

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Policy Recommendations to the U.S. Government for Promoting Learning, Equity and Resilience in Areas of Crisis and Conflict



TABLE OF CONTENTS

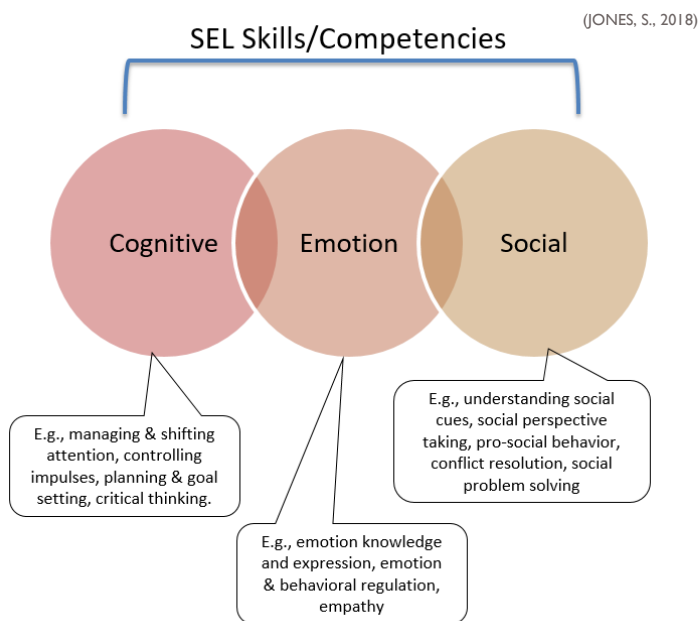
SUMMARY	1
SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING: A PRIMER	3
WHAT IS SEL?	3
WHY IS SEL IMPORTANT?	3
WHY IS SEL CRITICAL TO EDUCATION IN CONFLICT AND CRISIS (EICC)?	3
HOW DOES SEL PROGRAMMING SUPPORT UNITED STATES POLICY?	4
WHAT EVIDENCE SUPPORTS THE VALUE OF SEL?	4
WHY USAID SHOULD TAKE THE LEAD TO DEVELOP SEL IN CRISIS AND CONFLICT	5
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION GUIDANCE	6
RECOMMENDATION I	6
THE U.S. GOVERNMENT SHOULD INCLUDE SKILLS-BASED SEL IN ALL EDUCATION PROGRAMMING, WITH SPECIAL ATTENTION IN CRISIS-AFFECTED CONTEXTS (EICC).	6
RECOMMENDATION II	6
USAID SHOULD ENSURE, AT MINIMUM, FOUR MAIN INGREDIENTS FOR IMPLEMENTATION OF EICC--ALONG WITH SUFFICIENT FUNDING FOR THESE AND FOR THEIR EVALUATION.	6
RECOMMENDATION III	7
USAID SHOULD TAKE THE LEAD TO ADVANCE THE SEL FIELD INTERNATIONALLY BY INVESTING IN RESEARCH, PARTICULARLY IN CRISIS AND CONFLICT CONTEXTS.	7

SUMMARY

Decades of research highlight the importance of social and emotional skills for success in school, career, and life.¹ Students who participate in SEL perform measurably better in school than peers without exposure to SEL. They engage in fewer risky or unhealthy behaviors; are less likely to get married or have children before 18; are more likely to be employed; earn more; show more resilience; and are better able manage conflicts non-violently. In fact, the stream of benefits from SEL has been estimated to be worth \$11 for every \$1 invested.²

While social and emotional learning is important for all children and youth, for those in conflict and crisis, it is critical. Research from the developed world and emerging evidence in crisis-affected countries demonstrates that the harmful effects of toxic stress can be stopped or even reversed when children are exposed to safe and predictable learning environments and have positive, nurturing relationships with key adults, such as caregivers and teachers, who actively participate in explicit social-emotional learning (SEL) activities.

SEL helps children heal from experiences with tragedy and violence; puts them on a path for self-reliance by promoting skills that help them succeed in school and beyond; promotes equity and healthy relationships; and increases the community cohesion and stability that can empower individuals to resist violent extremism even in difficult circumstances.



For these and other reasons, SEL programming is central to compliance with the READ Act.

Yet SEL is an emergent field in the international education space, with best practices and even terminology still being defined and standardized.

Given its experience and influence, USAID is well placed to lead the global agenda to make SEL as effective and scalable as possible, particularly in conflict and crisis settings.

We therefore recommend that the U.S. Government:

- 1) Include skills-based SEL in all education programming, with special attention to conflict and crisis contexts.

We further recommend that USAID:

- 2) Set initial standards for the field by ensuring that all SEL interventions include at least three key components: a safe learning environment; care for teacher as well as student wellbeing; and implementation of high-quality skills-based SEL programming; and
- 3) Provide the leadership to advance the field of SEL through investments in research and learning, including implementation research, impact research and measurement research.

Please see page six for elaboration of these recommendations.



GRAPHIC REPRESENTATION FROM THE SEL ROUNDTABLE, JUNE 10, 2018
BY GREG GERSCH

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING: A PRIMER

WHAT IS SEL?

Defined in various ways, SEL helps children and adults acquire and use 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.”³

These “soft skills” are not fixed traits as once believed, but can be taught and learned in school and other environments. SEL may be delivered in standalone classes, integrated into school curricula, or conducted in after-school or non-formal settings—as long as it takes place in a safe, caring environment with facilitators who are themselves healthy and able to role-model SEL skills.

Research from Harvard’s Easel Lab defines three domains of SEL competencies.

- Cognitive: cognitive flexibility, response inhibition, attention control and working memory;
- Emotional: emotional knowledge and expression; emotion and behavior management; and
- Social: basic social engagement.

Activities that focus on these domains help children and adolescents develop into adults who are pro-social, cooperative and able to resolve conflicts peacefully.

Effective SEL programs are gender-sensitive and carefully adapted for social and cultural appropriateness in specific contexts and for specific age groups. As important as the curriculum, SEL instructors need to be able to model these abilities.

Particular lessons might involve, for instance, learning to identify emotions in oneself and others; managing stress through breathing and movement; cooperative problem solving; or a role-play in defusing conflict.

WHY IS SEL IMPORTANT?

SEL is a proven pathway to enhanced wellbeing, equity, and learning outcomes; it affects both individuals and societies in the short as well as long term. While SEL outcomes are important for all children, they are absolutely critical in the destabilizing environments of crisis and conflict.

WHY IS SEL CRITICAL TO EDUCATION IN CONFLICT AND CRISIS (EICC)?

Conflict and crisis threaten children’s social, emotional, and cognitive development. Children who experience severe and prolonged adversity can have a “toxic stress” response that damages brain development. This response can harm a child’s health, behavior, relationships and ability to learn—for years or decades following the stressful events.⁴ However, SEL opportunities provided in safe educational environments, with nurturing teachers and other caregivers, have been shown to help reduce or reverse the detrimental effects of toxic stress.⁵ SEL can also increase community cohesion and stability, and promote non-violent conflict resolution.

- SEL fosters a quality, inclusive, and safe learning environment where education in turn can restore children’s sense of stability, dignity, and hope.⁶

- SEL increases students' attachment to school—and when children and youth remain in school, they are less vulnerable to violence, abuse, exploitation and recruitment into sex work, armed groups, or crime.⁷
- SEL explicitly develops inhibitory control, self-awareness, positive self-image, awareness of and empathy for others, healthy relationships, and problem-solving and responsible decision-making—all of which reduce tensions, and the likelihood of violence, between groups.

HOW DOES SEL PROGRAMMING SUPPORT UNITED STATES POLICY?

SEL intrinsically supports the Reinforcing Education Accountability in Development (READ) Act of 2017. In fact, SEL programs are key to complying with its provisions, which call for basic education programs that:

- “(1) respond to the needs and capacities of developing countries to improve literacy and other basic skills;
- (2) ... expand access to safe learning environments (including by breaking down barriers to basic education for women and girls), and support the engagement of parents in their children's education;
- (3) promote education as a foundation for economic growth;
- (4) monitor and evaluate basic education programs in partner countries; and
- (5) promote U.S. values, especially respect for all persons and freedoms of religion, speech, and the press.”⁸

The READ Act also prioritizes assistance for countries where “there is the greatest opportunity to reduce childhood and adolescence exposure to or engagement in violent extremist ideologies.”⁹ These are the same areas where SEL could make the greatest difference.

WHAT EVIDENCE SUPPORTS THE VALUE OF SEL?

Hundreds of studies document what SEL adds to the lives of individuals and communities. Although most have been conducted in the United States, an increasing body of evidence on SEL is emerging from developing countries.¹⁰

ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT. Students in SEL programs have shown an 11-percentage-point gain in grades and test scores.¹¹ Studies find SEL interventions significantly increase students' commitment to school as well,¹² leading to better attendance and higher graduation rates.¹³ A recent study from the International Rescue Committee (IRC) found that students in both Lebanon and Niger who participated in an SEL-based tutoring program achieved higher literacy and numeracy scores than their peers who did not participate in this program.¹⁴

EQUITY. Important for its own sake, equity also promotes social cohesion and stability. SEL is a powerful pathway to equity. Two decades of randomized, controlled trials show that the most marginalized youth, who struggle the most with behavior and learning, benefit the most from SEL, especially in academic outcomes.

Conversely, a recent study of the relationship between educational inequalities and violent conflict—covering 50 years and nearly 100 countries—found causality in both directions. Especially since 2000, where inequality in education rises, so does the risk of violent conflict, which in turn exacerbates

inequality in education. These effects are strongest in fragile states. Continuing to provide education during conflict, especially to disadvantaged groups, “may be an essential element of peacebuilding in the wake of violence,” the study concludes.¹⁵

NON-VIOLENT CONFLICT MANAGEMENT. With SEL integrated in schools, students perform better at problem solving and use more strategies to resolve conflicts than children in comparison groups.¹⁶ They show more empathy and are less likely to resort to violence than their peers.

MITIGATING TOXIC STRESS. The harmful effects of toxic stress can be blocked or even reversed when children have safe learning environments, nurturing relationships with key adults, and various SEL activities. SEL strengthens healing and coping mechanisms for dealing with violence and suffering.¹⁷

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT. Long-term studies show a strong relationship between social and emotional skills and positive career outcomes. For instance, self-control in childhood correlates with higher educational attainment, career success, and personal finances, in addition to better health and lower substance abuse.

ECONOMIC RETURNS. Researchers estimate the return on investment to SEL interventions as \$11 for each \$1 spent.¹⁸ Economic benefits range from increased health, work and earnings—to the reduction of substance abuse, conflict, crime, and incarceration.

WHY USAID SHOULD TAKE THE LEAD TO DEVELOP SEL IN CRISIS AND CONFLICT

The need for high-quality academic and social-emotional education in crisis environments has never been greater. UNICEF reports that the number of children in conflict zones has risen by 74 percent over the last decade. Today some 27 million children in conflict zones are out of school. More than 28 million children were forcibly displaced either as refugees or within their own countries in 2015 alone. Nearly 66 million children and adults have fled their homes in recent years due to violence and conflict, according to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, UNHCR.

Currently 25 major conflicts are sparking humanitarian crises. Seventeen of these conflicts also have a “critical” or “significant” impact on U.S. interests, according to the Council on Foreign Relations.

Education during crisis gives children and communities hope for the future. It can be a powerful tool in helping communities rebuild through healing some of the trauma; encouraging long-term social cohesion, reconciliation, and peace-building; and preparing communities for reconstruction and social and economic development.¹⁹

It would serve our country well for USAID to set the agenda for SEL for at least the next five years. USAID leadership would address national security and ensure a U.S. perspective through funding for research on SEL. The consequences of not actively promoting research, implementation, adaptation, and evaluation of SEL in conflict and crisis could be alarming--both for those caught in tragic situations and for the United States. Without effective interventions, displaced, uneducated, and highly stressed children will be all the more vulnerable to extremist approaches—both as victims and possible perpetrators.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION GUIDANCE

The U.S. Government (USG) has the ability and influence to develop this young field and lead progress in SEL around the globe, as it did with the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) and spurring literacy. Below we offer three sets of recommendations for USG and USAID to consider for putting effective SEL programming front and center in the new education strategy, particularly in areas affected by conflict and crisis.

RECOMMENDATION I

THE U.S. GOVERNMENT SHOULD INCLUDE SKILLS-BASED SEL IN ALL EDUCATION PROGRAMMING, WITH SPECIAL ATTENTION IN CRISIS-AFFECTED CONTEXTS (EICC).

Implementation Guidance:

- **Learning:** Clearly define and measure progress in learning SEL skills. Programming should include both formal and non-formal settings, and cost-effective approaches to strengthening education institutions and systems of delivery.
- **System Strengthening:** SEL programs need to reach beyond school to encompass the social ecosystem of teachers, families, and communities. Where relevant, the programs should also consider the national, provincial or district, and local education ecosystems--including policies and practices--as they relate to SEL outcomes.

Rationale:

SEL helps keep children and youth in school, improves academic and other life outcomes, increases equity in education, and reduces the risk of violent conflict.

In addition, the READ Act requires basic education programs to:

“Expand access to safe learning environments; promote education as a foundation for economic growth; and promote American values such as respect for all people and freedom of religion and speech....”

SEL contributes to all of the above.

RECOMMENDATION II

USAID SHOULD ENSURE, AT MINIMUM, FOUR MAIN INGREDIENTS FOR IMPLEMENTATION OF SEL--ALONG WITH SUFFICIENT FUNDING FOR THESE AND FOR THEIR EVALUATION.

Implementation Guidance:

- 1) Provision of and access to a safe, supportive learning environment, in and out of schools;
- 2) Care for the wellbeing of teachers and other key caregivers, in addition to training, so that they can create a positive environment and model appropriate behaviors;

- 3) Implementation of high-quality, contextualized SEL interventions, with feedback loops for learning and adaptation;
- 4) A system to collect and exchange learning regarding what works-- as well as how, where, for whom, under what conditions and at what cost.

Prerequisites for these essentials include:

- Needs assessments to understand the local social and cultural context.
- Teachers and other caregivers taking a pivotal role in the assessments and entire program cycle, since they are the experts in the local environment.
- A socio-ecological approach. For a safe and conducive environment, all adults who teach and care for children should be involved. USAID should investigate how best to provide SEL and safe spaces to teachers, parents, and others. Only when adults are well themselves can they teach and model healthy behaviors to children.
- Adaptation of curriculum and methods to the local context and culture, different age groups, minorities, and the marginalized, including the differently abled.
- Gender and social inclusion considerations. These issues are important to equity in education and beyond. Studies show that increasing gender equality in education can decrease the likelihood of violent conflict by up to 37 percent.²⁰
- Participatory approaches from start to finish. Participation fosters ownership as well as infusing projects with valuable local knowledge. As possible, it should involve parents, caregivers, teachers, and communities.

RECOMMENDATION III

USAID SHOULD TAKE THE LEAD TO ADVANCE THE SEL FIELD INTERNATIONALLY BY INVESTING IN RESEARCH, PARTICULARLY IN CRISIS AND CONFLICT CONTEXTS.

Implementation Guidance:

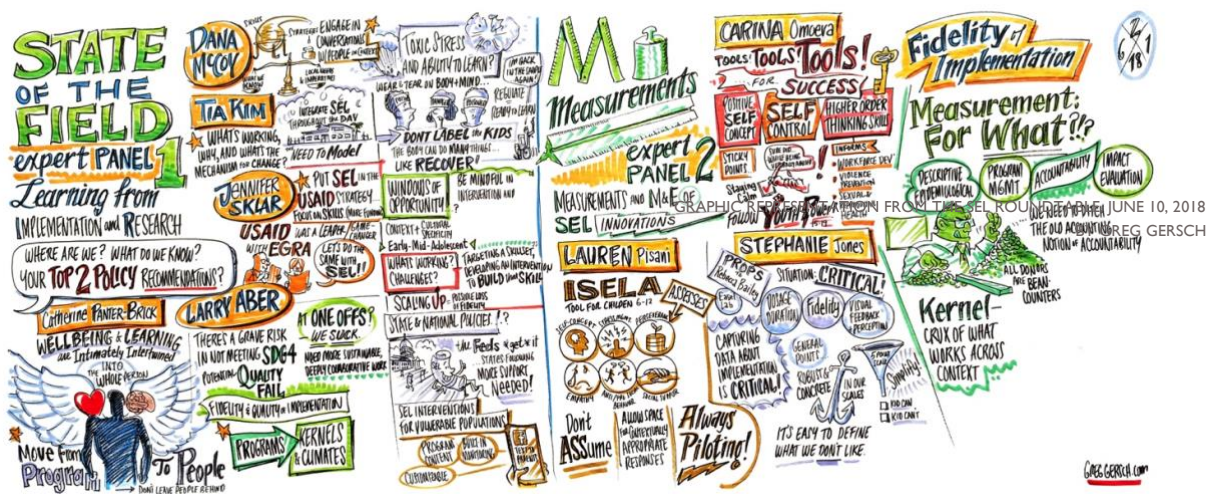
The agency should support:

- Developing a common framework and terminology so that, as USG leadership and investment guide the field, SEL programs and approaches can be easily understood and compared.
- Expanding the evidence base for SEL work in developing countries and, in particular, conflict and crisis contexts.
- Specifying desired outcomes and quality standards, possibly to include a set of core skills that can then be contextualized.
- Elaborating developmentally appropriate measures to:

- assess progress toward SEL outcomes,
- determine which elements are central to outcome success, and
- what works best for whom, in which context, for how long, under what conditions and at what cost.

These efforts should be informed by:

- Implementation science, to help us know how well implemented the core ingredients are, for whom, and at what cost.
- An understanding of “measurement for what?” Measurement tools measure different things for different reasons and must be fit for purpose.
- Acknowledgement that RFAs/RFPs will need to:
 - include funds for research on implementation, impact, and measurement;
 - support continuous quality improvement through enabling contextualization and adaptation;
 - support meaningful learning, by requiring grantees and contractors to explore not just what works (or not), but also how, where, for whom, under what conditions and at what cost.
- Research on the most effective teaching modalities for SEL in various contexts, and
- Research on institutional capacity-strengthening approaches that lead to the greatest improvements in SEL outcomes in crisis and conflict zones.



-
- ¹For wide-ranging descriptions of research, including meta-studies, see particularly publications by
- the International Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE), <http://www.ineesite.org/en/>,
 - the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), <https://casel.org>, and
 - the Aspen Institute's National Commission on Social, Emotional, & Academic Development, www.aspeninstitute.org.
- ²Belfield et al., 2015
- ³CASEL, 2013
- ⁴Shonkoff, J. P., Garner, A. S., Siegel, B. S., Dobbins, M. I., Earls, M.F., McGuinn, L., & Wood, D. L. (2012). The lifelong effects of early childhood adversity and toxic stress. *Pediatrics*, 129(1), e232-e246
- ⁵See, for example: Durlak et al. (2011). The impact of enhancing students social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development*, 82(1), 405–432; and Yeager, D. S., Miu, A. S., Powers, J., & Dweck, C. S. (2013). Implicit theories of personality and attributions of hostile intent: a meta-analysis, an experiment, and a longitudinal intervention. *Child Development*, 84(5), 1651–1667; and Dajani, Rana, Panter-Brick, Catherine, et al. (2018). Hair cortisol concentrations in war-affected adolescents: A prospective intervention trial. *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, 89, 138–146
- ⁶IASC, 2007; Talbot, 2013. Sources in endnotes 6–9, 11, 14 and 15 are as cited in INEE, 2016.
- ⁷Ibid
- ⁸<https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/601>
- ⁹Ibid
- ¹⁰Peyton et al., 2008
- ¹¹Durlak et al., 2011, cited by the Aspen Institute, 2017
- ¹²Hawkins et al., 2001
- ¹³CASEL, 2008, 2013
- ¹⁴The International Rescue Committee, 2018. Impact Report 1.1: IRC Healing Classrooms Retention Support Programming Improves Syrian Refugee Children's Learning in Lebanon, and Impact Report 2.1: IRC Healing Classrooms Remedial Tutoring Programming Improves Nigerian And Nigerian Children's Learning
- ¹⁵FHI 360, Education Policy and Data Center, 2016
- ¹⁶Battistich, Solomon, Watson and Schaps, 1989
- ¹⁷Wessells and Edgerton, 2008
- ¹⁸Belfield et al., 2015
- ¹⁹Nicolai, 2009; Novelli & Smith, 2011
- ²⁰FHI 360 study of Education Inequality and Violent Conflict, 2016