



Evaluation of the Safe Learning Model

Final Report

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Research team

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Executive Summary

Introduction

Concern Worldwide has been working in Sierra Leone since 1996. Its integrated programming aims to “tackle all dimensions of poverty, focussing on the overlapping areas of health, education and livelihoods” (Concern Worldwide, 2020). The Safe Learning Model (SLM) implemented between 2017 and 2021 in the Tonkolili district of Sierra Leone aimed to improve access to quality education in a safe learning environment, improve adolescent sexual and reproductive health, and enhance livelihoods, protection and wellbeing of the children living in target communities. This report presents results of a three-year evaluation of the Safe Learning Model, which included a randomised controlled trial and intensive qualitative immersion in a sub sample of intervention/control communities.

Overall, this report demonstrates that the Safe Learning Model has positive impacts on basic literacy skills and wellbeing, especially for girls in intervention group 1. The link between literacy progress and wellbeing of girls is also of note. However, the impact of the intervention must also be considered considering ongoing challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic (and related school closures), in a context of endemic poverty, and deep structural challenges within the educational system.

The Executive summary provides key findings from the study - more detailed information and interpretation of the findings are included in the main report.

Methods

A mixed methods design, combining qualitative and quantitative fieldwork and analysis was used for this study. This enabled a richer and deeper analysis of processes and outcomes over time.

Qualitative data that were collected over the period of three years (2018-2021) in four case study communities comprise semi-structured interviews and group discussions with children, teachers, parents, and community members along with a participatory research method of photovoice. In total 376 interviews were conducted over the period of 3 years. In addition, systematic structured observations of classroom practice using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) and Observational Research and Classroom Evaluation (ORACLE) tools were conducted in 2020 and 2021, with a total of 42 hours of observational data collected over the two years. This yielded rich data on teacher practices in case study classrooms.

Quantitative data included structured questionnaires administered to the children, teachers and headteachers in 100 schools as well as an Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) conducted with all participating children. An instrument to measure student wellbeing, the Child and Adolescent Personal and Social Assessment of Wellbeing (CAPSAW), was also administered to all participating children, having been developed by the Safe Learning Study

team following qualitative and quantitative investigation of wellbeing during the pilot study. The initial sample at baseline had 3,118 children, with 2,351 of those taking part in the first post-test (6 months), 2,150 in the second one (23 months), and 1,904 in the final wave of data collection (30 months).

Quantitative analysis of data was undertaken using an Intention-to-treat (ITT) approach, which estimates the effect of the intervention based on the intervention assigned (initial randomisation), irrespective of whether the children in such groups received the full intervention. This retains a larger analytical sample, while also providing more conservative estimation of treatment effects by reducing the risk of only including the results of children for whom the intervention was most successful (e.g., selective attrition) which could otherwise inflate the perceived efficacy of the intervention. The efficacy of the intervention programme was evaluated both by the existence of statistically significant differences between intervention groups and control, and where appropriate through the estimation of effect sizes in order to ascertain the tangible impact, the intervention had on child outcomes. In addition to the trial and case study data, process and implementation data was collected throughout the study.

Socio-cultural dynamics and education in rural Sierra Leone

Patterns of learning and teaching are shaped by the economic, cultural, and social context in which children live. Children in the Tonkolili district are immersed in a rich cultural and multi-lingual world, characterised by distinct gendered and spiritual norms that frame their experiences of living and learning. High levels of structural poverty predominate, exacerbated with the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Three years of ethnographic fieldwork provide deep insights into dispositions towards education in children's homes and communities; the role that informal learning plays in children's education; the significance of gender dynamics in shaping everyday life, and the persistent impact of poverty and hardship on the lives of children and their families.

Yet despite these challenges, the research highlights the high value that is placed by families on education, in addition to the importance of children's early literacy experiences in the family and community. These include the informal learning that occurs through children's daily contributions to family survival practices and livelihoods, in addition to wider community and social activities. Trading, farming, cooking and cleaning are important frames of reference for children as culturally valued activities and a core part of the family economy. Through these activities children engage and interact with adults and older siblings, learning key skills for survival and adaptation. As children age, gender differences become apparent with girls significantly more likely than boys to state they are involved in domestic chores including washing clothes, cleaning the house and caring for younger siblings. Girls along with boys were also found to be involved with chores outside the home (mining, farming, trading and hunting), and it was only boys in the Control group who were significantly more likely than girls to be engaged in these activities. Findings highlighted the strong social networks and solidarities across kin, and the important role of elders and wider community members as a key and rich source of oracy for children through traditions of storytelling and singing. Multilingualism is evident within communities, with fluency in local languages central to children's evolving language skills. While English is taught in schools, children rarely

speak it in their out of school lives. Older siblings were found to be especially important sources of more formal learning support (reading, writing, and counting) including helping with homework and during the pandemic school closures.

Literacy, Learning and Teaching

To measure children's literacy the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) was administered. The assessment consists of six sub tasks: letter identification, letter sounds, familiar words, invented words and oral reading and comprehension. Together with qualitative interviews in the four case study communities and systematic structured classroom observations in the case study schools, a comprehensive picture of literacy development and teaching practices in Tonkolili is provided.

EGRA - Letter Names

All children showed some improvement in *naming letters* over the three years of the trial, with mean increases in intervention Group 1 highest, and those in the Control group the lowest. When considered by gender, no significant difference across groups is evident for boys by 30 months, although some significant differences had been identified at 23 months. In terms of effect size, this was identified as a medium sized effect. A significant difference was identified for girls in letter naming, with those in intervention Group 1 scoring on average 6.7 more letter names per minute than girls in the Control group by the end of the trial. In terms of the effect size, this is within the 'small' (but significant) range.

EGRA - Letter Sounds

Like *naming letters*, all children showed some improvement in *letter sounds* over the period of the trial, with children in intervention groups showing significant rates of improvement relative to those in Control groups at 6 months and 23 months. However, children in Control groups also showed substantial improvements overtime, particularly evident by 30 months. A significant treatment effect was identified for girls in letter sounds, with those in intervention Group 1 scoring on average 8.9 more letter sounds per minute than girls in the Control group. In terms of effect size this is within the medium range.

EGRA - Familiar words

All children showed some improvement in identifying *familiar words* over the three years of the trial, with children in Groups 1 and 2 showing the greatest increase, and those in Group 3 and the Control group the least. While significant improvements were evident between intervention groups and the Control group at 23 months, by the end of the trial (30 months) this impact is not observable for both boys and girls. In terms of effect size on familiar words, a small effect is noted for girls in intervention Groups 1 and 2, although it is not statistically significant.

EGRA - Invented words

On the more complex EGRA tests, such as *invented words*, relative improvements among children were modest and were noted in terms of a reduction in the children's failure to score at least one correct answer. With respect to identifying a single invented word, a reduction in the number of children who failed to *identify invented words* was noted over the three

years of the trial, with children in intervention Groups 1 and 2 showing the greatest decline. While differences between boys in intervention and Control groups was significant at 23 months, by the end of the trial at 30 months, this difference no longer remained. A significant difference was identified for girls however, with girls in intervention Group 1 and 2 showing a decline relative to girls in the Control group.

EGRA - Oral reading

Similarly with respect to *oral reading*, while there is an overall decline in the number of children who fail to read a single word in a minute, this is slightly more evident in intervention groups, significantly so for girls in intervention Group 3 by 23 months. A significant difference was identified for girls in intervention Group 2 relative to girls in the Control group by the end of the trial. No significant intervention effect was observed in relation to the most complex EGRA sub-task (Reading Comprehension).

EGRA - summary

In summary, overall, improvements are present for both boys and girls over time in all groups, however boys perform better than girls on average across EGRA subtasks. As anticipated, EGRA scores improve for all groups over time as children progress through the first three years of primary school, and improvements over time are highest among lower order skills that are more readily learnt, than more complex higher order skills. However, children in intervention groups, in particular girls, generally improved more quickly than children in the Control groups. In basic sub-tasks (Letter Names and Sounds), girls in Group 1 show better performance relative to girls in the Control group. In more complex sub-tasks (Invented Words and Oral Reading), girls in Group 1 and Group 2 demonstrated a more significant improvement over the period of the trial relative to girls in the Control group.

Teaching Practices

Qualitative interviews with teachers, head teachers and children along with systematic structured classroom observation provide further insights into the impacts of the intervention and highlight key elements of teacher practices that contextualise and illuminate aspects of the EGRA findings. For example, systematic structured observations of teacher lessons point to moderate levels of classroom organisation, emotional support for children and engagement by children with their learning. From a literacy perspective, evidence from the intervention case study schools indicates that teachers identify knowledge of letter sounds as an important skill for children, whereas teachers in the Control school do not note its importance. Structured classroom observations also demonstrate that in intervention case study schools, teachers spend a significant amount of time on teaching letter names and letter sounds. These systematic observations confirm low levels of instructional support (the ways in which teachers implement the curriculum and support development of children's cognitive development) in all classrooms observed. Thus, teachers across each case study school preferred didactic and teacher centred methods, focusing on repetition, recitation and copying of tasks from the blackboard. Additionally, these patterns applied to all teachers irrespective of qualification. There were no observed differences in the teaching practices of qualified and unqualified teachers in the case study schools. However, most head teachers across the 100 schools indicate that their schools are affected by a shortage or lack of instructional materials (e.g., textbooks). Head teachers in the Control group declare being more negatively affected compared to those in the intervention groups. Teachers interviewed

in the case study schools also confirm the shortage of textbooks and even where textbooks did exist, they are frequently locked away, unavailable for use.

Gendered attitudes to success in education

Gender norms and perceptions of what it means to be a boy, or a girl are incorporated in the everyday life of children in Sierra Leone and underpin their experience of childhood, including work, play and classroom life. These perceptions of fundamental differences between men and women become clearly visible in attitudes and practices related to education and in expectations for girls' success.

The study has shown that teachers' attitudes are deeply gendered with some contradictions evident in their views on the learning of boys and girls. Across the study, teachers and principals highlight their high aspirations for the education of girls and their belief in the necessity of education for girls. Observations of practice in case study intervention schools highlight teachers' emphasis on the active involvement of girls in lessons. However, interviews with teachers also confirm their lower expectations for the success of girls in school. These patterns are replicated in the 100 schools in the trial. Across intervention and Control schools, most principals and teachers believe that boys are more brilliant than girls and that girls usually need more help in class.

Similar gendered views are evident among case study families. In general, parents (and elders) aspire to education for girls and believe that girls more than boys will use their education to help their family out of poverty. The survey conducted with caregivers across the 100 communities also shows that most of the children's relatives believe that "mainly girls" are going to use their education to get a better job in the future. However, parents and elders also have lower expectations for girls' success connecting this to sexuality, pregnancy, and girls' "poor" moral character. Further the study shows a progression in these gender stereotypical views over time and its negative impact on girls themselves. It was found that children's views on gender differences deepen over time, with increasingly negative views of girls' capacities evident, especially among boys as they get older.

Wellbeing

To assess children's wellbeing, the Child and Adolescent Personal and Social Assessment of Wellbeing (CAPSAW) instrument, developed by the Safe Learning Study team, was used. Throughout the evaluation, the measurement of children's wellbeing has been approached through understanding children's subjective wellbeing (feeling good and doing well), commonly understood as a child's feelings of happiness, complemented by objective indicators of wellbeing including food sufficiency.

Physical wellbeing

Physical wellbeing scores increase over time for all groups. At 30 months, girls in intervention Group 1 had the highest physical wellbeing score, scoring significantly higher than girls in the Control group. There were no other differences across other intervention groups.

Psychological wellbeing

Psychological wellbeing (Eudaimonia and Hedonia) initially increases for all groups at 6 months follow-up but decreased at the 23-month follow-up (during the pandemic). For Eudaimonia (doing well), scores increased for children in the Control group and in intervention Groups 1 and 2 between 23 and 30 months, but these increases were not statistically significant. The only significant intervention effect for Eudaimonia was found for boys at 23-months.

Hedonia (feeling good) increases for all groups at 6 months, more so for intervention groups than Control. Scores then decline from 6 to 23 months for the intervention groups and remain relatively stable for Control groups. At 30 months, all intervention groups report higher Hedonia, while scores decrease for the Control group. Only girls in intervention Group 1 show a significant increase in Hedonia scores at 30 months, with a medium effect size. Significant intervention effects were found for Hedonia for girls in intervention Group 1 at 6 months, and at 30 months. There are significant intervention effects for boys in intervention Group 2 and 3 at 6 months.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is also of note. Qualitative data confirm an increase of hunger and children's work during this period and heightened poverty in case study communities. Reports from interviews on the negative experiences of COVID-19 correspond with the reduction in psychological wellbeing (Eudaimonia and Hedonia) at 23 months reported among the children.

Relationship between literacy, wellbeing and gender

There is a significant positive correlation between EGRA scores and Hedonia levels. Children who perform well in EGRA subtasks appear to also report higher levels of feeling good about themselves (Hedonia). In other words, there is a relationship between children's literacy progress and their feelings of wellbeing. This is especially the case for girls.

The intervention in Group 1 has a positive and significant effect on the Hedonia levels among girls. Apart from the direct effect of the intervention on Hedonia, there is also an indirect effect that is explained by their EGRA performance. Consequently, girls in Group 1 have higher EGRA scores and their improvement in literacy also results in higher levels of Hedonia. These patterns can also be understood in the context of socio-cultural norms related to well-being and realising a 'good life'. Aspirations for girls reflect local understandings of wellbeing as freedom from poverty (a 'good' life) and girls' education as good for the family (a 'good' life). Doing well in literacy thus heightens the value of, and aspirations for girls, which may positively influence girls' wellbeing.

Experiences of Violence

The Safe Learning study adopted a multidimensional construction of violence, taking into account three different dimensions of violence: reported 'direct violence' that relates to experiences of physical violence (such as being beaten) and psychological violence (such as name calling and verbal threats); 'structural violence' that accounts for child reported suffering on account of a lack of resources (such as hunger and missing school due to work); and reported 'cultural violence' which refers to cultural norms that perpetuate both direct and

structural violence in society (for instance gender inequality and high levels of poverty and wealth inequalities). Reported experiences of violence are deeply rooted in socio-economic inequalities, and cultural norms, that persist across generations and are difficult to change. This must be borne in mind in the interpretation of the impact of the intervention.

Study findings indicate that the intervention does not appear to have any effect in relation to reports of direct, structural and cultural violence. All groups report experiencing substantial increases in direct violence from 0 months to 23 months, and this percentage declines for all groups at 30 months. While boys and girls follow similar trajectories in terms of reporting direct violence over time, the proportion of boys reporting direct violence is higher than girls in all groups, at every time point. One interpretation of these findings is that they could reflect children in intervention schools being more aware of violence (and thus reporting it) following the intervention itself.

Further analysis indicated that if a child feels safer with a teacher, they are also more likely to report having been whipped/caned by a teacher. This may suggest that children who do not perceive themselves as being safe may not report being whipped/caned. As noted above, changes in the child's perception of safety, arising from the intervention, may lead to increased reports of this type of violence.

Furthermore, qualitative case studies highlight a nuanced understanding of violence in communities and a clear differentiation between cases of severe violence which is perceived as harmful, and 'light' flogging which is seen as necessary to discipline children. The qualitative data also highlight intergenerational differences in attitudes towards corporal punishment. Older generations (elders) are more likely to indicate that they perceive flogging of children as necessary. Such findings must also be understood in the context of wider concerns expressed by elders in relation to their loss of control with respect to the younger generation.

While there appears to be a growing awareness among adults of the prohibition of corporal punishment within a wider context of children's rights, qualitative data highlights the prevalence of gender-based violence, including various forms of sexual harassment, domestic violence and forced marriages in case study communities. Children in case study schools, especially but not exclusively girls, report sexual harassment and bad touches happening between children and adults (usually men) in their communities, rather than in school. Interviews with children also highlight that in schools, sexual harassment is not reported as occurring between teachers and children but rather occurring between children themselves. Interviews with parents and elders confirm that local responses to the prevention of sexual harassment relies predominantly on restrictions and control of girls. This has implications for gender inequalities, and the range of external activities and opportunities open to girls.

Implementation and Process Evaluation

The Implementation and Process Evaluation was carried out to explore barriers and facilitators to implementation and assess to what extent the Safe Learning Model was delivered as intended (fidelity). Factors identified as having a positive impact on the delivery of the intervention across all groups included training, materials and the role of the Learning

Coaches. Learning Coaches were identified as a valuable resource to the roll out of the intervention. Teachers report that lesson preparation skills (including lesson plans), literacy teaching awareness and classroom management were the most important skills that they learnt from Learning Coaches. Barriers to the delivery of the model included the qualification levels of teachers – Learning Coaches stated that the low skill level of some teachers caused them to spend more time on raising teacher skills to a suitable level to deliver the literacy intervention. Teacher retention was also identified as a barrier to delivery as, over the three years of the intervention, a significant number of voluntary and unpaid teachers left for other jobs. A high turnover of teachers, itself indicative of structural aspects of the education system, means that a good portion of Learning Coach time was spent on training new teachers rather than refreshing the skills and training of existing ones.

The various components of the model took place frequently across the three groups. It was found that on average over the three years, Learning Coaches visited intervention Group 1 schools more often than intervention Group 2 and 3 schools. Coaches stated they struggled to deliver all aspects of the intervention in schools in Groups 2 and 3. The multiple activities taking place as part of the SRGBV intervention were cited by coaches as a barrier to delivering two learning cycles per month as part of the literacy intervention in Groups 2 and 3. The majority of teachers reported that their school received Concern training on gender norms and gender-based violence. In Groups 2 and 3 the majority of schools delivered SEL and School Club sessions regularly over the intervention period. Community-based SRGBV activities also took place frequently over the intervention period in Groups 2 and 3.

Conclusions

The report demonstrates that the Safe Learning Model has positive impacts on basic literacy skills and wellbeing, especially for girls in intervention Group 1. However, these positive changes occurred within a larger context of endemic poverty, gender stereotypes, structural problems of the educational system and the COVID-19 pandemic, which might have negatively impacted the level of success of the intervention.

The analysis of EGRA scores shows the improvement over time for both Control and intervention groups, however intervention groups do better in general than Control groups, depending on sub-task and gender. Of note is that the intervention has a stronger effect on girls rather than boys especially in the later time periods. The analysis of qualitative interviews and systematic classroom observation highlights the direct and positive impact of the literacy intervention on what teachers emphasise in their teaching, aligning this with core skills prioritized in the intervention.

The study highlights contradictory trends with respect to girls' education showing high aspirations for the education of girls, yet lower expectations of their success in education. The intervention has been shown to have a positive impact on girls' success, especially in Group 1, but also a positive impact on their wellbeing. This suggests that targeted supports for girls in their learning and success in schools may also support their levels of confidence and happiness.

The study also confirms children's awareness of physical, psychological and gender-based violence both in their schools and in their local communities. While the study did not identify

any significant differences in the children's reported experiences across intervention groups, the greater tendency to report direct violence because of the intervention itself must be borne in mind.

Recommendations

Literacy, teaching, and learning

- Prioritise quality teacher education at the national level and the recruitment and retention of teachers in rural schools
- Prioritise continuing teacher education and development including in relation to gender equality and teacher expectations for girls success in their learning
- Advocate for a faster school approval procedure
- Consider enabling coaches to focus exclusively on collaboration with teachers and head teachers to improve the quality of teaching and learning, allocating responsibilities to others for aspects of an intervention.
- Consider the redistribution of the roles and responsibilities in schools: allow teachers to focus on the literacy element of the intervention only, while involving other actors in the provision of further components of the intervention such as school clubs and socio-emotional learning sessions.
- Consider provision of a targeted programme, using appropriate technologies, to unqualified community teachers, enabling them to gain official teaching certificates. Consider developing support programs for trained teachers to motivate them to stay in rural areas.
- Build clearer links between the children's local language/mother tongue and language teaching/ learning, crucially important in early language acquisition.
- Recognise the value and significance of children's informal learning in their home and community, supporting parents/elders/siblings to bolster children's oral and other language skills.
- Recognise the key role of primary carers in children's lives, especially older siblings. Consider supports to both highlight and supplement their contributions
- Focus on improvement of the caregiver engagement in children's education

Wellbeing

- Prioritise support for positive children's peer relationships in school
- Incorporate and validate local concepts of wellbeing ('a good life') into training programmes with parents, teachers and children. Build on positive aspirations for girls' education to positive expectations for girls
- Ensure stakeholders recognise the link between girls' progress in school, their wellbeing, and the added value to the local community

Gender and violence

- Put additional focus on whole community approaches to gender-based violence
- Put additional focus on the promotion of positive images of girls as capable students.
- Put additional focus on the necessity to reduce girls' workload in the household. Consider organising discussions with practical advice on redistribution of household chores.
- Include awareness of gender-based violence between children in policy responses
- Put additional focus on awareness raising on positive discipline practices in school, home and community.
- Extend the evaluation period on the effectiveness of SRGBV, as changing norms are likely to take longer to manifest themselves than outcomes that are more independent of cultural factors, such as EGRA. This could include data on peer cultures, bullying, etc.

