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Social and Emotional Learning Infused Programs in Adversity Contexts

Research has demonstrated repeatedly that emotions are strongly connected to learning and that children who receive social and emotional learning (SEL) instruction are more connected to teachers and school, more engaged in learning, more motivated to learn, more well- behaved and less likely to engage in risky behavior, and able to perform better academically.[i] This paper will review the areas of SEL programs that have been proven to be effective and determine how these interventions could be best piloted and sustained in conflict-affected countries or contexts. Key questions in include: What is the role of classroom climate and teacher training in SEL programming? How can SEL be culturally relevant and adapted to different contexts? How should SEL How can SEL be operationalized and implemented in education systems so that SEL is sustainable?

While the positive impact of SEL on learning outcomes is quite known in the developed worlds of the United States, evaluations on SEL programs in low-resource, conflict-affected countries have been scarce. The paper will first examine recent evidence of the effectiveness of SEL programs through a review of impact evaluations and case studies that are statistically robust and believed to be relevant and adaptable to other contexts. A few promising practices in conflict-ridden settings will also be highlighted.

Background:

Conflict severely impacts the psychosocial well-being of children. Adverse environmental experiences due to war, violence, and poverty profoundly impact the life course outcomes of a child. Without adequate protection and guidance in conflict settings, children often have poor mental health and behavior linked with poor performance and learning outcomes. Research has shown that children with aggressive or disruptive behaviors that do not learn emotional management skills often display such behaviors through adulthood.[ii] Likewise parents and teachers' mental health in conflict-affected situations also affect their ability to care for children. Unfortunately, cycles of violence and abuse are easily perpetuated in the classroom environment and such situations lead to long-term detrimental effects for a child's development and future outcomes.[iii]

SEL is important in conflict and crisis settings because it aims to improve the ability of children to cope and recover from adversity, perform better academically, manage and de-escalate conflict situations and thus has a significant role in building resilience. SEL instruction is a kind of peace education which improves skills to develop behavioral changes that prevent the occurrence or recurrence of conflict and create conditions necessary for peace.[iv] In societies emerging from conflict, the role of SEL, in the short term, is to build resilience which is defined as "the ability to recover, perform and transform from situations of adversity."[v] As for the long-term goal, quality education through SEL builds social capital by investing in the social and emotional health of the next generation and strengthening connections between schools, families and communities.[vi]

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While educational policies have reflected a growing interest in the development of social and emotional skills as a means to improve well-being and performance, the definition of social and emotional learning may often vary between different actors and humanitarian agencies. In this paper, SEL refers to the definition provided by the Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL):

"the 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."[vii] The five domains reflected in this definition include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

The aim of SEL instruction is to ultimately empower children and youth to be agents of their own well-being and develop more coping and resiliency skills to recover from conflict, crisis, violence and trauma. Education resilience requires individual strength but also demands that there is an availability of opportunities, resources and services. Accordingly, evidence-based SEL programs consist of two components: creating safe learning environments and providing social competency instruction.[viii] Creating a safe learning environment is a necessary foundation in order to ensure protection, provide routines and a sense of normalcy. Successful SEL programs also complement safe environments with skill-building - where explicit SEL instruction has a designated time slot, is infused in course curriculum, and where students are given the opportunity to demonstrate SEL skills.

Key Findings from evidence-based research in developed countries:

Social and emotional skills development can be effectively promoted and supported through learning environments such as schools. A systematic review on work for mental health in schools found that interventions with the most impact on mental health, social, emotional and educational outcomes included integrated SEL classroom instruction, emphasized teaching skills and teacher education, promoted student engagement in positive activities in and out of the classroom, and broad parent and community involvement in program planning, implementation, and evaluation.[ix] Schools are a natural and effective medium because school actors play a significant role in combining both academic and SEL strategies and serve as a connection point between families and the broader community. International development and humanitarian organizations have also rightly recognized that "classroom-based interventions must take a coordinated, systemic, whole-child, school-wide approach in order to be effective and sustainable."[x]

The World Bank and International Rescue Committee (IRC) has advocated a "three-tiered approach for SEL": classroom and school climate, teaching pedagogy, student skill building.[xi]

Creating safe and appropriate learning environments is a necessary foundation to SEL so that students are able to feel safe, cared for and supported. School and classroom environments need to be structured so that students "feel a sense of control and predictability," and "understand the rules and consequences for their behavior." Scholars have recognized that positive school environments and SEL

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go hand-in-hand, each supporting the other.[xii] There exists solid evidence that a positive learning environment strongly influences a student's attachment to school which significantly increases student academic performance.[xiii] A more caring and safe classroom environment also improves a range of social and emotional skills which leads to the second component of SEL programming – SEL instruction. Such classrooms create more supportive and cooperative learning environments. Cooperative learning has proven to improve interpersonal relationships among students and contribute to motivation, psychological health and achievement of students.[xiv]

Quality education through effective teaching pedagogy and instructional practice is important so that students find meaning in attending school and can receive SEL instruction. Effective teaching pedagogy is promoted and sustained through teacher training. The International Rescue Committee's SEL program called *Healing Classrooms* devotes their program especially to teacher training and enhancing teacher well-being as a means to achieve effective SEL instruction. Equally important is the program's efforts to strengthen teacher identity, making teachers feel valued and developing a career path as to create a longer term commitment to teaching.[xv] Teacher well-being is an important tenet of SEL programming as well as the focus on teacher support and supervision for SEL instruction.

Enhanced teacher-student connection also strengthens a child's attachment to school which leads to improved social competence, pro-social behaviors as well as higher participation and performance in school.[xvi] My Teaching Partner is a SEL intervention that was developed on the premise that improving student-teacher interactions would lead to improved social and academic outcomes. The program was a consultation and web support model that provided constructive feedback on a teacher's teaching in terms of classroom management, and emotional and instructional support. The findings were significant in that the intervention group yielded significantly higher outcomes in positive peer interactions, behavioral engagement, instructional learning format, and analysis of problem-solving, with near significant effects on Academic Progress.[xvii]

Student skill building must be conducted with evidence-based and recommended best practices to be effective. An extensive review of SEL programming for preschool and elementary students revealed that the most effective SEL programs were integrated within academic content areas and included explicit social and emotional skills instruction as well as opportunities to practice these skills within and beyond the classroom."[xviii] Similarly, a meta-analysis of 213 school-based, universal SEL programs found that the use of four recommended practices in student skill building programs produced significant positive effects for targeted outcomes (social and emotional skills, attitude towards self and others, positive social behavior, conduct problems, emotional distress, academic performance). The four practices are: using a sequenced step-by-step training approach, using active forms of learning, focusing sufficient time on skill development, and explicit learning goals – which form the acronym SAFE.[xix]

Some programs work at the nexus of classroom climate, teacher-student interaction and skill building such as the U.S. program, RULER. The program aims to change the social-emotional climate of the classroom through teacher training and application of the RULER curriculum in order to develop emotional literacy as well as enhance emotional and instructional support. RULER encourages educators and students to analyze the emotional aspects of personal experiences, academic materials, and current

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events through five key emotion skills: Recognize, Understand, Label, Express and Regulate. A 2-year cluster randomized control trial found that schools that implemented RULER had better classroom organization, and greater emotional and instructional support compared to schools without RULER.[xx]

Emotional recognition and regulation are important skills of emotional intelligence. SEL programs have understandably placed much of the responsibility on teachers in creating a positive classroom climate and providing SEL instruction. Students themselves can also learn to take responsibility for their well-being. Practices for developing social and emotional skills can also be taught in order to empower children to be agents of their own emotional intelligence. For example, a program called Quiet-Time teaches students how to meditate for 12 minutes a day and was implemented school-wide in a San Francisco school that was profoundly affected by neighborhood violence. As a result, the school witnessed significant drops in the truancy and suspension rates and saw a great improvement in behavior of the students as well.[xxixxii] Meditation served as a take-home tool for children, a technique that develops social and emotional skills that children can practice on their own time even outside of school. More research is needed in exploring how to best implement such practices and the degree to which they are effective in different contexts.[xxiii] Such practices, if adapted appropriately to context, could prove especially beneficial for children in conflict-ridden settings.

Apart from explicit social-emotional skills instruction and teaching practices for emotional intelligence, social and emotional healing can also be achieved indirectly through constructive activities such as participating in cultural arts. A number of programs have been cited for aiming to generate the "skills, creative vision and confidence" to contribute to artistic culture of their country, or to "support self-directed learning" and "encourage students to express themselves."[xxiv] Extracurricular activities or engagement in the arts foster students' attachment to school and create opportunities for participation. Thus, students' intrinsic motivation to behave in pro-social ways increases, thereby decreasing deviant behavior in the school setting.[xxvxxvi]

SEL programming must include multiple dimensions of learning environments that reflect a child's social ecology: peers, school and family. In order to achieve significant and long-lasting gains in the social and emotional health of a child, there needs to be shared participation for reinforcing SEL skills and practices between schools as well as families. For this reason, the International Rescue Committee has identified family-based interventions as a priority and is running programs in Thailand and Burundi focused on family strengthening that involve impact evaluations and randomized control trials. According to the results of the First Quarterly Impact Monitoring survey of "New Generation: Burundi," intervention groups experienced a 58%- 87% increase in child well-being.[xxvii] Similar other research has reinforced the finding that family involvement in SEL programs increases the number of positive student outcomes as well as duration of the effects.[xxviii]

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Promising/Innovative Approaches in Conflict-affected countries:

Although the SEL programs in the United States or U.K. has proven to be effective (to varying extents) on both psychosocial and academic outcomes, there still remains a lack of evidence and rigorous evaluations for SEL programs in conflict-ridden or emergency contexts.[xxix] However, many well-designed and executed SEL programs in the United States have shown tremendous improvements in social-emotional well-being, school participation and academic achievement especially for at-risk children or in conflict-ridden contexts. For example, the program called 4R's conducted in 18 inner city schools[xxx] and Strong Start for kindergarten through second grade, high-risk students showed the greatest gains compared to other students in the treatment groups.[xxxi] These results are encouraging because they indicate that SEL instruction may be especially effective for children in conflict-affected countries, just as SEL instruction has demonstrated the greatest gains for at-risk children in terms of social and emotional competencies and academic achievement. Assuming the effects on at-risk children in the U.S. will produce a similar impact for children in conflict-ridden or emergency contexts, some of these programs could be replicated and adapted to conflict-affected countries.

A few SEL programs that are piloted conflict-affected countries are being rigorously examined for impact evaluations and have so far shown promising results. Opportunities for Equitable Access to Quality Basic Education (OPEQ) in DRC is one example of SEL programming in a low-resource conflict-affected context and is the first to use a cluster-randomized trial. The program aims to improve social, emotional and academic outcomes through quality of teaching and learning. It includes school and community engagement, and SEL in the form of 1) Integrated Curricula and 2) Teacher Professional Development. While a rigorous impact evaluation is underway, recent qualitative feedback was collected from children asked to report on their perceptions of support, cooperation and predictability. Within the first year, children assigned to the pilot cohort perceived their teachers to be more supportive than those who did not receive the intervention package.

Another promising program is the Healing Classrooms Initiative developed by IRC. With focus on student and teacher well-being in order to improved educational outcomes, the program aims to improve teacher training and community participation through program evaluation and staff training. The evaluation of Healing Classrooms has yielded positive and encouraging results based largely on qualitative and anecdotal reports of teachers and students. A 2005 internal assessment of the integration of Healing Classrooms into IRC's work in Afghanistan revealed that teachers made considerable improvements in their efforts to create more safe and child-centered learning environments that included regular routines and individualized attention. Teachers also employed more effective and creative teaching strategies such as integrating games, pictures and stories in the curriculum content.

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Conclusion

In summary, research based on case studies and impact assessments have found that each component of the three-tiered approach to social and emotional learning has significantly improved children's psychosocial and learning outcomes. For improving a safe and caring classroom environment, practices such as classroom management, cooperative learning and supportive teacher-student interaction prove to be very effective. In terms of teaching pedagogy and support, integrating SEL in classroom curriculum and providing teacher training in the form of feedback and reflection have yielded significant results. Student skill-building should reflect four recommended practices: sequenced, active, focused and explicit (SAFE).

Policy Recommendations for Operationalizing SEL in Education Programs affected by conflict:

1) **Recognition of the Importance SEL for Learning Outcomes**

Social and emotional competencies should be explicitly recognized as core learning outcomes as well as a means to improving academic performance within education systems and the broader community. SEL instruction must be integrated in the academic curriculum to ensure effective results. Once the importance of SEL is agreed upon, international humanitarian organizations, governments and relevant stakeholders can engage in cross-sectoral collaboration to include other sectors such as health, livelihoods in SEL programming efforts.

2) **Ensure SEL programs are a part of Conflict-Sensitive Education**

SEL programs in conflict-ridden contexts should not exist within a vacuum but as a part of an education system grounded in the framework of conflict-sensitive education. Programs will not be effective unless appropriate protection mechanisms are in place to ensure a safe learning atmosphere. Education systems should be inclusive, equal and provide quality and safe access to education. Promoting a positive and caring classroom climate through improved teacher-student interactions is a promising avenue.

3) **Adapt evidence-based SEL programs and interventions into contextually appropriate and culturally grounded mediums and practices.**

Relatively few rigorous impact evaluations have been conducted for SEL programs in conflict-affect countries. Replication and adaptation of evidence-based interventions in other settings require careful planning to ensure that interventions are culturally relevant and appropriate. Core education activities as well as extracurricular activities (such as the arts and sports) should incorporate SEL by reflecting a strong connection to local culture. The need for culturally adaptable interventions means that there is the need for universal interventions, not just for children under special psychosocial circumstances. In order for SEL instructional practices to be inclusive, education programs need to serve all children to help cope with day-to-day stressors that violence and conflict present, not just severe cases that need referrals.[xxxii]

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4) Integrate SEL within core education system structures and functions

Many schools fail to implement evidence-based prevention programs or use them with poor integrity, do not implement correctly or do not continue or sustain programs after pilot or developmental phase.[xxxiii] SEL must be sustained through the integration of already existing structures and functions of the long-term environment and school system. Continuous professional development needs to reflect training in SEL for school leadership. Teacher training should be prioritized not only because a huge onus placed on teachers for delivering quality instruction but because teachers serve as important figures in a child's life that model appropriate behaviors. Family and community partnerships ensure a holistic implementation of SEL across the spheres of a child's life. Finally, monitoring and evaluation systems must be developed to include SEL competencies as indicators and outcomes for success.

Challenges and Further Research:

According to a systematic review of the measures of social and emotional skills for children, there is little common consensus as regards to what is meant by social and emotional skills and there are few standardized and valid metrics for SEL outcomes. Given the growing interest in psychosocial aspects of learning and the current emphasis on monitoring and evaluation, there is a need to establish consistency and sustain the presence of measures and scales that are recognizable to academics and practitioners alike. Most of the measures used in impact evaluations are not repeatedly used and are "short-lived." Also, the practicalities of capturing certain domains such as "self-awareness" remain a challenge. The relative weak development in outcome measurement reflects the fact that evaluations pertaining to social and emotional skills are still in an emerging state. Outcome measures may not be culturally transferable and there exist differences in evaluation design due to different underlying frameworks, or the type of respondent or inconsistent terminology.[xxxiv]

In general, much more research is needed in terms of impact evaluations for SEL interventions in conflict-affected countries and settings. In addition, the effect of some promising practices that aim to develop emotional intelligence such as meditation, as well as other activities such as the arts or sports, have yet to be rigorously examined in such contexts.

Finally, research that examines the relative contribution of different intervention components can help to determine which specific skills or combinations of skills lead to different outcomes at different developmental periods. It is likely that the combination of improvements in student social-emotional competencies, school environment, teaching practices and expectations, and student-teacher relationships all together contribute to students' immediate and long-term outcomes in behavior.[xxxv]

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