



Evaluation of the Safe Learning Model

Annual Briefing 3
Year 2 Main Trial
Reporting period 2020-2021

UCD School of Education

August 2021

Research Team

Dr Daniel Capistrano, Dr Elena Samonova, Dr Aimee Smith, Assistant Professor Seaneen Sloan, Professor Ciaran Sugrue, Associate Professor Jennifer Symonds & Professor Dympna Devine

www.safelearning.ie

Executive Summary

Introduction

The annual report 2021 refers to children's experiences of, and progress during, the third year of primary school in the 100 schools and communities taking part in the Safe Learning Study (SLS) in Tonkolili. As in previous years, this report draws on a mixed-methods approach incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data.

The first round of quantitative data collection for SLS (baseline) occurred in October 2018 while the second data collection (post-test 1) was administered in May 2019. This report draws on the third wave of data collected in November 2020 (post-test 2). This third wave of quantitative data collection was originally due to have taken place in May 2020. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent school closures, it was delayed until November 2020 when schools had reopened and participating children had just moved into Class 3. Quantitative data collected at this time included a structured questionnaire administered to the children (who had just moved from Class 2 into Class 3) in 100 schools, as well 100 Class 2 teachers, 87 headteachers and 13 deputy headteachers. In addition, all participating children were administered the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA). Surveys and assessments were administered by NestBuilders International (NBI) who had prior experience of delivering these assessments through their assistance with all previous waves of data collection. Training was designed by the UCD team and delivered by senior NBI staff.

At baseline 3,147 children participated, however some children would have missed subsequent assessments in subsequent data waves. The most common reasons for missing the assessments were absence on the assessment day, dropout from school, and movement to another school. 1,850 children were present in all three data collections; analysis throughout this report that discusses comparison across the three waves of data uses responses from these children only. However, analysis of specific waves (for example post-test 1 only) takes into consideration all children that participated at that time. Among those who did not participate in the latest wave of quantitative data collection, the most common reason was that the child had moved school (439 children, representing 52% of all those missing at post-test 2). Among the 62 children who had dropped out of school, there is a higher proportion of boys compared to girls.

As with previous years, this third wave of quantitative data was supplemented by qualitative data collection in four case study communities, which took place in February-March 2020. In response to the COVID-19 school closures, additional visits were made to the case study communities in November-December 2020 to capture the impact of this significant event. Each round of qualitative data collection deepens

the understanding of processes in schools, communities and families through repeat interviews. While previous qualitative data had been collected directly by the UCD team on field trips to Tonkolili, the November-December 2020 data collection was carried out solely by NBI staff due to the restrictions on international travel. Training was designed by the UCD team and delivered through online videos and in-person by senior NBI staff.

This executive summary outlines the headline findings of the annual report, grouped under our core themes of Well-being, Violence, Teaching and Learning, and Language and Literacies. The impact of gender underscores the analysis, as does any notable differences across control and intervention groups.

Well-being

Child and adolescent well-being is a primary concern of governments, NGOs and researchers. Throughout the Safe Learning Study, we have approached well-being through an analysis of children's subjective well-being (their feelings of happiness), complemented by more objective indicators of well-being (for example, having enough to eat and drink). Previous reports illustrate that children's everyday lives are circumscribed by poverty and hardship; high levels of poverty exist within the study population with little variation of experience of poverty within the region. The model of well-being presented incorporates both psychological well-being - feelings of Eudaimonia (doing well) and Hedonia (feeling good) - as well as physical well-being (objective indicators of well-being). To further contextualise our model of well-being we also draw on the socio-cultural context of children's lives including their work and play (social well-being). Children's work can include domestic chores in the home and working outside the household on family farms and mining. To complement and deepen the analysis of well-being, qualitative data is also drawn upon to explore the concept of a 'good life' with children and adults in the case study communities. This latter exploration adds to the understanding of well-being in the context of extreme poverty.

Psychological well-being

There was a reduction in psychological well-being at post-test 2 compared to previous waves. The general levels of feeling good (Hedonia) and doing well (Eudaimonia) had increased from baseline to post-test 1 for both boys and girls. At post-test 2, however, there has been a substantial reduction in the level of Eudaimonia (doing well), although the level of Hedonia (feeling good) remains similar. There were no major differences in psychological well-being across gender, socio-economic status and control/intervention groups. One possible explanation for the decrease in average psychological well-being scores at post-test 2 may be the negative impact of COVID-19 on children's everyday lives, including the COVID-19 school closures and the social

and economic impacts of the pandemic at home and in communities as detailed below.

Physical well-being

Within the Safe Learning Study, physical well-being is measured by whether children have enough to eat (food sufficiency), feel healthy and how often they miss school due to sickness. The previous report (Annual Briefing 2) found improvements in physical well-being between baseline and post-test 1. This has continued with both boys and girls reporting a similar level of food sufficiency and feeling healthy, with increases between baseline and post-test 2. There was also a reduction in the frequency of children missing school because they are sick, with no differences between boys and girls.

Although children from the poorest families reported eating less often at baseline, their situation at post-test 2 is now similar to those from other groups. A similar average of food sufficiency is found in control and intervention schools across the three waves with no significant difference found.

Food sufficiency was also found to be a statistically significant predictor of individual psychological well-being change. While surveys showed that food sufficiency had increased by the time of the post-test 2 data collection, qualitative interviews highlighted acute food shortages and hunger during the COVID-19 school closures and lockdown in our case study communities. The impact of COVID-19, lockdown and travel restrictions on the experience of poverty emerges strongly and may account for the reduction in psychological well-being observed in this wave.

Social well-being

Both boys and girls in the survey reported an increase in both domestic work and working outside the household (farming, mining) at post-test 2 compared to baseline. Compared to post-test 1, the difference in the frequency of work *outside* the home in post-test 2 is not statistically significant. The slight increase in working outside the home is evident in both intervention and control schools. For children working outside the home there was a slight decrease from post-test 1 to post-test 2 for children in medium and higher socio-economic groups while there has been a slight increase for children from the lowest socio-economic groups. It is the poorest children who are most likely to work outside the home.

The increase in frequency of domestic work from post-test 1 to post-test 2 on the other hand is statistically significant, with girls continuing to perform more domestic work than boys. In addition, surveys also show that children's views on gender roles are clearly related to the types of work they usually do in the community; almost all children think that boys are stronger and better at farming work and that girls are better at domestic work. There are similar patterns of frequency of domestic work for children across socio-economic groups with an increase from baseline to post-test 2.

There has been a slight decrease in the number of children missing school due to work between baseline and post-test 2 with no significant differences for both boys and girls. During the COVID-19 school closure the workload of children increased in all case study families, irrespective of socio-economic status and gender. In some of the poorest families in our case study communities, the extra workload negatively impacted children's time to study at home and contributed to a delay in returning to school. After school re-opening, the workload for all children in the case study families reduced. During the closures children in the case study communities also had reduced opportunities to play with friends in the community and at school although some still managed to play with siblings/close friends nearby. Although they missed playing with their friends, children understood that schools were closed as a measure to keep them safe.

Concepts of a 'good life' across case study communities

To complement the quantitative measures of well-being, a qualitative exploration of the concept of a 'good life' was conducted to further understand local/cultural definitions of living well in Tonkolili. For case study communities, the idea of a good life for children is multidimensional and includes both objective aspects of well-being (for example food security, education for children, shelter and health) and subjective aspects of good behaviour (for example, being obedient, respecting elders and having manners). This complements the measures of well-being used throughout the Safe Learning Study. Views of what constitutes a 'good life' for children were consistent across each case study community and socio-economic groups and were closely related to cultural practices of child-rearing. This is relevant to discussions below of discipline and local concepts of what is safe and appropriate.

In addition, young people in the community emphasised both physical health and feeling good about themselves as important to a 'good life'. Case study children stated that the things that made them happy were playing with friends, having their parents take care of them and being good at school, closely aligning with the measures of subjective and psychological well-being for children used throughout the study.

Violence

Violence impacts not only well-being but also children's capacities and dispositions to learning. The Safe Learning Study incorporates a multidimensional construction of violence taking into account three dimensions: '*direct violence*' refers to experiences of physical violence (for example being beaten) or psychological violence (for example name-calling or verbal threats); '*structural violence*' refers to situations where children suffer due to inadequate resources (for example hunger and missing school due to work); and '*cultural violence*' refers to the social norms that legitimise and perpetuate direct and structural violence in society (for example gender inequality,

high levels of poverty and wealth inequalities). This report highlights the experience of violence in children's everyday lives at home, at school and in their interactions with peers with reference to physical and psychological violence and cultural violence with reference to gender inequality. Extreme poverty (structural inequality) underpins these dynamics.

While illegal in Sierra Leone, corporal punishment remains a central disciplinary technique and characteristic of adult-child relationships. However, the experience of and attitude towards corporal punishment needs to be understood in the cultural context. The report thus situates experiences of the different dimensions of physical violence in the context of ideas around safety. In addition, the experience of teenage pregnancies is presented as an example of cultural violence that prevents girls from accessing education.

Local concepts of safety

In the qualitative interviews children emphasised that safety meant the absence of physical and spiritual danger. Physical danger is interpreted in terms of the natural environment (risks of injury due to rivers, bush, wild animals) with some children also referring to their fear of corporal punishment, while spiritual danger is interpreted in terms of the supranatural (witches and demons). Similarly, teachers and headteachers refer to safety in terms of risks and dangers derived from the local environment (noise, pollution, traffic, rivers). In the quantitative data, most teachers perceive their school to be safe for boys and girls at post-test 2, like the levels reported at baseline and post-test 1. However, the proportion of teachers who think that the school is 'very safe' both for boys and girls has reduced from baseline to post-test 2. There were no significant differences between safety perceptions of teachers in control and intervention schools, as well as no difference in teachers' perceptions in approved or unapproved schools.

Qualitative interviews show that most of the children report feeling safe in the case study schools. This is also reflected in the quantitative data from the wider 100 schools, where 38% of children at post-test 2 report they 'always' feel safe at school, although this has reduced from 47% at post-test 1. There are also differences across gender and being in an intervention/control school. Boys in control schools are less likely than boys in intervention schools to report that they 'always feel safe with teachers'. Girls in both control and intervention schools are more likely than boys to report they 'always feel safe with teachers'.

Children's views of 'feeling' safe are however culturally embedded, especially with respect to attitudes toward corporal punishment. Here a distinction is evident between normative /culturally acceptable levels of 'whipping'/caning and what is perceived by them as being physically hurt (beaten). This difference is reflected in differences between reported frequencies of being whipped/caned and of being beaten/physically hurt in schools and families.

Violence in school

Despite children's reporting of 'always' feeling safe in school, there is an increase in the proportion of children who report being beaten or physically hurt by their teachers at post-test 2 compared to baseline (23.6% for girls and 25.6% for boys, increased from approximately 3% at baseline). While this may indicate an actual increase in physical violence in school, it can also be attributed to the fact that children are getting older and are better able to articulate their experiences with violence than they may have done two years previously.

In addition, at post-test 2, approximately 70% of children (73.2% of boys and 70.8% of girls) report being whipped or caned by their teachers which is an increase since baseline. No significant difference was found between boys and girls or based on children's socio-economic status. However, there is a significantly higher proportion of children reporting being whipped or caned by their teacher in control schools.

While there is no significant difference between the proportion of children being whipped or caned among those being taught by qualified or unqualified teachers, the level of teacher qualification is nonetheless significant. Findings confirm that the higher the teacher qualification the lower the likelihood of their students reporting being whipped or caned.

Despite being aware of the prohibition on corporal punishment in school, teachers expressed the opinion in qualitative interviews that 'light' punishment with one or two strokes is appropriate and should be used to keep children under control.

Violence in family

The number of children reporting they were being whipped or caned by someone in their family has increased since baseline, to now account for 60% of boys and 59% of girls. There is also a substantial increase in the number of children reporting they were beaten/physically hurt by someone in their family at post-test 2 compared to baseline, to now account for 30% of boys and 31% of girls. At baseline there was a significantly higher proportion of girls reporting being beaten/hurt by members of their families; however, by post-test 2 the proportion is similar among boys and girls. Qualitative interviews suggest these increases in reported physical violence might be attributed to the greater time children spent at home during the COVID-19 school closure. In addition, and as with reporting on physical punishment in school, as children get older, they may be better able to express their experiences of various forms of violence.

The discrepancy between the number of children reporting being beaten/physically hurt at post-test 2 and being whipped or caned also needs to be understood in the cultural context. While severe flogging is seen as a bad practice that should be banned as it is harmful for children, 'light' flogging (whipped/caned) with several strokes is seen as culturally appropriate. Obedience and good behaviour of children are integral

elements of the local understanding of 'living well' in Tonkolili. 'Light' flogging is not seen as punishment and is used as one of the methods of ensuring discipline in children. Parents considered severe flogging as something that should only be used as a last resort.

Violence among peers

Psychological violence (being called names, teased or verbally threatened) among peers is more widespread than physical violence, with 42% of children stating they had some experience of it. Reflecting the dynamics within gender peer groups, boys are more likely to report other boys as perpetrators of name-calling/teasing etc, while girls are more likely to report other girls. However, while 17% of children reported they had also been physically hurt/beaten by another child, it was boys who were more likely to be identified as the perpetrators by both boys and girls.

Teenage pregnancy during the COVID-19 pandemic: cultural violence

An example of cultural violence within the Safe Learning Study are attitudes towards teenage pregnancy. These are rooted in social norms and gendered practices that negatively affect girls' opportunities to succeed in education. There is a widespread stigmatisation of pregnant girls and a very strong tendency to blame girls for their pregnancies. These attitudes were expressed by both men and women in case study communities. Teachers also consistently shared these beliefs. Despite the recent official lifting of the ban on attending school, girls are still unlikely to continue their studies while they are pregnant and have little chances to return to school after giving birth due to the negative attitudes towards young mothers. Qualitative interviews show that there was a strong perception among adults in the case study communities that teenage pregnancies were one of the most negative consequences of the COVID-19 school closure; however it is unclear if teenage pregnancies significantly increased during this time.

Teaching and learning

The COVID-19 pandemic caused disruption on a global scale and in Tonkolili, school closures were implemented from 31st March until October 2021. The immediate impact of school closures was documented in a previous sub-study conducted by the UCD team in Summer 2020 which illustrated the experiences of principals on the ground. The current report builds on these findings by highlighting the impact of school closures /re-opening on teaching practices. More generally, gender dynamics in the classroom are also highlighted with reference to teacher attitudes and children's perceptions of teacher's gendered expectations, in addition to children's own gendered attitudes.

COVID-19 impact on teachers and teaching

While teachers believed that the school closures were necessary to prevent the spread of COVID-19, they also were aware of negative consequences both for children and themselves. Interviews with teachers in the case study communities highlighted teacher concerns over learning loss and drop out from school, with the associated long-term consequences for families and communities. School closure also impacted teachers financially and psychologically. During the closures, schools did not receive the subsidies and fees from parents they typically used to pay unpaid community teachers. Income losses were however experienced by all teachers. Some teachers who were not from the villages their schools were in were prevented from seeing their own family due to the lockdowns.

A significant proportion of teachers (42%) reported teaching more than once a week during the COVID-19 school closure. Teachers from schools in the intervention groups reported teaching more frequently compared to those from the control groups, especially in schools where Concern organised out of school classes. Qualitative interviews confirm that out of school classes organised by Concern during the school closure were positively perceived by both parents and teachers. Upon school reopening, Concern activities such as coaching and training sessions for teachers resumed in most of the intervention schools.

Teachers reported a lowering of students' performance after the school reopening. An additional challenge was covering the full curriculum as parts of the class 2 curriculum were missed during the school closure. To cover all the topics of the curriculum, extra classes were organised either during the lunch break or after the usual school time. In all case study schools, new sanitary measures and social distancing were also introduced including the use of face masks for all children. In interviews, teachers reported that while most children had returned to school, some had dropped out due to increased poverty because of lockdown. Also noted were 'temporary dropouts' where children have been delayed getting back to school due to increased work or lockdowns in other villages.

Gender in the classroom

Earlier reports have shown that a high proportion of children believe that their teachers perceive boys as more 'brilliant' than girls in the classroom. This wave of data collection not only sought to examine any changes in children's perceptions of their teachers' attitudes, but also to gather information from teachers directly about their own gendered assumptions. It also explored further children's gendered attitudes.

About 71% of teachers report that girls usually need more help with their education compared to boys, whereas boys are usually seen as more brilliant (71.7%) and as those who will use their education more in the future (44.3% compared to 24.5% for

girls). Although there was a higher proportion of teachers in control schools stating that girls need more help in class than boys (80% in control, 68% in intervention schools), this was not statistically significant. Qualitative interviews with teachers confirmed views ranging from a belief in the innate abilities of boys, to the time poverty of girls arising from their chores/work demands. Interviews also confirmed teachers were in support of the education of girls, believing it enhanced girls' job prospects and capacities to contribute to their families.

Teachers' gendered views and practices are important in shaping the context (and outcomes) for children's learning. Findings confirm that teachers' views on girls' ability correlates with girls' performance on the letter names sub-task of the EGRA assessment. Girls scored more correct letter names per minute at post-test 2 if their teachers believed that girls are more brilliant than boys, or that boys and girls are equally brilliant. This relationship however is not significant for the other sub-tasks in the assessment. It is also not a statistically significant predictor explaining boys' scores in the letter names sub-task.

Further, children's views are closely aligned with those of their teachers (and parents) highlighting the deeply embedded nature of gendered attitudes. They are also consistent in perceiving boys as more brilliant. This is especially the case among boys themselves, 80% of whom believe boys are mainly brilliant, in contrast to 49% of girls who perceive girls are mainly brilliant. Children are also more likely to believe it is boys, rather than girls, who will make use of their education in the future.

Notwithstanding these gendered perceptions, from baseline to post-test 2, there was an increase in the proportion of children who believe their teachers think that both boys and girls should come to school every day. No significant differences were evident between control and intervention schools. Connections between perceptions of boys' brilliance and greater teacher attention to boys (being asked questions) was noted in some interviews with children, although not consistently so. Further analysis to document the gendered practices of teachers in the classroom is ongoing in the final wave of data collection.

Language and literacy

A core focus of the Safe Learning Study is to track improvements in children's literacy over the three years of the Safe Learning Intervention as measured by the EGRA assessments. To contextualise the findings, the report also explores literacy practices at home and in the community and considers the impact that COVID-19 school closures had on literacy and learning.

Language and Literacy at home and in community

Language is central to literacy, as is the interconnection between the language(s) spoken at home and what children experience in school. Children involved in the Safe Learning Study are multilingual, reflecting the multilingual nature of Sierra Leone. Proficiency in English is potentially important for subsequent performance in the English based EGRA literacy assessments. Across all children in the study Krio and English are mostly spoken at school rather than at home, except for children from higher socio-economic groups who are significantly more likely to also speak both languages at home. At baseline, there was a similar proportion of children who stated they spoke English at school across control and intervention schools. However, at post-test 2 there is a significantly higher proportion of children who report speaking English at intervention schools compared to the control group.

In case study communities, it is more likely for children to speak Krio than their parents and elders. English is rarely spoken at home among children in these case study communities; while children can speak English, they do not speak it at home often due to a lack of family members who also speak English. This is connected to inter-generational experiences of schooling within families and, given the predominant role of female family members in caring, the attendance of mothers/grandmothers at school. While the profile of case study families indicates varied levels of literacy and schooling, maternal education is consistently rare across parent and grandparent generations; only three mothers out of the 16 case study families had attended school themselves and none of the grandmothers interviewed had attended school. Nonetheless, most case study families express a high level of support for the education of both boys and girls and undertake a variety of strategies to support their children's education. This includes older children supporting younger children in studying (signifying the importance of siblings as carers), or immediate and extended family members providing financial support for children's education. Consistently education is perceived as an investment and a path out of poverty. Children use their reading and writing skills outside of school mostly when studying or supporting younger siblings in studying, suggesting that literacy skills are not widely used in their family and community everyday lives.

Family literacy and COVID-19 school closure

All case study families were impacted by the COVID-19 school closure in terms of learning and literacy. Reiterating teacher concerns, children reported they had 'forgotten' what they had learned before at school. Interviews also highlighted the lack of resources for children to study with at home. Throughout interviews, the key role of older siblings in supporting children's learning was confirmed in the help they provided younger siblings to study at home during the closures. Some children were also able to avail of external lessons within the community. While available, radio lessons were

infrequently used by children at home, often due to a poor signal or lack of ownership of a radio.

EGRA

The Safe Learning Study adopted the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) as the main tool to assess literacy development among children in Tonkolili. This assessment consists of six subtests: letter name identification, letter sounds, familiar words, invented words, reading comprehension and oral reading. Despite COVID-19 school closures, there were increases across all sub-tasks with a substantial increase in the average number of correct letter names and sounds per minute. There was also a substantial increase in the scores for oral reading.

Across all subtasks, boys outperform girls. In both letter names and sounds per minute, boys have a better performance compared to girls and the difference is statistically significant. In remaining sub-tasks boys also tend to have higher scores than girls. As stated in an earlier section, girls' performance on the letter names sub-task is positively correlated with their teachers' more positive views on girls' abilities in relation to boys.

At baseline, children from intervention and control schools had similar scores for letter sounds and names. By post-test 2, children from intervention schools had higher scores compared to those in schools in the control group. This was also the case for the remaining sub-tasks. An exception is reading comprehension, where there are increases in scores from baseline to post-test 2 for both intervention and control schools although both groups continue to perform at similar rates.

When gender is compared across intervention and control schools, boys are found to do better than girls in the intervention schools. However, girls in the intervention schools, while doing less well than boys, do better than both boys and girls in control schools. The intervention has a positive influence on the literacy of boys and girls, compared to their peers in the control group, with boys especially so.

In addition, it was found that children who speak Krio at home scored significantly higher in the letter names sub-task. While they also scored higher in letter sounds, this difference is not statistically significant. Those who speak Krio or English at school also score higher on letter names and sounds although this difference is only statistically significant for the letter names sub-task. The gap in EGRA scores between those who speak Krio or English at school and those who do not have increased significantly over the three waves.

Conclusion

This report draws on the third wave of data collection for the Safe Learning Study and compares this year's outcomes with those in previous waves. Like previous reports,

the data is drawn from both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Mixed evidence on the well-being and learning progress of children in the 100 communities in Tonkolili district was found. While there is a substantial increase in the average number of correct answers in EGRA, notable and significant gaps are evident between boys and girls, with boys outperforming girls in all sub-tasks. While this advantage is extended for boys in intervention schools, it is noteworthy that girls in intervention schools are doing better than their peers, both boys and girls, in control schools. Our findings also show an increase in physical violence towards children in general and continued economic, social and cultural obstacles to the education of girls. Many of our findings from this wave of data collection should also be seen in a context of the COVID-19 pandemic that brought serious disruptions to education, and the social and economic lives of children and their families. Extreme poverty (structural inequality) underpins the everyday lives of the study communities, ensuring that the impacts of 'shocks' such as a pandemic, are especially profound.

Key Learnings in Year 2 Report 2021

Well-being

- Although there was an increase between baseline and post-test 1 in children's psychological well-being, there has been a decrease in post-test 2. The impact of COVID-19 on everyday life must be considered here.
- There has been an increase in physical well-being (having enough to eat and feeling healthy) reported by children between baseline and post-test 2, with average values growing steadily across the three waves in both control and intervention schools.
- While overall food sufficiency increased from baseline to post-test 2, qualitative data showed that during COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures there was acute food insecurity in case study communities.
- Children reported an increase in domestic work and working outside the household (farming and mining) between baseline and post-test 2. During the COVID-19 school closures this increased for all case study children, although showed evidence of returning to normal levels during the quantitative fieldwork. The school closures due to COVID-19 also lead to a reduction in play time for children.
- Understanding of living a 'good life' in the case study communities includes both objective (feeling safe, having enough to eat) and subjective (being obedient, good behaviour) aspects of well-being, aligning with the conceptualisation of well-being measures used throughout the study.

Violence

- The three domains of violence used in the study - direct, structural and cultural - remain an integral part of children's everyday lives. While structural and cultural violence decreased between baseline and post-test 2, direct violence has increased.
- There is an increase in the number of children reporting that they are beaten or physically hurt at school and at home. One potential explanation for this increase in reporting is the fact that children are getting older and are better able to articulate their experiences with violence. School closures due to COVID-19 may have also contributed to the increase in violence at home reported by children.
- Corporal punishment remains a deeply embedded aspect of traditional child-rearing with children. The number of children reporting being whipped or caned by someone in their family was high at baseline and has increased at post-test 2. Despite this increase there remains a discrepancy between children reporting being whipped or caned and those reporting being beaten/physically hurt. Children do not necessarily associate whipping and caning as being beaten or physically hurt.
- Parents and teachers make a distinction between severe and light punishment; severe punishment is considered bad for children's well-being, however 'light flogging' is considered an appropriate method of discipline and aligns with local concepts of living a good life.
- Despite large scale corporal punishment in school, children and teachers perceive their schools as safe. Local concepts of safety are largely understood as being the absence of physical and spiritual dangers and rooted in physical geography and cultural beliefs.
- Violence among peers tends to be more psychological (in the form of teasing, name calling or verbal threats) and does not vary by gender. Boys are more likely than girls to be identified as perpetrators of physical violence.
- Qualitative interviews show that teenage pregnancies are perceived as one of the most negative consequences of the COVID-19 school closures. Although it is unclear whether there was a significant increase in teenage pregnancy during the school closures, attitudes towards teenage pregnancy remain an enduring example of cultural violence in case study communities, with particularly negative consequences for the education of girls.

Teaching and learning during COVID-19

- The COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on teachers, teaching and their perceptions of children's school performance due to school closures.
- Teachers were impacted financially and psychologically during the closures due to the reduction in income and fees from parents as well as lockdowns preventing some teachers from returning to their families in other villages.
- A significant number of teachers however were able to continue teaching more than once a week during closures. This was more likely in intervention schools where Concern organised out of school classes.
- While out of school classes were received positively by teachers and parents, teachers remained very concerned about the impact of school closures on children's learning.
- While most children in the case study communities returned to school following the reopening, some dropped out due to increased poverty. In addition, some children were delayed in returning to school due to extra workload at home or lockdowns in other villages.

Gender dynamics in the classroom

- From baseline to post-test 2 there was an increase in the proportion of children who believe their teachers think that both boys and girls should come to school every day. However, negative attitudes towards girls' abilities to study remain widespread among both teachers *and* children and have implications for their learning.
- Most teachers report that girls usually need more help with their education compared to boys, whereas boys are usually seen as more brilliant and as those who will use their education more in the future. About a half of children also share these beliefs in boys' brilliance and among boys this proportion is even higher.
- Despite this widespread opinion about boys' brilliance, most teachers think that girls' education is very important because of better job prospects and future contributions to the family.

Language and family literacy

- There is a high level of multilingualism among participating children. Across all children, Krio and English are mostly used at school rather than at home.

- In case study communities, interviews showed that although children could speak English, they tended not to at home due to a lack of English proficiency among other family members. The lack of attendance at school by parents and grandparents, especially mothers in case study communities is notable in this respect.
- At baseline there was a similar proportion of children speaking English at school across both control and intervention schools. At post-test 2 there was a higher proportion of children speaking English at intervention schools.
- Children also rarely use their literacy skills at home outside of studying and helping younger siblings and occasionally other family members.
- COVID-19 school closures impacted on children's learning; most children studied at home during the school closures. However, interviews showed there was a lack of resources to support children's study and unequal access to extra lessons in the community.
- Older siblings proved invaluable in helping younger children to study at home during the school closures.
- Both parents and children worried that the school closures would lead to learning loss.

EGRA

- Despite the COVID-19 school closures, there was a substantial increase in the average correct answers in most of the EGRA sub-tasks with a substantial increase in the first two sub-tasks, letter names and letter sounds.
- Boys outperformed girls in all sub-tasks. The difference between boys and girls in the first two sub-tasks, letter names and letter sounds, is statistically significant.
- While girls do not score more than boys, their performance on the letter names sub-task is positively correlated with their teachers' attitudes on girls' educational abilities.
- Children in the intervention schools also scored higher in all sub-tasks compared to children in control schools except for reading comprehension. Although both groups have improved scores in reading comprehension since baseline, they continue to perform at similar rates.
- Children who speak Krio at home scored higher in the letter names and letter sounds sub-task although only the difference in letter names is significant.

- Children who speak Krio or English at school also score higher in the letter names and sounds sub-tasks, although only the difference in letter names is significant. The gap in EGRA scores between those who speak Krio or English at school and those who do not have become increasingly significant over the three waves.