Social and Emotional Learning Systematic Review - Study Brief

PURPOSE & OBJECTIVES

Social and emotional learning (SEL) has emerged as a key strategy for donors working to improve education and other outcomes in developing and humanitarian contexts. However, most evidence around the effectiveness of SEL programming comes from the Global North. To fill this gap, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) commissioned the Research for Effective Education Programming – Africa (REEP-A) task order to conduct a systematic review of the emerging evidence on SEL and soft skills interventions in development and humanitarian contexts. Specifically, this review has three primary aims: 1) to uncover what SEL evidence exists in humanitarian and development settings; 2) to understand what the evidence tells us, and 3) differentiate the findings by learning context, setting, and population. The resulting evidence gap map and report provides an overview of the existing evidence[i] on the effects of SEL and soft skills interventions on key outcome areas, including social and emotional competencies, academic success, well-being, health, and resilience, in development and humanitarian settings. This study brief complements the gap map and report by highlighting key findings and recommendations that emerged in the review.

Research Questions

RQ1. What breadth, depth, and type of evidence exists on SEL and soft skills in development and humanitarian settings?

RQ2. What are the effects of SEL programs on children and the communities around them in developing and crisis-affected settings?

RQ3. How does the evidence for SEL programs differ within and across populations?

INCLUSION CRITERIA

Publication date
2000 to March 2021

Context
Development or humanitarian

Population
Children and youth

Focus area
SEL/soft skills
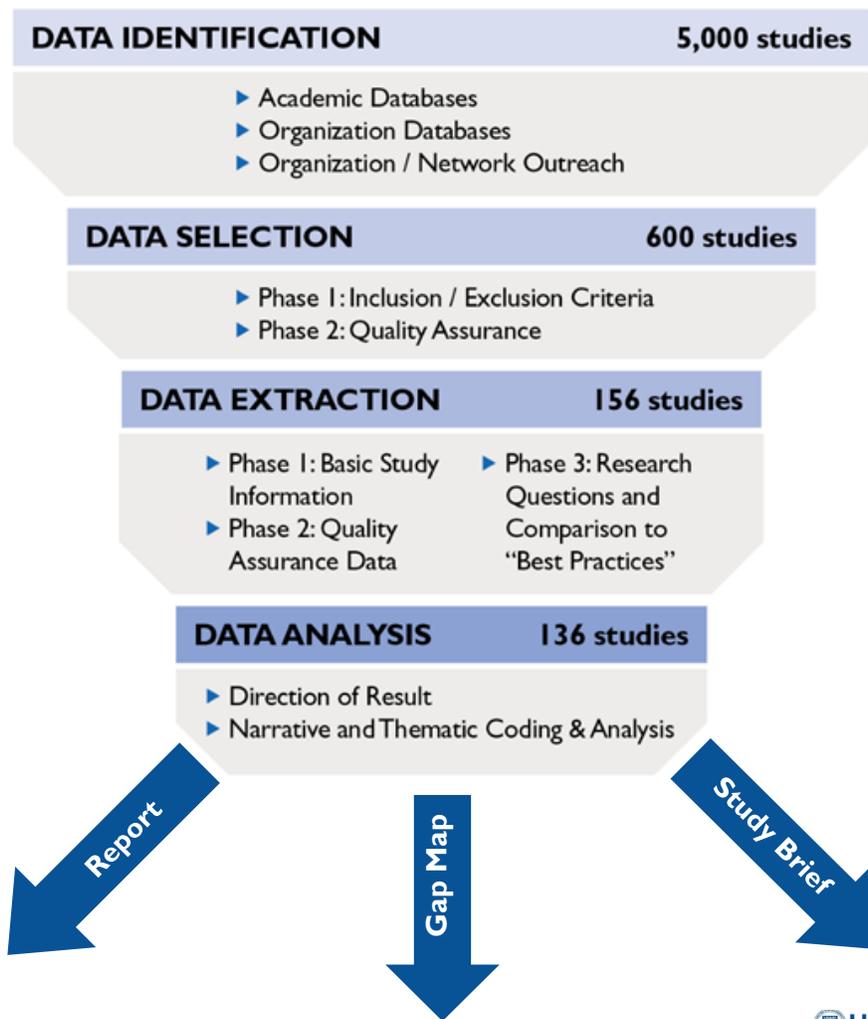
Relevance
Connects to education or learning

Publication language
English

RESEARCH METHODS

This systematic review used a four-step research process, following the methodology set out by the Cochrane Collaboration and the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie) and leveraging education quality criteria as defined by Building Evidence in Education (BE[2]). We *identified* approximately 5,000 articles through a three-pronged approach: 1) searching academic databases, 2) searching organizational databases, and 3) reaching out directly to relevant networks and organizations. We initially *selected* approximately 600 articles based on the inclusion criteria. Out of a total of 156 studies of SEL programs for primary school-aged children (6 to 14 years old) and youth (15 to 29 years old)[ii] in development and humanitarian settings selected to undergo a full quality assurance review, we *extracted* data for 136 studies that met the minimum standard of rigor for inclusion (quality score ≥ 20).[iii] We *analyzed* the studies according to our three primary RQs, and compared them to criteria for best practices based on evidence from the Global North.[iv]

DATA IDENTIFICATION — 5,000 studies
- Academic Databases
- Organization Databases
- Organization / Network Outreach

DATA SELECTION — 600 studies
- Phase 1: Inclusion / Exclusion Criteria
- Phase 2: Quality Assurance

DATA EXTRACTION — 156 studies
- Phase 1: Basic Study Information
- Phase 2: Quality Assurance Data
- Phase 3: Research Questions and Comparison to "Best Practices"

DATA ANALYSIS — 136 studies
- Direction of Result
- Narrative and Thematic Coding & Analysis

Report → Gap Map → Study Brief

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL) SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

Final Report

August 2021

KEY FINDINGS

RQ1. Breadth, Depth, and Type of Evidence

One-hundred and thirty-six studies representing 110 unique interventions with SEL components met the inclusion criteria. Likewise, the majority (n=85) of these studies were impact evaluations, though they varied in rigor and quality. Likewise, the majority (n=61) of the interventions occurred in a development context, with nearly half of the studies (n=51) occurring in sub-Saharan Africa. Although the searches returned literature across all regions and populations, there were still major gaps in the quality and type of research. Only one-third of the studies met the criteria for "very high" rigor and no implementation studies met the inclusion and quality criteria.

DISTRIBUTION OF
UNIQUE INTERVENTIONS
BY COUNTRY

- 1 intervention
- 2–4 interventions
- 5 or more interventions
- Countries included within the SEL study
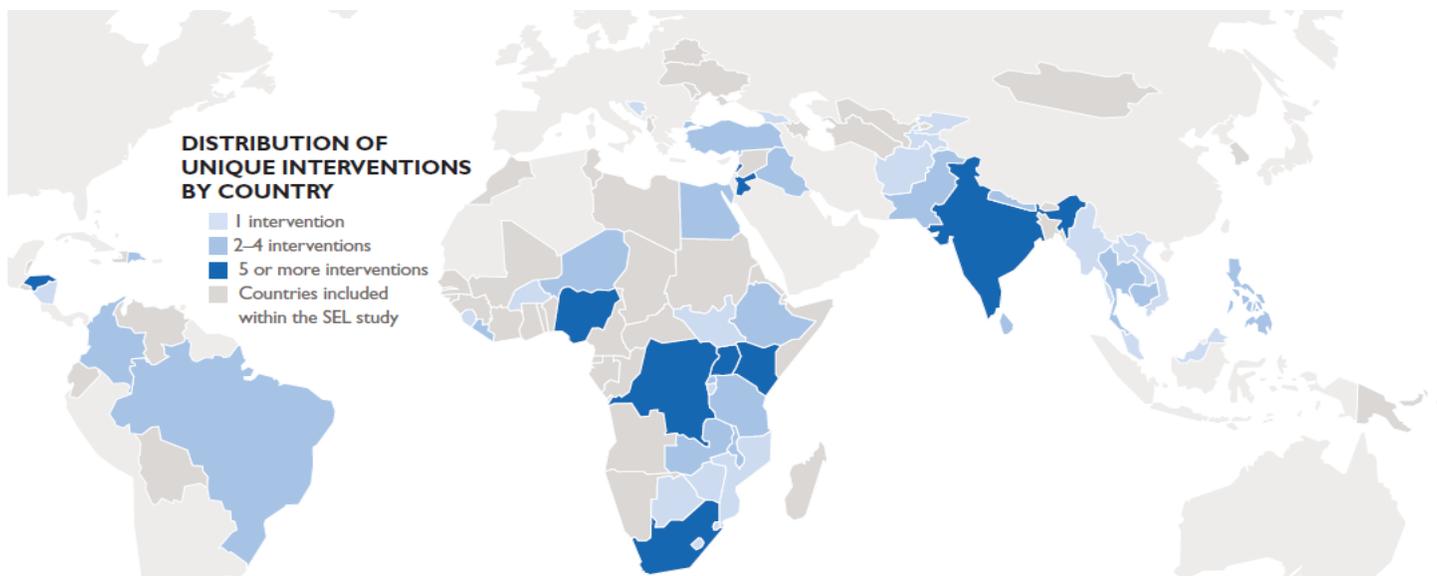
The figures below highlights the proportion of studies by region, target population, research type and rigor.

Region

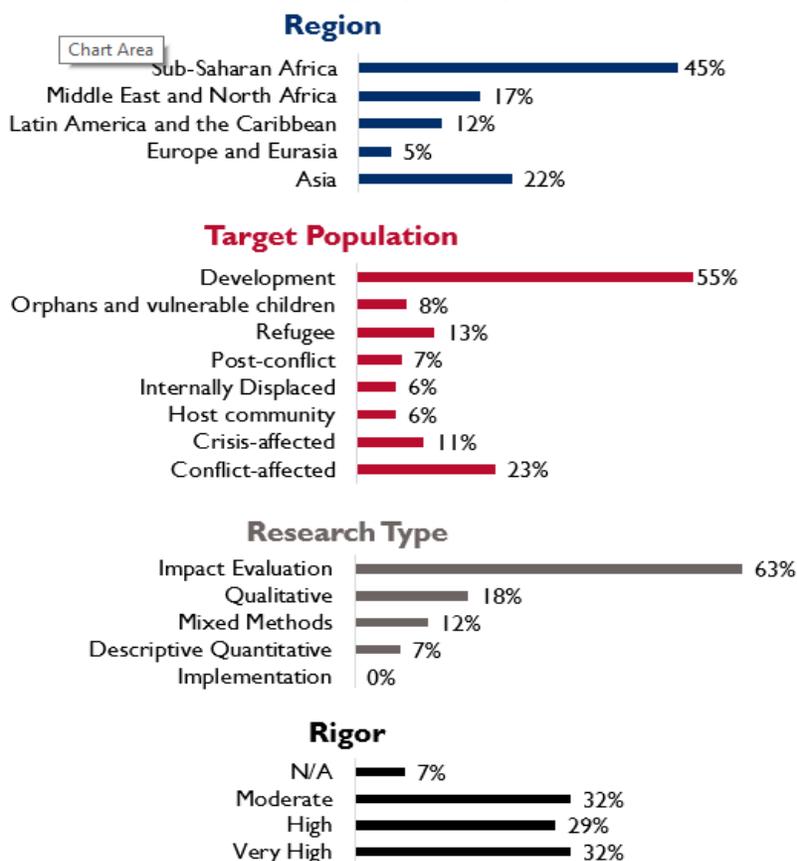| Region	%
Sub-Saharan Africa	45%
Middle East and North Africa	17%
Latin America and the Caribbean	12%
Europe and Eurasia	5%
Asia	22%

Target Population

Target Population	%
Development	55%
Orphans and vulnerable children	8%
Refugee	13%
Post-conflict	7%
Internally Displaced	6%
Host community	6%
Crisis-affected	11%
Conflict-affected	23%

Research Type

Research Type	%
Impact Evaluation	63%
Qualitative	18%
Mixed Methods	12%
Descriptive Quantitative	7%
Implementation	0%

Rigor

Rigor	%
N/A	7%
Moderate	32%
High	29%
Very High	32%

KEY FINDINGS (cont'd)

RQ2. Effects of SEL Programs

Interventions used a variety of implementation approaches which we catalogued by classroom management strategies, teaching practices, targeted SEL skills training – either integrated or standalone, and multi-tiered. Studies also targeted and measured a wide range of outcomes; the greatest proportion targeted social and emotional outcomes followed by well-being outcomes.

SEL Approach

Approach	%
Multi-tiered / Multi-component	10%
Targeted SEL skills training – Standalone	70%
Targeted SEL skills training – Integrated	18%
Teaching practices	17%
Classroom management strategies	10%

Outcomes

Outcome	%
Community	5%
School	10%
Teacher	8%
Workforce	23%
Well-being	65%
Academic	15%
Social / Emotional	74%
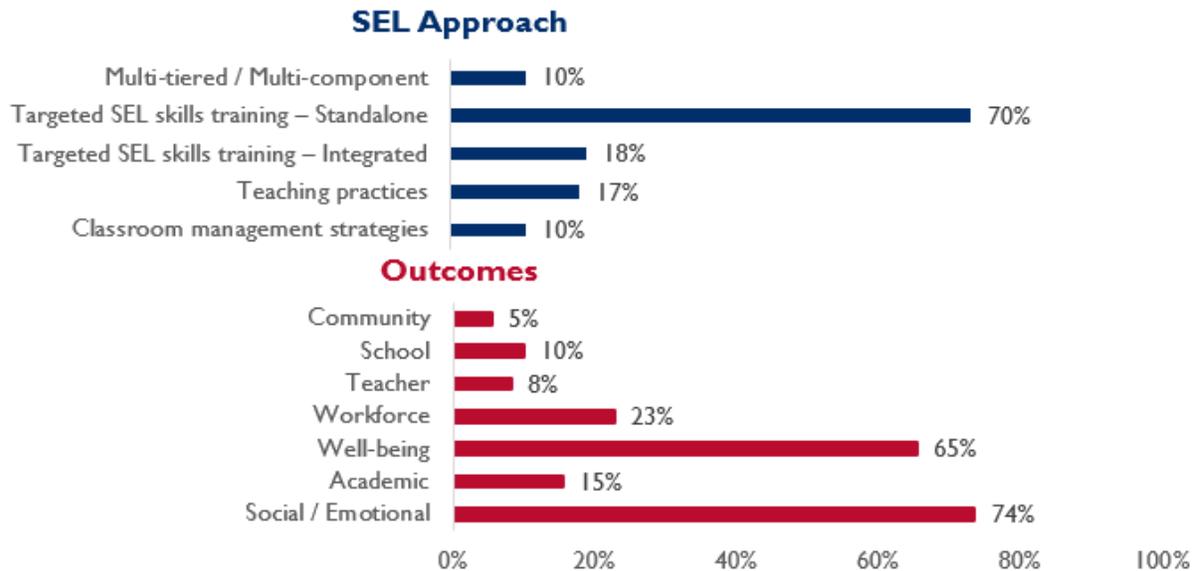
While the existing evidence from humanitarian and development contexts is not as conclusive as the literature from the Global North, we found that the following trends in approaches and implementation factors support effectiveness.

- **Targeted, explicit SEL instruction is associated with positive effects** on social and emotional and other outcomes. Interventions that actively engage children and youth, provide focused time on developing SEL skills, and explicitly target specific competencies prove to be the most effective, similar to findings from the existing evidence base from the Global North.[v]

- Studies that integrated SEL often saw **promising effects on other (academic, workforce, health) outcomes, even when no effects on social and emotional competencies were found**. Even when SEL outcomes did not see increases, the additional focus on social and emotional competencies was frequently correlated with other intended outcomes, perhaps due to the improved teaching practices resulting from SEL training or because SEL outcomes were poorly measured.

- There is **insufficient research on the effects of teachers' own SEL skills and knowledge** on student outcomes. While some studies showed correlations between student outcomes and teacher's knowledge and SEL skills, there is a lack of rigorous research on teacher-related outcomes.

- **Interventions that primarily targeted SEL did not see improvements in mental health** outcomes, and vice versa. SEL should not be used as a replacement for targeted mental health interventions, nor do mental health interventions necessarily build SEL skills. Additional mental health supports and more targeted services for those children and youth with greater needs should be layered on top of SEL programs that are provided for the general student population.

KEY FINDINGS (cont'd)

RQ3. Results Differ Within and Across Populations

Across humanitarian and development contexts, SEL programs led to different effects for male versus female children and youth. Differences across gender intersected with their other identities and factors, including age, exposure to conflict, displacement, region, ethnicity, disability, socioeconomic status, and urbanicity.

- **Effects of SEL programs differ by age and gender.** Within and across studies, boys and girls and older and younger children saw different outcomes. These differences interacted with other factors, including the specific context and program design, to encourage or discourage positive outcomes for specific ages and genders.

- **Context matters.** We found multiple studies that assessed the same intervention in different contexts, and across each, the effects on their target population differed. Without engaging local communities, a program may contradict local values, norms, and practices, which can undermine its effectiveness.

- **Marginalized groups that are targeted and supported within an intervention often outperform nonmarginalized groups** on SEL or other target outcomes. When the specific needs of orphans and vulnerable children, including children with disabilities, are taken into account in the program design, these children often saw the greatest gains from interventions. When their needs were not adequately addressed, these children did not benefit as much as their peers.

- **Structural issues interfere with the effects of SEL programs**. In acute crises, research showed limited effects of SEL programs on children's skills, well-being, and mental health. This was especially true for sub-populations such as girls who may face additional safety issues or obstacles to achieving academic or workforce outcomes.

CROSS-CUTTING THEMES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Gender. More than half of the studies disaggregated results by sex, and many demonstrated differences in outcomes by sex. Yet, most programs are not consciously addressing differing needs based on gender.

- Locally informed and age-appropriate gender-responsive approaches should be deliberately integrated into intervention design from the outset through to completion.
- Gender-sensitive, disaggregated data should be required for monitoring and research across all stages, including collection, analysis, reporting, and dissemination.

Disability. Programs rarely addressed disabilities in targeted or responsive ways, but those that did demonstrated strong positive outcomes for these children and youth.

- Interventions should include more targeted, inclusive approaches for children and youth with disabilities, such as providing transportation to support access and incorporating materials that teach respect for children with disabilities into SEL lessons.
- More research and disability sensitive data are needed to better understand and address the needs of children and youth with disabilities in humanitarian and development settings.

Equity. Very few studies deliberately discussed equity and how programs addressed equity in their activities. Those that did were funded by USAID.

- Equity-responsive practices such as differentiated learning spaces and training that specifically targets marginalized sub-populations should be deliberately integrated into intervention design.
- More equity analyses are needed in order to ensure programs do not contribute to existing inequalities.

Cost-Effectiveness. The few studies that discussed program costs or included a cost analysis pointed to benefits to society for SEL programming, though methods and approaches were inconsistent, making comparisons difficult.

- Cost measurement planning should be included into SEL program evaluation design, and accurate, relevant, comparative cost data should be collected throughout the research process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

RESEARCH

Although we found promising evidence on SEL programs in development and humanitarian contexts, *additional rigorous research is necessary to better understand how SEL competencies are developed, for whom, and under what circumstances*. The existing evidence does not yet demonstrate exactly how social and emotional skills are most effectively developed, or how the acquisition of these skills impacts longer-term outcomes. There is also little research on the "black box" of what takes place in the implementation of SEL programs. As such, researchers should *conduct additional research on implementation, causal pathways, and long-term outcomes related to SEL.* Furthermore, current research is based primarily on self-report measures, which can be biased. The field must therefore *develop more objective and transferrable SEL measures, such as performance-based measures.*

POLICY

This study demonstrated the dearth of empirical evidence on SEL policies. However, it also showed the need for *systems and policies that support teachers and schools to implement SEL effectively*. The limited research on policies explored in this review show the potential for a disconnect between policy and practice. Thus, *policies need to be tied to resources for training, monitoring, and ongoing support, based on relevant, local evidence.*

PRACTICE

SEL programs that actively engage participants, focus time on building SEL skills, and explicitly teach SEL show the greatest gains in social and emotional competencies and other outcomes. It is vital to *monitor and assess active, focused, and explicit SEL programs.* Additionally, these programs must *align with teachers' and students' needs and realities* and *provide sufficient training and ongoing support for educators*. Educators' own needs were scarcely addressed within the existing literature, highlighting an important gap which future research should examine. Further *SEL programs should be developed in collaboration with communities and caregivers*, to ensure context relevance. When designing interventions and measures, the *specific context and target population should be consulted* to ensure programming is responsive to their needs and that SEL approaches are relevant for target communities. SEL programs should focus on creating an enabling environment for students to develop social and emotional competencies and should not be expected to address distinct mental health outcomes. SEL programs should *provide referrals to additional services* for participants who have greater mental health needs.

INTEGRATION AND COORDINATION

SEL should *consider the whole socio-ecological system within which a child develops.* Within the classroom or learning environment *SEL skills should be taught in a focused, explicit, and targeted manner.* Teachers, parents, caregivers, and community members should be engaged in the development, implementation, and monitoring of programs. However, children and youth cannot be expected to develop SEL skills within broader systems that interrupt the development of these competencies and well-being.

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[i] These findings are based on published studies and reports, or those that were shared with the research team in draft form, that met the inclusion criteria described in this study brief. Findings and recommendations do not include ongoing or future opportunities for research related to SEL and soft skills.

[ii] Due to the limited scope of work and unique priorities and approaches for social and emotional development within early childhood (EC), research primarily targeting EC (ages 3 to 5) was only included in the first phase of review in response to RQ1.

[iii] The research team applied a quality assurance checklist, which was adapted from the Building Evidence in Education (BE[2]) guidelines, to evaluate the rigor and strength of the evidence for each study.

[iv] Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' Social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development, 82*(1), 405–432.

[v] Durlak et al., 2011