

Safe *Learning*

Empowering children
through education



CONCERN
worldwide



THE SAFE LEARNING STUDY

The Safe Learning Study is an innovative mixed-methods study conducted by UCD School of Education. We assess the impact and effectiveness of Concern Worldwide's Safe Learning Model, in primary schools in rural Sierra Leone.

The study prioritizes the voices and experiences of children, in addition to those of their families, teachers and peers. We seek to understand the everyday lives of children in rural Sierra Leone with a view to improving their literacy, rights, well-being and gender equality.

*Safe Learning - Empowering
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WHAT IS THE SAFE LEARNING STUDY?

In partnership with UCD School of Education, Concern Worldwide is conducting a five-year research study to provide robust evidence on strategies to improve learning and reduce School Related Gender Based Violence (SRGBV) in Sierra Leone.

The Safe Learning Study involves a randomised control trial of tiered interventions known as the 'The Safe Learning Model' in 100 communities.

These interventions relate to literacy, gender, safety and wellbeing.

In addition, the research involves in-depth qualitative analysis of children's everyday lives across home and school in four case study villages.

CHALLENGES IN SIERRA LEONE

Sierra Leone ranks among the lowest on the Human Development Index, including poor literacy rates, especially in rural districts. In recent years the Education sector has made great efforts to improve access to Primary Education. Challenges remain however as children in school continue to struggle with making progress.

In addition, School-Related Gender-Based Violence (SRGBV) and inequality are major barriers to the education of marginalized children in Sierra Leone. Children, especially girls, are exposed to significant violence within schools, families and communities. Girls are also less likely to complete school and gain functional literacy skills.

Safe Learning

WHAT IS THE SAFE LEARNING MODEL?

All children require a safe space to learn and develop. Unfortunately, both physical and psychological aggression and gender biases are prevalent in many schools.

Concern Worldwide has developed an integrated model of intervention addressing children's safety, learning and wellbeing. The model adopts a holistic approach to education and brings together interventions on SRGBV within an education programme.

The model consists of three components: Literacy activities, school-level SRGBV prevention and response, and community-level SRGBV prevention and response.

CHILD RIGHT-12
NOBODY UNDER THE AGE OF 18
IS ALLOWED TO MARRIED

SAFE LEARNING MODEL COMPONENTS

LITERACY ACTIVITIES RESPONSE

- Continuous Teacher Professional Development
- Coaching and Teacher Learning Circles
- Competency based foundational literacy

SRGBV PREVENTION & RESPONSE

- Gender transformative teacher and school management committee training
- Safe spaces and Socio-emotional Learning
- School Clubs
- Life Skills sessions

COMMUNITY-LEVEL SRGBV PREVENTION & RESPONSE

- Community-based life skills
- Living peace with caregivers
- Community Conversations

Activities are implemented in 80 communities throughout the Tonkolili district in Sierra Leone. Communities were randomly selected and assigned to different levels of intervention based on simple stratification criteria.

For more information, please visit the Concern Website

RESEARCH DESIGN

The Safe Learning Study is a mixed methods study of an intervention programme to improve children's learning, gender equality and wellbeing in rural Sierra Leone.

A rich set of mixed methods data has been generated across 100 primary schools tracking children from Class 1 to Class 3, in addition to in-depth case studies in four schools.

The overall aim of the Safe Learning Study is to assess the impact and effectiveness of Concern Worldwide's intervention programme - 'the Safe Learning Model' in primary schools in rural Sierra Leone.

WHAT IS THE AIM OF THE SAFE LEARNING STUDY?

The specific aims are:

- To explore the socio-cultural context of children's everyday lives and the impact on children's learning
- To consider gender dynamics in children's lives
- To explore everyday experiences of primary school, including the practices of children, their teachers and principals
- To track children's literacy attainment
- To assess the impact of the Safe Learning Model on:
 - children's wellbeing, literacy and gendered experiences in education
 - the attitudes of teachers, principals and community stakeholders

SAFE LEARNING CORE THEMES

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Socio-Cultural Dynamics

We explore the rich tapestry of the children's social and cultural worlds including the traditions, work practices and values that frame the children's interactions with adults and peers



Gender Dynamics

We consider the gendered dynamics in children's everyday lives in their schools and local communities and the impact this has on children's engagement with and participation in school.



Well Being

We document the physical, psychological and social wellbeing of children through a purposely designed measure that captures changes in wellbeing over time.



Language And Literacies

We consider the languages spoken by the children at home and in school and track the children's progress in literacy over time.



Teaching And Leading

We explore the everyday experiences of teachers and principals including their values, educational trajectories, pedagogical and leadership practices.



SAFE LEARNING STUDY DESIGN

The Pilot Study

The pilot phase of the study took place from 2017 – 2018 in 10 schools.

It consisted of

- Baseline testing of children in October 2017 and end-line testing in May 2018.
- In-depth qualitative work with up to 30 children in one school. Detailed ethnographic data was also conducted plus an intensive case study analysis of four families. Interviews were also held with school staff and community leaders.
- Assessing the feasibility of undertaking a randomised controlled trial of the Safe Learning Model in more communities.
- To trial the range of methods appropriate to the study of children's everyday lives inside and outside school
- The development and testing of culturally sensitive instruments measuring Child Wellbeing, Gender Equality and Gender Violence

The ethnographic data was collected using observant participation methodology and child-centred qualitative research as well as visual ethnography techniques, including photo-voice, life-course drawings and family trees.

Pilot report executive summary available [here](#).

The Main Trial

One hundred primary schools in the Tonkolili district were randomly clustered into four groups: 25 control group schools and 75 schools receiving varying levels of the Safe Learning Programme (Groups 1, 2 and 3).

Four case study schools were selected to match the intervention levels of the Safe Learning programme – one case school from each arm of the trial.

Control	Treatment 1 No SRGBV	Treatment 2 Light SRGBV	Treatment 3 Full SRGBV
25 Communities	25 Communities	25 Communities	25 Communities
No intervention	Literacy	Literacy + SRGBV school level	Literacy + SRGBV school level + SRGBV community level

Who is involved in The Main Trial?

Building on the findings from the pilot phase, the Safe Learning Study involves a matched mixed methods design including a Randomised Control Trial (RCT) and case studies of four villages.

Quantitative Sample

- Follows children from Class 1 through to class 3
- 3000 children in 100 schools
- Questionnaires with 100 teachers annually
- Questionnaires with 100 principals annually
- Community survey

Case Study Sample

- Follows children from Class 1 through to Class 3 in four schools
- 16 Inter-generational family case studies (Elder, Parent, Case study child, Sibling)
- Interviews with class teachers
- Interviews with Principals
- Interviews with Elders and community leaders

Quantitative Design

Quantitative data is being collected across all 100 participating schools via three measures at baseline and at the end of each year in the study.

- A pre-literacy test
- Well-being measure
- Early Grades reading Assessment (EGRA)

Prior to both the baseline and end-line quantitative data collection, training with field staff from Nestbuilders International (NBI) takes place in Freetown, Sierra Leone.

On each occasion, training is designed and delivered by the research manager at NBI and a representative from the UCD School of Education.

Case Study Design

The ethnographic data we collect uses participant and non-participant observation; child-centred qualitative research as well as visual ethnography techniques, including photo-voice.

In each phase of the research members of the UCD School of Education spend time immersed in each case study community, with the assistance of two NBI field staff fluent in the local language.

Together we spend time with the children and their teachers in the classroom, to learn about teaching and learning practices, peer and school cultures.

Each year we also speak with our case study families: 8 families of boys and 8 families of girls in the case study classes. We speak with their parents and grandparents, as well as elders and Chief in each local village.

Covid 19 Sub Study

Like countries around the world, Sierra Leone was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and schools were closed from March - October 2020.

The UCD team conducted research with a sub-sample of our schools in order to:

- Provide information on the implementation of school school closures in Tonkolili
- Track the immediate needs of communities in light of school closures
- Review the impact of extended school closures on case study communities
- Owing to social distancing requirements, structured phone interviews were conducted in
- June and July 2020 with the 77 principals of schools involved in the Safe Learning Study.

Qualitative semi-structured interviews with four headteachers in the case study schools were also conducted.

In November 2020, once schools were safely re-opened, each of the four case study communities were visited by researchers.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the case study families, the children, teachers and principals of their experiences during the period of school closure.

For more information see the executive summary of the [Covid 19 Safe Learning Report](#)



ETHICS AND DATA PROTECTION

How Is Participant Privacy Protected?

The ethical guidelines informing the Safe Learning Study are based on international models of best practice and codes of conduct for working with children and vulnerable adults.

The UCD Safe Learning Study has been approved by the UCD Human Research Ethics Committee. It is compliant with the European General Data Regulation (GDPR) that protects the personal data of children, parents, teachers and principals involved in the study.

All information provided by the research participants is treated in the strictest confidence and used only for research purposes. No individual school nor child will be identifiable in any reporting of the study findings.



UCD SAFE LEARNING TEAM

How Is Participant Privacy Protected?

The UCD Safe Learning Study brings together researchers from the UCD School of Education, senior advisors at Concern Worldwide, staff at Concern Sierra Leone, and NestBuilders International who assist with data collection and translations in the field.

The UCD Safe Learning Study team is comprised of researchers from diverse backgrounds, including education, sociology, psychology and anthropology.

The study is led by

Professor Dympna Devine, Assistant Professor Seaneen Sloan, Professor Ciaran Sugrue and Associate Professor Jennifer Symonds.

The study benefits from international expert advice and a team of experienced Sierra Leonian fieldworkers through our collaborations with Nestbuilders consultancy.

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IMAGE CREDITS

- Cover:** Student at Baptist Rowalla Primary School. Kholifa Rowalla, Tonkolili, Sierra Leone. **Photo Credit:** Michael Duff, May 2014
- Page 2:** Class 4 students at TDC Primary School, Makali, Tonkolili, Sierra Leone. **Photo Credit:** Michael Duff, May 2014
- Page 4:** Class 3 students write first term exams at Baptist Lower and Upper Primary School Magburaka, Tonkolili, Sierra Leone. **Photo Credit:** TJ Bade, December 2016.
- Page 6:** Class 3 teacher, Margaret Kamara with students at Emanuel Pre. And Primary School at Magburaka Tonkolili, Sierra Leone. **Photo Credit:** TJ Bade, December 2016.
- Page 8:** Students at UMC Primary School Masengbeh perform a skit about gender as part of a School Club, Masengbeh, Tonkolili, Sierra Leone. **Photo Credit:** Michael Duff, May 2014
- Page 12:** Class 6, RC Primary School. Matotoka Community, Tonkolili District, Sierra Leone. **Photo Credit:** Michael Duff, June 2015
- Page 18:** Nursery, RC Primary School. Matotoka Community, Tonkolili District, Sierra Leone. **Photo Credit:** Michael Duff, June 2015
- Page 20:** Class 3 teachers, Abraham M. Kamara, at Baptist Rowalla Primary School engages in a discussion with his coach, Paul Conteh. Kholifa Rowalla, Tonkolili, Sierra Leone. **Photo Credit:** Michael Duff, May 2014
- Page 23:** Class 3 student at Baptist Rowalla Primary School. Kholifa Rowalla, Tonkolili, Sierra Leone. **Photo Credit:** Michael Duff, May 2014



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