

“Social emotional development for teachers”: An innovative program to improve teacher well-being in El Salvador

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DESCRIPTION OF CRISIS-SPECIFIC CHALLENGE

In El Salvador, teachers (and students) face significant social and emotional challenges, including threats of gang violence and community insecurity that impact their psycho-social well-being, cause uncertainty about the future, and increase levels of stress. A recent study from the El Salvador Ministry of Health reported on the prevalence of chronic illnesses among teachers associated with stress and the need to identify and respond to physical and psychological signs of stress before the damage is irreversible (MINSAL 2017). Increased stress levels ultimately impact teachers' relationships with students, parents, and colleagues, which in turn impact teaching and learning.

To ensure that students receive quality education in this complex setting, teachers in El Salvador must develop social and emotional competencies that support their personal well-being, as well as the social-emotional needs of their students. When teachers learn to regulate and manage their own emotions, they are able to maximize their effectiveness in the classroom (Jennings 2015). As part of the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC)-funded Strengthening the National Education System Program, FHI 360 is building social-emotional capacity of teachers through targeted social-emotional learning strategies and mindfulness practices to reduce stress levels and increase effectiveness of classroom management.

BRIEF OVERVIEW

The “Social Emotional Development for Teachers” Program in El Salvador is being implemented from 2018-2019 as part of the Strengthening the National Education System (SNES) Program funded by MCC and implemented by FHI 360. Social Emotional Development for Teachers Program participants include over 3,000 primary and secondary teachers,

as well as principals who also have teaching duties. Approximately 65% of the teachers are women, about 70% live and work in rural settings, and the majority are over age 40. Baseline data collected from teacher participants showed that 32% of teachers experience high to moderate levels of perceived stress and that 38% tend to suppress their emotions, which has been shown to ultimately result in higher levels of stress.

The teachers work in 350 schools that form 45 school clusters. These 45 school clusters form the treatment group of SNES and were randomly assigned to the treatment group by an external evaluator commissioned by MCC. The teachers receive 120 hours of training, including 48 hours of in-person workshops (six 8-hour workshops), 48 hours of post-workshop application activities (including individual exercises, group activities, and classroom application with students), and 24 hours of virtual activities.

The Program integrates two evidence-based social-emotional frameworks to create a customized professional development opportunity tailored to the social-emotional needs of Salvadoran teachers. The Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) Five Core Competencies form the foundation of the Program's theoretical framework, as each of the six modules focuses on one or more of the five CASEL competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. The Search Institute's 40 Developmental Assets, drawn from its Developmental Assets Framework (1997), have been mapped onto the CASEL core competencies and adapted for adults, resulting in 40 concrete skills that teachers in El Salvador can build to help them develop the five core competencies.

The content of in-person workshops and post-workshop activities is drawn from multiple evidence-based sources, including (1) mindfulness activities from

the book *Mindfulness for Teachers* and activities from the Colombian organization RESPIRA, (2) psychosocial support materials from INEE and War Child Holland, and (3) social-emotional learning resources from IRC and Save the Children. The program first develops teachers' intrapersonal social emotional competencies, before moving to interpersonal competencies and positive classroom strategies, as shown by the workshop sequence below:

1. Social and Emotional Well-being: An introduction to social-emotional well-being for teachers
2. Intrapersonal Mindfulness: Developing mindful awareness; identifying and managing our inner thoughts and emotions
3. Self-Care: Prioritizing self-care practices as essential for integrated development
4. Interpersonal Mindfulness: Fostering compassion, connectedness, and meaningful relationships
5. Positive Social Emotional Experiences: Promoting positive social and emotional experiences within ourselves and our students
6. Balanced Caring and Positive Classroom Environment: Understanding the importance of contribution and creating a balanced approach to caring for others, and cultivating and sustaining a positive classroom climate

To adapt and validate this content to the El Salvador context, the Program has taken the following steps:

1. The first part of the workshop design process involved reviewing the CASEL and 40 Developmental Asset frameworks with the FHI 360 team in El Salvador (composed entirely of Salvadoran nationals). The team reviewed the Spanish translation of the CASEL framework and did an exercise to adapt the 40 Development Assets Framework for adults, which was later reviewed and finalized by FHI 360's social-emotional experts. The El Salvador team then jointly designed the structure of the six workshops with the team of social-emotional learning experts. The workshop topics and frameworks were validated and approved by the Ministry of Education.
2. For every module, the design process has involved the following steps: (1) draft module developed

by FHI 360 social emotional learning experts, (2) modules reviewed by FHI 360 team in El Salvador, (3) module materials reviewed and edited by Ministry of Education, (4) facilitators trained in new module content, providing recommendations for final tweaks to content and/or implementation strategies.

EVIDENCE AND OUTCOMES

The El Salvador "Social Emotional Development for Teachers" program is still being implemented. To date, five workshops have been completed, with one workshop, school coaching visit, and the culminating activity remaining to be completed by early 2020. The program will be evaluated through a mixed-methods study employing both quantitative and qualitative methods.

The quantitative evaluation involves applying a survey to approximately 1,600 teachers who participated in the social-emotional development program and comparing the results to a control group that was established as part of an external randomized evaluation commissioned by MCC. This external evaluator randomized 147 school clusters, resulting in a treatment group of 45 clusters and a control group of 55 clusters. The remaining 47 clusters are not participating in the study.

The survey combines five existing reliable and valid scales used to measure social-emotional competencies that have been translated and contextualized to El Salvador through cognitive interviews with teachers and an initial pilot. Cognitive interviews are used to study how individuals mentally process and respond to survey questions and can therefore help to ensure that translated surveys have the intended meaning (Lavrakas 2008). In this case, we conducted cognitive interviews with a sample of 30 teachers in El Salvador to inform adjustments to the language used in the survey, ensuring that scales adapted from other contexts would make sense to teachers in El Salvador.

The survey will be applied during the sixth workshop and will measure the impact of the workshops on teachers' mindfulness, self-awareness, emotion regulation, positive affect, negative affect, stress, and teacher emotional burnout.

The qualitative portion of the evaluation will consist of individual interviews and focus groups with teachers to

gather additional data to complement the quantitative data.

While endline data has yet to be collected, preliminary results will be available by the start of November 2019. The project team in El Salvador has gathered testimonials and anecdotal evidence from teachers who have participated in the workshops. Teachers report applying mindfulness techniques regularly at home and at school to reduce stress and improve their own mental and physical well-being. They also report improved relationships and interactions with colleagues and students by applying strategies in active listening and positive communication, among others.

LIMITATIONS, CHALLENGES, AND/OR LESSONS LEARNED

A key challenge in implementing this program has been teacher attendance. This workshop series is one of approximately six training activities that have required teachers to miss classes with students. As a result, not all 2,700 teachers have participated in all social emotional workshops. This is problematic, as the workshops are designed to build upon one another. To address these issues, future adaptations and iterations of this program could include the following adaptations (advantages and disadvantages are discussed for each option):

1. Include less in-person training and more virtual activities. The advantage of this approach is that it would allow teachers to miss less class time with students and enable teachers to learn at their own pace. The disadvantage of less in-person training is missing the opportunity to learn from a trained facilitator and not being able to learn through as many interactions with peers.
2. Consider in-person training times that do not require teachers to miss classes (such as Saturdays or pre-established national professional development days). The advantage here is that teachers would miss fewer classes with students, but the disadvantage is that attendance may be lower on Saturday sessions. In fact, Saturday sessions could interfere with teachers' work-life-balance, which may be counter-productive for a teacher well-being program.

3. Strive to develop stand-alone modules that are less dependent on content from other modules. The advantage of this approach is that teachers who miss one session would be able to join additional sessions without being lost or confused. Additionally, stand-alone modules would allow for more flexibility in adapting and/or re-ordering modules to fit the needs of future PD programs. However, the disadvantage of having standalone modules is that (1) they may be very hard to design as much of the SEL content is interconnected, and (2) teachers may have a more disjointed (rather than integrated) PD experience and may fail to make connections on their own between content.

Another key challenge has been monitoring the completion of post-workshop activities by teachers. The initial plan was for all teachers to document their post workshop activities in their teacher guides, which have logs to register mindfulness activities, reflection questions for readings, attendance lists, and questions to respond to for group work. At the start of each new in-person workshop, teachers begin the session by discussing their post workshop activities while the facilitator circulates around the room to document who had completed the work and who didn't (teachers are asked to bring the previous teacher guide to the new workshop to show their complete work).

However, there have been two challenges: (1) not enough teachers are filling out the post-workshop activity pages in the teacher guide and (2) facilitators have not done a consistent job of documenting completion of post-workshop activities, as they struggle to find time to check-in with each participant during the workshop. It would have been ideal to digitize these post workshop activities to be able to track completion using technology. The Program made a decision to avoid online activities since not all schools have Internet connectivity, but in hindsight, it may have been best to develop online/digital activities for the majority of participants and to develop alternative "hard copy" activities for those without technology.

TEACHER PROFILE

Martha Palomo is a kindergarten teacher in the municipality of Usulután in El Salvador who has participated in the Social Emotional Development for Teachers workshops in El Salvador. Ms. Palomo shared that by participating in the workshops, she has learned to control her emotions in a more sensible way, begun to focus on the relation between her physical and mental well-being, and become more open-minded toward people with different opinions and perspectives.

Ms. Palomo has incorporated mindfulness techniques such as “three breaths,” “mindful eating,” and “mindful walking” in her daily life in order to relax and reduce stress. At the same time, she has shared these techniques with her students and has noted a positive change in her classroom environment. Ms. Palomo’s favorite part about being a teacher is spending time with students and their families and knowing that she can create welcoming environments that enable productive teaching and learning, along with the development of positive self-esteem in her students.

The greatest challenge that Ms. Palomo faces is a toxic work environment, largely due to colleagues who do not get along with one another and are not open to change. She has used strategies from the social emotional development workshops to channel positive energy into her teaching and has adjusted her mindset and practiced emotional regulation techniques when interacting with fellow teachers.

LINKS

- CASEL. 2019. “Core SEL Competencies.” <https://casel.org/core-competencies/>
- Lavrakas, Paul, ed. 2008. Encyclopedia of Survey Research. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Search Institute. 2019. “Developmental Assets Framework.” <https://www.search-institute.org/our-research/development-assets/developmental-assets-framework/> Search Institute has identified 40 positive supports and strengths that young people need to succeed. Half of the assets focus on the relationships and opportunities they need in their families, schools, and communities (external assets). The remaining assets focus on the social-emotional strengths, values, and commitments that are nurtured within young people (internal assets).