule (Pellegrini and Bartini 2000), projective expressive techniques (drawing) using the Kinetic Drawing System (Knowff and Prout 1985), semi-structured interviews using Semi-Structured Interviews for Children (McConaughy and Achenbach 2001) and sociometric techniques using the Social Inclusion Survey

(Frederickson and Graham 1999, Humphrey 2013).

When designing or adapting instruments, developmental benchmarks for the knowledge, skills and attitudes measured should be considered in the research design. Social desirability bias, when the participant answers in a way that will be viewed favorably by the researcher, also needs to be factored in when using self and informant reporting scales. Finally, instruments must be adapted for cultural and contextual relevance, especially when used in the developing world as most of the instruments above have been designed and validated in the West.

There is very limited rigorous evaluation of SEL programming in low-resource contexts, particularly in those affected by armed conflict. This kind of research needs to be prioritized and funded in order to better understand the impact of SEL in contexts of adversity.

The International Rescue Committee, in partnership with the Institute of Human Development and Social Change at New York University, is currently conducting a **cluster-randomized trial** of its OPEQ program (Opportunities for Equitable Access to Quality Basic Education) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). It is the first time such an approach has been taken in the international sector and in such a context (IRC 2013). The 5-year program aims to improve the academic, social and emotional outcomes of children living with conflict through improving the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom. The ongoing study uses a series of measures that combine items from previously validated measures, such as AIR's Conditions for Learning Survey and the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, with items developed to match the specific content of OPEQ. Children are asked to report on their perceptions of support, cooperation and predictability in their classrooms and schools (precursors of SEL), as well as their level of peer victimization and mental health (SEL outcomes). Analyses are currently underway to test the measure's reliability, validity and sensitivity to change as a result of the intervention. The evaluation aims to examine the effectiveness of the program in order to inform efforts for improving learning conditions in the DRC and other post-conflict settings.



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SEL and Resilience in Contexts of Violence and Conflict

Social and emotional knowledge, skills and attitudes can help students cope with adversity, and foster their resilience. Resilience is the ability to recover, perform and transform from situations of adversity. Applied to the education sector it relates to vulnerable individuals achieving learning outcomes and social and emotional well-being even in contexts of overwhelming difficulties. What seems to matter most to learners in these contexts is the opportunity to make meaning of the adversity experienced and to find purpose in education. This is best achieved by socially and emotionally engaging with others in a healthy way. SEL supports this engagement process, and can also help increase students' ability to focus on learning. For children and youth, learning is a source of control in an otherwise uncontrollable context (Reyes 2013). This education resilience, however, is not dependent on an individual's strength alone, but requires the availability of opportunities, resources and services. Young people can navigate the adversities they face in search of social and emotional well-being, and education systems can make relevant, meaningful and accessible services to foster their innate search for resilience (Ungar 2011).

meaningful participation in school, family and the community are correlated to children's learning and social and emotional well-being in spite of conflict and crisis-affected contexts. Schools can foster hope, purpose, social competence, problem solving and autonomy, mutual care and support among students, parents, teachers and administrators.

Additional resilience evidence collected by The World Bank's Education Resilience Approaches (ERA) Program demonstrates the important multi-dimensional relationship between SEL and resilience in education settings. It provides important examples of how social and emotional knowledge, skills and attitudes can contribute to learning; how learning can contribute to social and emotional well-being, and how SEL can enhance the ability of vulnerable children and youth to make healthy coping choices rather than maladaptive ones. In contexts of violence and conflict, learning can contribute to well-being, and well-being to learning. We have no choice but to embed one in the other. Research shows the most effective approach is to combine both academic and SEL strategies, led by school actors themselves (Zins et al. 2007).

Operationalizing SEL in Schools

While an integrated approach to operationalizing social, emotional and academic learning in the classroom can take a number of shapes, research shows there are some effective fundamental principles. An extensive review of SEL programming for preschool and elementary by CASEL (2013) found that the most effective SEL programs were integrated within academic curriculum areas and included explicit social and emotional skills instruction as well as opportunities to practice these skills in and outside the classroom. Many evaluated programs focused on classroom- and school-wide contexts to promote and reinforce SEL.

Indeed, SEL classroom-based interventions must take a coordinated, systemic, whole-child, school-wide approach in order to be effective and sustainable. School climate plays a significant role. Schools are microcosms of society, and unless they are properly supported, violence outside the school will be reflected within it. A positive school climate that ensures a healthy, safe and peaceful learning environment can strengthen the ability of schools to protect children and youth, and foster their resilience.

Concretely, a three-tiered approach for promoting the social and emotional well-being of children and youth should focus on: (i) classroom and school climate, (ii) teaching pedagogy and school personnel support and (iii) student skill building.



Students in a Healing Classrooms program in Herat, Afghanistan are made to feel safe, cared for and supported.
© International Rescue Committee

Education systems can foster resilience by integrating SEL with academic learning. Cefai's research in the United States (2008) and that of Loughry et al. in the West Bank and Gaza (2006) show how high expectations and opportunities for

1. In the classroom, students who feel safe, cared for and supported are better able to learn. This is accomplished through a school and classroom environment in which students feel a sense of control and predictability, and where there are clear and consistent structures, rules and consequences for their behavior. As Elias and Zins (2007) have noted, positive school environments promote SEL, and SEL helps create supportive school climates. An example from decades of experience in education work in conflict and crisis-affected areas is the International Rescue Committee’s (IRC) Healing Classrooms (2013). The program focuses on expanding and supporting the ways teachers can create and maintain “healing” learning spaces in which children can recover, grow and develop.

2. Teachers and school personnel play a key role in the education and well-being of a student. Through effective teaching pedagogy and instructional practice teachers enable students to develop and practice social and emotional skills. School administrators can offer leadership and guidance in reinforcing the use of these skills outside the classroom and in school life. When teachers work on their own social and emotional knowledge and skills, their students also benefit. School administrators can prioritize this kind of teacher professional development. Resilience research by The World Bank with Palestine refugees in the West Bank, Gaza and Jordan reveals the crucial role teachers play in providing not only academic instruction, but also care, advice and emotional support (World Bank 2013). This occurs in both direct ways (teacher visits to students’ homes after particularly difficult moments, for example) but also through integrated social and emotional care within academic instruction, extra-curricular activities, and opportunities for students to exercise leadership and committed mutual support.

3. Opportunities for practice and skill building enable students to demonstrate and model social and emotional competencies with their peers, teachers and parents. The Durlak et al. (2011) meta-analysis of 213 school-based universal SEL programs concluded that the most effective SEL student skill building programs were Sequenced, Active, Focused and Explicit, or SAFE. These criteria can be met by programs which use active forms of learning, focus sufficient time on skill development, and have explicit learning goals (Bickmore 1998, Bond and Hauf 2004, Durlak 1997, Dusenbury and Falco 1995, Gresham 1995). These interventions have led to supportive class climate, positive academic outcomes and a reduction in negative behaviors amongst students.



Parents’ participation in school planning helps promote SEL, such as these mothers from a community school in Mali. © Jo Kelcey / World Bank

Operationalizing SEL in Education Systems

Education systems can identify and institutionalize existing innovative and contextually relevant SEL practices. Institutionalizing implies the provision of the policy frameworks, the program structures and the resources to integrate SEL with other education goals, such as learning, school retention and equity. Increasingly, research has shown that programming must be integrated into the long-term environment, school curriculum or system (IASC 2007, Hart 2012, Zins and Elias 2007), not just temporary projects or add-on activities (Retamal and Low 2010). Similarly, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee’s (IASC) guidelines recommend embedding the delivery of psychosocial related activities into wider systems, including the education system. They promote directing services to all children and youth coping with the day-to-day stressors that violence and conflict present—not just the more severe cases requiring specialized services such as referrals for trauma counseling (see figure on the next page).

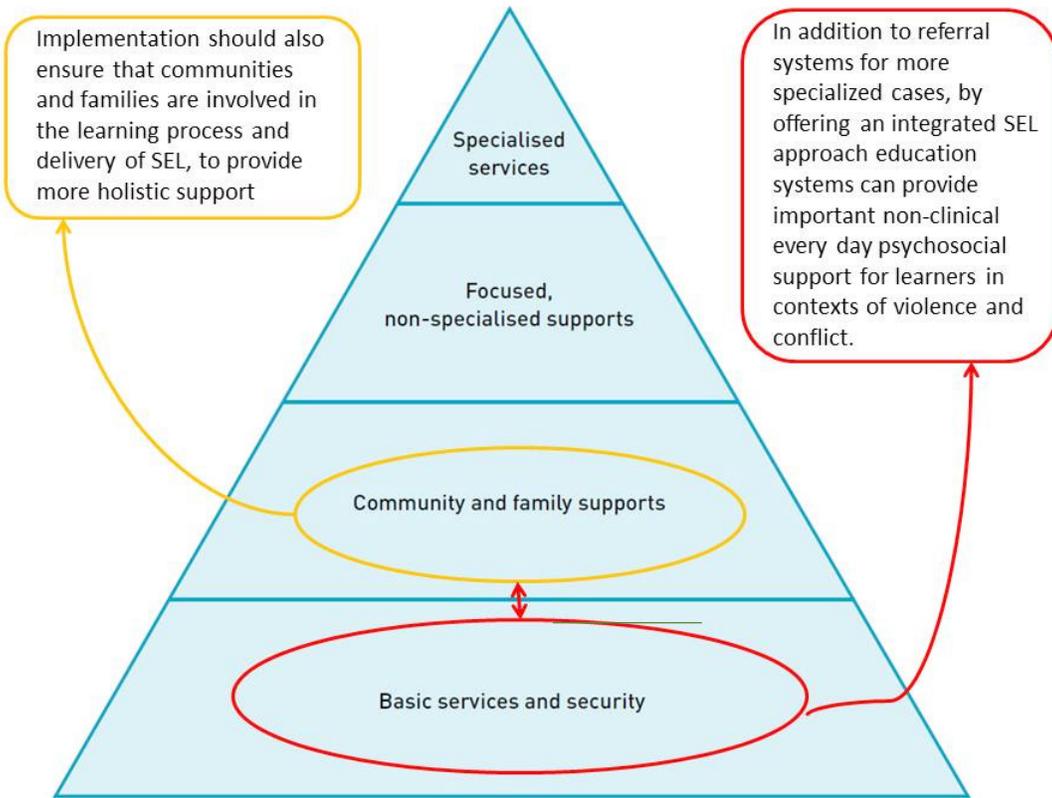
The national education strategy against school violence in Peru (2013-2016) is an example of such an institutionalized, system-wide approach to SEL. Its *Escuela Amiga* component works across multiple ministries and focuses explicitly on social and emotional skills development, improving school climate and strengthening school-community relations (Peruvian Ministry of Education 2013). Curricular reform has added an area called “personal development” as a core learning outcome for students in kindergarten to grade 11, with clear descriptions, sequencing and indicators for each competency, capacity and skill that students need to master.



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Source: Adapted from the IASC Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings (2007).

More innovative examples of how SEL can be adapted to fit local realities already exist in many different contexts of adversity, often as complements to the formal education system.

For example, the *Colegio del Cuerpo de Cartagena de Indias* in Colombia recognizes and builds upon the special role that dance has in Colombian culture to present an alternative to the other image of the body that has been promulgated through the country's violent conflict. The *Afghanistan*

National Institute of Music also builds on local culture and traditions—in this case the rich history of music making in the region—teaching vocational music skills alongside the national curriculum so that students may “have the skills, creative vision and confidence” to contribute to the artistic, social and cultural life of their country (AMIN 2012: 4). Social healing and transformation through the arts is also an important aspect of the *Living Arts Program* in Cambodia which explicitly seeks to restore the vibrant arts culture that was in place prior to the genocide. Finally, the *Qattan Centre for the Child* in Gaza has adopted an integrated pedagogical approach that utilizes literature, music, drama, and cinema to support self-directed learning and encourage students to express themselves, discover different cultures and strengthen their understanding of their own cultural identity. Education systems can institutionalize these types of SEL innovations through their policies and programs.

In addition to what we already know about education quality (such as qualified teachers, appropriate class sizes, etc.), learning in contexts of adversity requires an additional set of social and emotional moderating factors (strength and direction of learning) as well as mediating factors (why and how children learn). This integrated understanding into how learning can be supported in contexts of violence and conflict has important policy and program implications, as presented on the next page.



The youth theater group of teaching students in Honduras is focused on the mayan cultural traditions in the Central American region.

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Policy Recommendations to Institutionalize SEL within Education Programs in Contexts of Adversity

1. Explicitly recognize the importance of social and emotional skills within learning outcomes

- Education policy must explicitly recognize that social and emotional skills are necessary for learning by integrating SEL into the academic curriculum, and reinforcing the support of schools and education communities to the broader goals of caring, empathy and social cohesion in the aftermath of violence and conflict.

2. Use risk and resilience frameworks to understand maladaptive coping strategies of learners and provide alternative “adaptive” choices

- An integrated approach to SEL and academic learning should mitigate risks and maladaptive approaches, and foster resilience by using and protecting the assets, opportunities and services available to learners in contexts of adversity.

3. Consider culturally grounded mediums which support the operationalization of SEL within education settings

- Core education services should reflect SEL through mediums such as arts, sports, and youth leadership opportunities to help ensure the relevance of activities to support SEL and academic learning. The strategic use of these approaches promotes a sense of positive identity, belonging and connection in situations where violence and conflict have often undermined the social fabric.

4. Systematize SEL within core education system structures and functions

- School leadership should undergo training in risk, resilience, SEL and positive school climate.
- Teacher training should focus explicitly on pedagogical approaches and curriculum design that is learner-centered, interactive and promotes positive discipline and reinforcement.
- School discipline and behavior management practices should be guided by SEL principles.
- School-family partnerships should be adopted such as school-based management and community participation structures to promote and reinforce the importance of social and emotional well-being for children and youth at home and in the community.

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Authors: Andrea Diaz Varela, Jo Kelcey, Joel Reyes (World Bank); Meridith Gould, Ph.D, Jennifer Sklar (International Rescue Committee)

