LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS OF LEARNING

EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACHES TO FOUNDATIONAL LITERACY, NUMERACY, AND SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING

From Save the Children's Girls' Education Programming, Funded by Canada's Charlevoix Education Initiative, Colombia, DRC, and Nigeria, 2020 to 2023

INTRODUCTION

Getting students into schools is an important element of education programming. But beyond filling classrooms, it's crucial to focus on how students learn once they're inside. At Save the Children, improving foundational learning outcomes is a priority in our education portfolio.

From 2020 to 2023, Save the Children Canada implemented three girls' education projects funded by Global Affairs Canada under the Charlevoix Education Initiative, which focused on conflict-affected areas. Together, these projects reached over 260,000 girls, boys, parents, teachers, and community members in Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and Nigeria. In this briefing note, we share the insights gained about improving learning outcomes from our Charlevoix girls' education portfolio projects.

After an overview of the importance of learning outcomes, we outline Save the Children's evidence-based approaches to literacy and numeracy, built on decades of experience through implementation in 36 countries. Next, we cover our proven methodologies to improve children's social and emotional learning (SEL) competencies and discuss the importance of SEL for children's wellbeing and learning, especially important in crisis settings. We summarize our interventions to address the ways that issues of equity and access impact learning outcomes, including gender equality, disability-responsiveness, and poverty. Finally, we discuss approaches to address learning outcomes in crisis contexts including armed conflict, climate change, and COVID-19. Case studies throughout highlight examples from each of the three projects. We conclude with recommendations for future programming.

CONTENTS

> **"** *When my child comes home from school, and I ask them what they have been taught, they explain and summarize everything for me. I can also see that they have learned to read and write.* **"**
>
> Female caregiver, Borno state, Nigeria

WHY LEARNING OUTCOMES?

The right to learn is intrinsic to the right to quality education, embedded in global standards and commitments to education. The UN's Sustainable Development Goal 4 specifies quality education, and UNICEF's Commitment to Action on Foundational Learning is based on the crucial role that foundational learning plays in a child's development. More broadly, the basic literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional skills that constitute foundational learning boost progress on other Sustainable Development Goals, contributing to a healthy and just society.

The benefits of foundational learning go beyond improved academic performance. Literacy skills are a gateway to learning both in and out of school, numeracy skills underpin problem solving and critical thinking, and socio-emotional skills contribute to productive citizenship. Improvements in learning have a positive impact on sustainable development, the eradication of poverty, climate resiliency, gender equality, and human rights, according to the UN's 2023 call for action on the crisis in global learning.

At Save the Children, we place particular emphasis on foundational literacy, numeracy, and social and emotional learning outcomes. This aligns with the UN's Sustainable Development Goal 4 and Indicator 4.1. We support UNICEF's Commitment to Action on Foundational Learning, in collaboration with the World Bank.

Despite the globally recognized importance of these skills, we are facing a global learning crisis. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of children were not learning essential foundational skills such as literacy and numeracy. This includes out-of-school children, and in-school children not receiving adequate support. Amidst increased impact of conflict and climate change, the learning crisis has amplified, and children are falling behind.

Save the Children is committed to ensuring that all children benefit from a quality education, with particular attention to those most impacted by inequality due to their gender, ability, language, sexual orientation, and refugee, socio-economic, marital or parental status.

A child's ability to read and understand a simple text by the age of 10 is the benchmark used for measuring learning poverty. From 2019 to 2022, the percentage of children in low- and middle-income countries who fall below that skill level has increased by 22%, demonstrating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on an already challenging situation[1]. Student assessments are key to a strong education system, enabling the targeting of instruction to students' needs. However, only 39% of countries in a 2023 UNICEF survey reported using formative assessments in classrooms. Socio-emotional skills, a core element of foundational learning, are only assessed in 42% of countries worldwide. Meanwhile, education systems are not contending with the magnitude of the issues; many education officials and teachers overestimate achievement rates in foundational learning[2]. And, global wealth inequality means that education spending in low-income countries is inadequate to improve learning, and often ineffectively allocated[2].

Literacy and numeracy are the basis for lifelong learning and for future opportunities within society. They are core building blocks to enable broader learning and open up choices and opportunities both within and outside of school. A lack of literacy and numeracy skills is strongly linked to social exclusion.

At the same time, wellbeing and learning are mutually reinforcing. Children's wellbeing is necessary for success in learning spaces and daily life. Children cannot learn if they are not protected, are unhealthy, or hungry. They cannot succeed and thrive if they are not valued, heard and included.

CORE BUILDING BLOCKS: LITERACY & NUMERACY

LITERACY BOOST

Save the Children's Literacy Boost is an evidence-based signature program that has been improving children's literacy skills in 36 countries since 2009. Key to the approach is an equal emphasis on formal and community-based learning opportunities, and integration of strategies with national and local curricula. Literacy Boost strengthens teachers' skills and emphasizes the importance of mother tongue instruction as it promotes six core skills: alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, and writing.

Our teacher training resources, based on global research on how children learn to read, focus on play-based methodologies to create safe, participatory, and motivating spaces for learning. Literacy Boost also promotes holistic support for literacy skill development outside of the classroom, through engaging families and communities in the learning process by increasing the availability of print materials in homes and communities.

Literacy Boost promotes six core skills

Teacher Training for Literacy Learning

Save the Children's teacher professional development resources include modules to improve teacher competencies in teaching vocabulary, reading comprehension, and fluency.

Teachers are trained to incorporate skill-building into their curricula across all subject areas. By focusing on the core reading skill areas throughout lesson planning and implementation, teachers ensure that children build a solid foundation for literacy. Ongoing assessments of student progress are used to guide teachers' focus.

Assessing students' reading levels and designing programs to meet children where they are on their reading journey is critical to the Literacy Boost approach. When it comes to measuring learning, choosing an assessment tool that suits the needs and goals of the project is key. The Literacy Boost assessment tool for measuring pre-reading skills, similar to the internationally recognized Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA), documents a wide range of emergent reading skills and detailed student background data. While it provides a specific and comprehensive picture of a child's literacy level, it is complex and expensive to administer. In large classrooms with busy teachers, simpler, targeted assessments can be more practical. By enabling regular use by teachers themselves, they can also support the move away from rote teaching methods. An alternative literacy assessment tool is the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) tool developed by the Indian NGO Pratham.

The ASER reading assessment assigns each student a fluency level based on their ability to identify letters and words, read simple sentences, and understand a short paragraph.
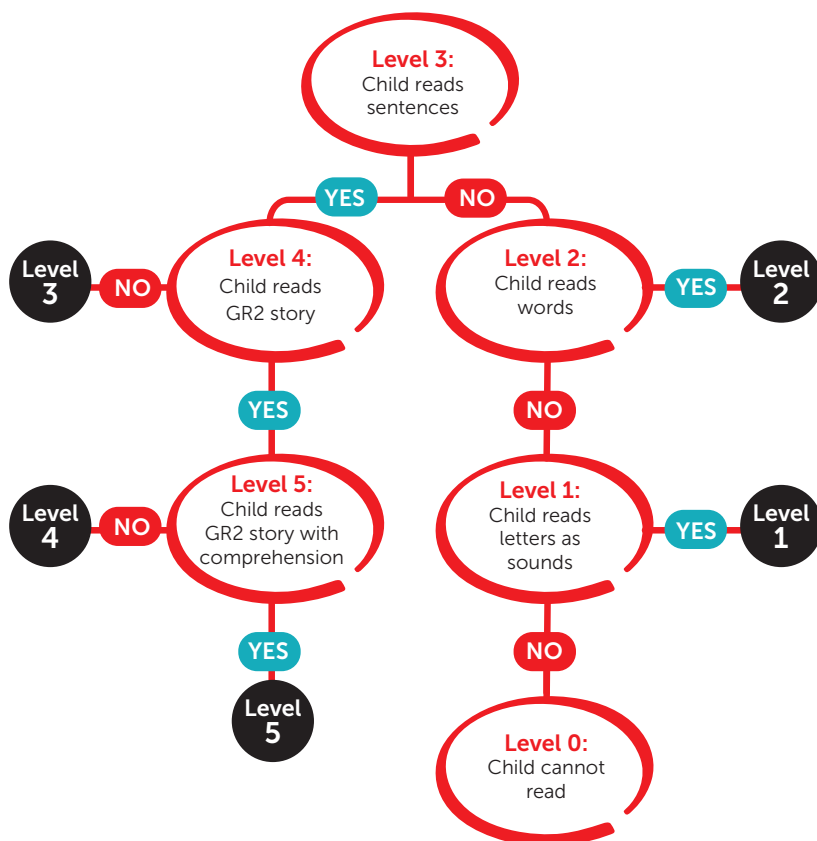
Adapting Assessments

In order to improve learning outcomes, we need to be able to measure them, so we can build our knowledge and determine best practices. In our Charlevoix girls' education portfolio, we adapted the ASER tool for the context of each project, with an eye on both benchmarks and progress. The benchmark of a Grade 2 reading level is important not only to measure functional literacy, but to align with standards set by Global Affairs Canada and the UN's SDG Indicator 4.1.1: the proportion of children and young people achieving a minimum reading and math proficiency. However, if we have too narrow of a focus on benchmark data, we lose sight of the progress made by children who improved their reading level even if they did not yet achieve the benchmark. The ASER tool is organized into a series of reading levels based on children's ability to read letters (Level 1), words (Level 2), sentences (Level 3), Grade 2 level text (Level 4), and comprehend a Grade 2 level text (Level 5), allowing us to track progress made by children as they move up through the levels. This data provides a clearer picture of the extent of learning poverty in a specific context, and is used to shape targeted a literacy intervention that addresses children's learning needs and meets them where they are.

ASER Reading Assessment Methodology

Level	Description	How to identify
Level 0	Child cannot read letters	Child reads 3 or fewer letters
Level 1	Child reads letters as sounds	Child reads at least 4 letters correctly
Level 2	Child reads words	Child reads at least 4 words correctly
Level 3	Child reads sentences	Child reads sentences in no more than 30 sec, making no more than 3 errors
Level 4	Child reads a Grade 2 level story	Child reads a G2 story in no more than 45 sec, making no more than 3 errors
Level 5	Child reads a Grade 2 level story & answers questions	Child reads G2 story in no more than 45 sec, making no more than 3 errors, and answers 3 of 5 questions correctly about the story

Level 3: Child reads sentences

- **YES** → **Level 4:** Child reads GR2 story
  - **NO** → Level 3
  - **YES** → **Level 5:** Child reads GR2 story with comprehension
    - **NO** → Level 4
    - **YES** → Level 5
- **NO** → **Level 2:** Child reads words
  - **YES** → Level 2
  - **NO** → **Level 1:** Child reads letters as sounds
    - **YES** → Level 1
    - **NO** → **Level 0:** Child cannot read

The ASER assessment starts at Level 3, where data collectors use the rubric and decision tree to assess and document a child's literacy level. If the child can read the 4 sentences of the Level 3 task, they continue to levels 4 and 5 accordingly. If the child cannot complete Level 3, they move to Levels 2 and 1 accordingly. This approach is designed for efficiency in administering the assessment, and reduces potential frustration among children who cannot complete the higher levels or find the lower levels too easy.

Through project learnings, we identified the need for clarity around what it means to demonstrate improvement, with clear quantifiable instructions for project implementing teams. We worked through the varying priorities of contextualization and standardization, reflecting the realities of a project location and local curriculum while balancing the need for consistent indicators to measure learning outcomes across the portfolio.

Assessment is crucial to the goal of improving learning. In the classroom, it enables teachers to adapt their curriculum and pedagogy to meet children's needs. At home, it communicates achievements to families so they can celebrate their children's learning progress and increase motivation. In education systems, assessments provide data that identifies emergent issues in schools so they can be addressed regionally and nationally. And, assessments are valuable tools for advocacy to demonstrate where change is needed and lobby to inform government policy.

Boosting Literacy in DRC

The *Ni Someshe* project drew on the four core components of Literacy Boost to improve foundational learning: student assessments, teacher training, mobilizing communities, and enhancing the literacy environment. Adapted assessments, described in the previous section, enabled teachers to efficiently track student progress. Teacher training workshops on inclusive and gender-responsive pedagogy drew on Literacy Boost teacher training resources. By the end of the project, 544 teachers demonstrated knowledge of gender-responsive and inclusive teaching methods to improve learning for girls and boys and support survivors of SGBV. They participated in training on positive discipline and other classroom management strategies, child protection, and psycho-social support, among other topics.

These improved competencies contributed to improved literacy results for girls and boys in all age groups, with those 6 to 9 years old showing the most improvement in their reading and writing skills: a 46% increase for girls, and 55% increase for boys. Community workshops engaged parents and caregivers to discuss girls' right to education and the supports that all children need to succeed at school. Significant improvements were reflected in attitude and behavioural changes: a 146% increase in the number of female parents who reported providing emotional, practical, or material support for their child's education, and a 117% increase for male parents. Through listening clubs and remedial learning centres, *Ni Someshe* nurtured opportunities for learning outside of formal classroom spaces, creating an enhanced literacy environment.

Adapting Resources with Local Education Stakeholders

In Nigeria, the project team gathered education stakeholders from across Borno and Yobe states for a Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) conference to address the need for contextualization of the approach to suit the local education system. The project's work to promote TaRL led to the adoption of its proven methods for teaching remedial literacy by the Ministry of Education, scaling across 14 Local Government Areas in northeastern Nigeria. To support community-based education and improve classroom pedagogy, the project also established certification pathways for volunteer teachers. This initiative resulted in 102 volunteer teachers passing their certification exam during the project period, to strengthen community-based remedial education programming.

CATCH-UP CLUBS

Our Charlevoix girls' education portfolio leveraged Save the Children's recent innovations in remedial literacy learning. Catch-Up Clubs is our approach to accelerated literacy learning, geared to address learning losses and reduce dropout for children ages 8 to 13. It combines the best practices of Pratham's Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) with the proven successful strategies of Literacy Boost, such as promoting play-based learning and community engagement to promote literacy. A Catch-Up Club is a community space led by trained facilitators during after-school hours to complement formal learning, or as a condensed version during school holidays.

The approach is centred on TaRL's framework of grouping children according to their actual reading level, rather than their age or grade level. To this end, facilitators conduct short one-on-one assessments using the ASER methodology to create four groups based on children's current levels: letters, words, sentences, and paragraphs. Save the Children has developed an Activity Bank resource for facilitators to use, organized by learning level. All activities are play-based, with an emphasis on games and physical movement to boost children's motivation and focus.

Since the launch of Catch-Up Clubs in 2021, close to 60,000 children in 10 countries have taken part in a Club in their community. Over 85% of those children improved their literacy skills by at least one level. 16% started off at the level of reading letters and progressed to reading stories with comprehension. Tracking the impact of the approach is a priority for Save the Children's global strategy for Catch-Up Clubs, with several impact evaluations and analyses from a range of contexts recently released.

> 66 *It is so good to learn while having fun.* 99

Catch-Up Club girl participant, DRC

> 66 *The Catch-up Club has helped me to read better and understand the text. Many times we read for the sake of reading and we don't understand anything of what we are reading. Now I am not embarrassed to speak in public and I express myself much better thanks to the exercises we do in each class.* 99

Catch-Up Club girl participant, Colombia

Catch-Up Clubs in Colombia

Catch-Up Clubs were integral to the improved reading levels of children at-risk of dropout in the *Beyond Borders* project in Colombia. Over 1,300 children in grades 5 and 6 participated in 24 Clubs. Teachers identified girls and boys with low literacy levels who were then recruited to the Catch-Up Clubs, led by two trained community volunteers recruited from local community and women's rights organizations. Sessions ran for 1 hour after school for 13 weeks, amounting to over 50 hours of participation. Results were exceptional. By the end of the sessions, 80% of participants reached the highest level (reading with comprehension at the grade 2 level) compared to only 30% at the beginning. 38% of participants progressed by at least one reading level, with many improving by more than one level.

Catch-Up Clubs are designed to be safe spaces, especially in crisis contexts:

- Community outreach is included to mitigate and address stigma around the mixed age groups and barriers to children's return to school

- Every session includes a play-based activity to strengthen children's social and emotional learning competencies, such as conflict resolution, empathy, self-efficacy, respect for diversity, critical thinking, and problem-solving

- Facilitators are trained in how to use referral pathways to support the well being of children in need of counselling, healthcare, protection, or other safeguarding services

The basket game (known as the Kambeba game in some Zambian classrooms) is a fun way to reinforce children's letter and sound recognition at the beginner and letter levels.

Level: beginner and letter

Activity format: whole group, small groups

Materials: a basket, bag or another container; letter (or syllable) cards; syllables chart

Steps:

1. Children sit or stand in a circle.

2. Show children the basket (or container) containing letter or syllable cards and explain the game: "We're going to sing a song and pass the basket around. Whoever is holding the basket when the song stops should pick a card at random, read it to the class, and show the letter or syllable to the group."

3. Begin singing the song and passing the basket around.

4. Suddenly stop singing. When the song stops, the child holding the basket picks a card at random, reads it out to the group, shows the letter/syllable to the other children and suggests a word containing the letter or syllable.

NUMERACY BOOST

While our Charlevoix girls' education portfolio focused on literacy, numeracy is also covered in Save the Children's roster of foundational learning approaches. Numeracy Boost draws on proven strategies to develop the math skills of children in early primary grades, both inside and outside the classroom. Geared toward interactive pedagogical approaches rather than memorization and repetition, Numeracy Boost, like Literacy Boost, emphasizes the central role of teachers and integrates new approaches to teaching numeracy into local education systems. The approach features teacher training that encourages flexible thinking about math concepts, and strategies that map onto local curricula, through three core domains: numbers and operations, geometry, and measurement. Numeracy Boost engages communities through math clubs and math festivals that highlight the usefulness of math skills in everyday life. Caregivers also receive support to encourage math learning at home through games and puzzles. In Pakistan, students participating in a Numeracy Boost program showed stronger improvements in numeracy skills compared to control school students, and those from the lowest socio-economic quartile improved by 30%, the highest gains of all the participants. In Ethiopia, a Numeracy Boost program addressed gender gaps in numeracy, reducing the number of skills in which girls lagged behind boys from 11 to 3.

Numeracy Boost promotes three core skills

1+2 NUMBERS AND OPERATIONS	GEOMETRY	MEASUREMENT
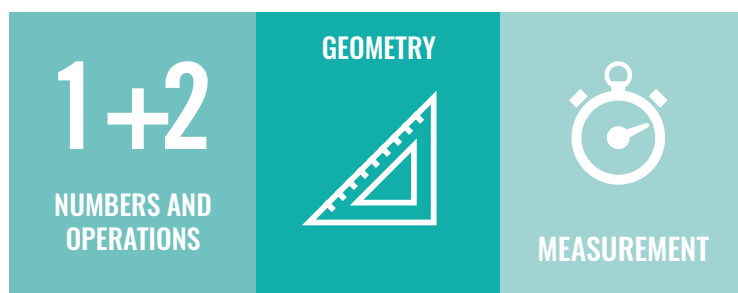
As a signature Save the Children foundational learning approach, Numeracy Boost is an important complement to Literacy Boost and therefore an important component of our basic education interventions. We incorporate numeracy skills and assessments as we attend to the assessment considerations outlined above. The ASER numeracy tool is a more accessible alternative to the Early Grade Mathematics Assessment (EGMA), requiring close adaptation to make it as useful as possible for teachers and facilitators. To this end, Save the Children has launched resources for simplifying the ASER numeracy tool. Benchmarks for numeracy learning are also more complex compared to literacy, due to greater differences in skills and levels across curricula globally. We see the opportunity to address this challenge with a closer focus on numeracy skills in future education projects, through prioritizing competencies and streamlining data collection accordingly to deliver targeted support. Save the Children has also launched a Catch-Up Clubs numeracy program as a complement to the literacy version, including a Math Activity Bank and a numeracy assessment that leverages the ASER numeracy tool.

CHILDREN'S WELLBEING: SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING

|				
Wellbeing is critical for establishing a strong foundation for learning.	Children's cognitive, social, and emotional development are interdependent and correlated in many ways.	Emotional regulation and social skills are an important basis for classroom work.	In emergency contexts SEL skills help prepare children for learning and achievement in schools.	SEL activities can improve concentration and behavioral conduct, and contribute to a positive attitude towards learning.

SEL is an important but often neglected component of foundational learning. The cerebral cortex or "thinking brain" controls the development of language, learning, and abstract thought, but neuroscience research shows that a child's cortex isn't activated if their needs for physical and emotional safety and security are not being met[3].

SEL supports children's wellbeing by building resiliency, fostering critical thinking, and strengthening peer relationships; attributes that set the stage for a positive experience of literacy and numeracy learning. Save the Children's SEL programming is built into our various approaches, from the foundational learning of Literacy Boost and Numeracy Boost; to training teachers to integrate SEL activities into their lessons; to organizing after-school clubs and safe spaces for children to practice SEL competencies; to working with parents on SEL development in the home.

SEL activities include:

- Teacher training that incorporates both mainstreamed and stand-alone SEL components
- Play-based approaches to literacy and numeracy pedagogy
- Community-based extracurricular activities such as Girls' & Boys' Clubs and Digital Clubs
- Student leadership opportunities in classrooms and schools
- Alignment of school codes of conduct with SEL skills
- Home-based SEL through workshops with parents and caregivers
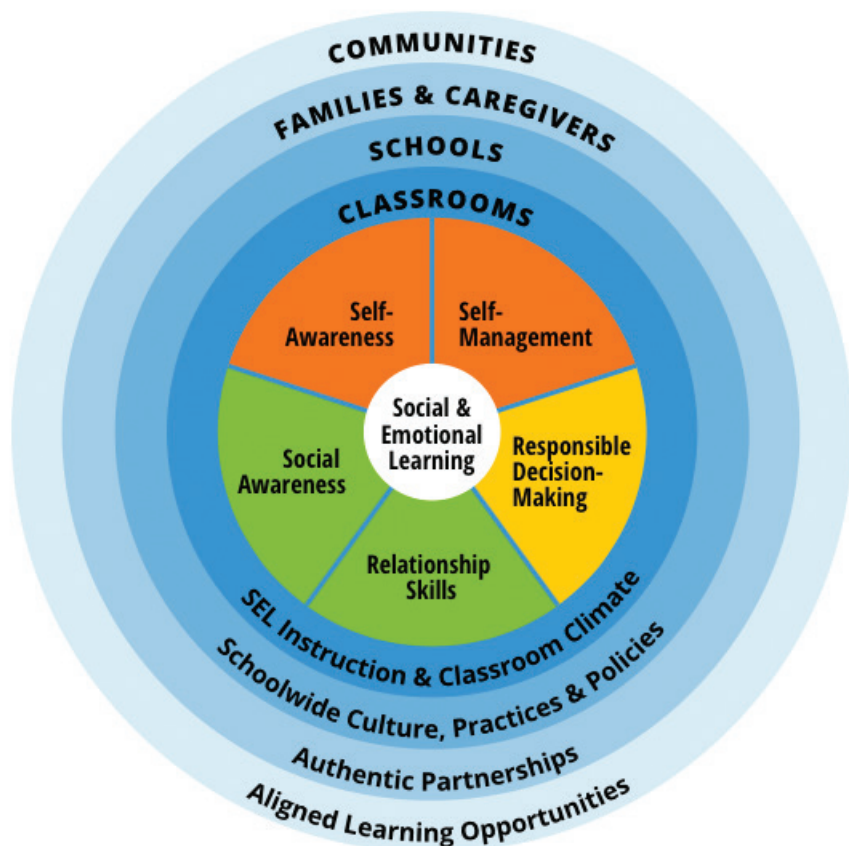
The CASEL wheel outlines the five SEL domains: self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness.

Growing a Growth Mindset

Expanding on these core domains, we added a sixth to our Charlevoix girls' education portfolio: growth mindset. To have a growth mindset is to believe that you can grow your abilities through dedication and hard work. This view creates a love of learning and resilience. While people with a fixed mindset believe basic qualities are unchangeable, a growth mindset believe that intelligence, personality, and abilities can grow and develop with time and effort. Global research shows that a growth mindset contributes to success in many areas of life. Evidence suggests that this is especially important for children and youth from marginalized and disadvantaged backgrounds[4].

We base our SEL approach on the best practices in SEL frameworks and evaluations, and leverage CASEL's framework of the five key SEL domains. Self-awareness involves recognizing one's emotions and self-concept. Self-management moves to regulating those emotions and managing stress. Social awareness looks at empathy and respecting others' perspectives, even if different from one's own. Relationship management skills focus on social engagement, supportive connections, and conflict resolution. Finally, responsible decision-making centres on problem solving, accountability to one's actions, and respectful collaboration.

Sample from the Catch-Up Clubs Activity Guide

We are the same, we are different

Why: children will be able to identify similarities and differences between themselves and will determine the importance of kindness to those that are the same and those that are different.

Time: 20 minutes (flexible)

Resources: a list of similarities to call out (see the example list, substitute any examples that are not applicable)

Arrangement: space for moving freely

SEL competencies: self-awareness and social awareness

EXAMPLE LIST
Group yourself with everyone in the room:
- who has the same favourite colour as you;
- who is the same age as you;
- whose first name starts with the same letter as yours;
- who has the same favourite food as you;
- who has the same number of brothers and sisters as you.

To assess SEL competencies, Save the Children developed the International Social-Emotional Learning Assessment (ISELA): a scenario and performance-based tool to provide a profile of children's SEL competencies by assessing skills related to self-concept, stress management, perseverance, empathy, and conflict resolution.

SEL Domain	ISELA Skill Measured
Self-awareness	• Accurate self-perception • Self-efficacy
Self-management	• Stress management • Self-motivation
Social awareness	• Perspective-taking • Empathy
Relationship skills	• Relationship building
Responsible decision-making	• Solving problems & conflict
Growth mindset	• Belief in learning • Perseverance & learning motivation

For our Charlevoix girls' education portfolio, we continued our focus on streamlining data by adapting the ISELA tool to suit the project contexts – from migrant and border communities in Colombia to conflict-affected areas in DRC and Nigeria – using a mix of performance-based and self-assessment questions. The domains addressed by the tool were tailored to each project's context and objectives, rather than assessing all domains by default, in order to narrow our focus and concentrate resources efficiently.

Girls Strengthening Their SEL Competencies

COLOMBIA

90% **OF GIRLS** demonstrated strong SEL competencies by the end of the project

NIGERIA

57% **OF GIRLS** aged 10 to 14 improved their SEL competencies through participation in the project

AND 21% of girls aged 6 to 9

DRC

THERE WAS A 178% increase in the number of girls aged 6 to 9 with strong SEL competencies

In future projects, we see the opportunity to focus on streamlining SEL tools with the development of a standardized exercise to select the appropriate domains at the start of a project.

Creating Peaceful Classrooms

Colombian schools in the Colombia-Venezuela border region face the challenge of integrating displaced and refugee students. In collaboration with local partner Aulas en Paz, our *Beyond Borders* project implemented an extensive teacher training program centred on SEL, with the goal of creating social cohesion among host and migrant communities. A variety of activities allowed for different modes of learning to suit busy teachers' schedules: online sessions, in-person workshops, and mentoring. Teachers learned how to promote inclusive citizenship, establish xenophobia-free classrooms, and foster equitable and gender-responsive learning environments. The 4,410 teachers trained improved their inclusive teaching practices, a 161% improvement for female teachers and 61% improvement for male teachers. By the end of the project, there was a 19% increase in girls who reported positively on the safety, quality, and gender-responsiveness in schools.

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

To improve learning outcomes, we must first address barriers to accessing school and learning spaces, to ensure that children feel safe, comfortable, and able to participate once in the classroom. Across our Charlevoix girls' education portfolio, we took a whole-school approach, working at all levels to create an inclusive learning environment that meet the needs of all children, particularly the hardest to reach, such as girls. Activities included:

AT THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

- Mainstreamed and stand-alone SEL activities, such as girls' clubs and extracurricular sports to foster girls' and boys' sense of self-esteem, agency, and empowerment, and build key knowledge and skills so children can advocate for their right to quality education

- Community-based education initiatives to promote learning outside the classroom

- Girls and women's participation in school governance and decision-making processes

- Assistive learning devices for children with disabilities

AT THE FAMILY AND COMMUNITY LEVEL

- Campaigns led by female and male Gender Champions to address discriminatory attitudes and practices that prevent girls and other marginalized groups from participating in school.

- Family and community dialogues and events to promote girls' education and reading, math, and SEL activities at home.

- Community child protection committees to address child protection, SGBV including early and forced marriage, and school absenteeism.

AT THE SCHOOL LEVEL

- School codes of conduct that include definitions of child abuse and SGBV, and a zero tolerance policy for violence

- Gender-responsive pedagogies integrated into teacher professional development and wellbeing programs, to support teachers in establishing inclusive, equitable, and safe classrooms

- Disability-responsive approaches that emphasize mainstreaming by strengthening teachers' capacities to address individual children's learning needs, through classroom management strategies that accommodate learning challenges and are also useful for multilingual contexts

- Inclusive school infrastructure improvements such as separate and private girl and boy latrines, and girl-friendly welcoming spaces

- Advocacy with local partners, including women's rights organizations, to strengthen education policies and practices at school, regional and national levels

In the contexts where we work, poverty is one of the major barriers to consistent attendance and enrolment in school. Income level and food insecurity impact children's ability to attend school and engage in learning. In many project contexts, initiatives to increase access to schools – such as school feeding programs, education kits, menstrual hygiene management materials, and cash programs – are prerequisites to improve learning outcomes for the hardest to reach.

COMMUNITY-BASED EDUCATION FOR INCLUSION

Community-based education was a common thread in our Charlevoix girls' education portfolio, as a strategy to promote inclusion and girls' participation. Girls and other community members participated in focus group discussions and baseline studies to help identify the most pressing learning needs for the hardest to reach, from education support outside of the classroom to mitigation for school dropout. Then, projects established education training activities for project volunteers, such as caregivers, older adolescents and youth, and community leaders who learned about instructional strategies to support girls' participation in the learning process. In DRC, community education volunteers were trained to refer children to education resources such as government-supported accelerated learning programs, Catch-Up Clubs, and radio-based lessons. In Nigeria, volunteer teachers learned strategies to support children's learning outside of the formal school system. In Colombia, a digital classroom pilot combined SEL and EdTech through video games. Children and adolescents learned coding, programming, and robotics skills to create their own video games, focused on Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR), child protection, and other relevant topics. This experience boosted skills in logical reasoning and problem-solving, and highlighted the potential of using children's interests and hobbies as a starting point for program design.

SAFE SCHOOLS

The realities of crisis and conflict underlie all of our three girls' education portfolio projects. Whether rooted in armed conflict, climate change, or the COVID-19 pandemic, these factors necessitated close attention to the ways in which safety and security prevent children from learning.

Realities of Crisis Contexts

VIOLENCE, ARMED CONFLICT, AND DISPLACEMENT

Boko Haram insurgency and government counterinsurgency have led

1.8 MILLION people in **NIGERIA** to be **INTERNALLY DISPLACED**

2.3 MILLION Venezuelan **MIGRANTS** arrived at the Colombia border in 2020, amidst **ARMED CONFLICT IN THE BORDER REGION**

232 SCHOOLS in **EASTERN DRC** were deliberately **ATTACKED** in the first half of 2023

POVERTY

HIGH STUDENT FEES impact families' ability to send children to school

Approximately **7 MILLION CHILDREN** in the **DRC** are **OUT OF SCHOOL**

In **NORTHEASTERN NIGERIA,** only **44%** of boys and **29%** of girls are **ENROLLED IN PRIMARY SCHOOL**

EXTREME WEATHER DUE TO CLIMATE CHANGE

OVER 10,000 cases of **CHOLERA** in **NIGERIA** after **severe flooding**

SCHOOLS used as **EMERGENCY SHELTERS** in **COLOMBIA** after **FLOODS** due to La Niña impacts

GENDER INEQUALITY AND SGBV

65% OF WOMEN in the Venezuela-Colombia border region **REPORT EXPERIENCING VIOLENCE**

37% OF ADOLESCENTS in North and South Kivu Provinces, DRC, reported being **SURVIVORS OF SGBV**

OVER HALF OF GIRLS 5 to 17 years old in the DRC are **OUT OF SCHOOL,** and **75% OF ILLITERATE PEOPLE** in North Kivu province are **WOMEN**

In our girls' education portfolio, we developed a comprehensive conflict-sensitivity and risk analysis, with appropriate mitigation responses to work toward safe and resilient education systems. We leveraged Save the Children's evidence-based Safe Schools approach, aligned with the globally-endorsed Comprehensive School Safety Framework. It's designed to keep children safe and address causes of insecurity through a gender lens, looking at four components: policies and systems that strengthen school safety, school safety management, school facilities, and safe knowledge and behaviours.

Key interventions across our programming included:

- Classrooms that are welcoming to refugees and displaced groups, through SEL interventions

- Schools that are resistant to extreme weather events, through emergency preparedness and disaster risk planning

- Mobile education units and distance learning during school closures and disruptions caused by displacement crises

- Provision of financial or material support to the most marginalized families

- Linkages between schools and local child protection systems

- Teacher training on mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), SEL and basic child protection; recognizing teachers as first responders to children affected by trauma

The integration of approaches to support children's learning before, during, and after an emergency is key to ensure that education systems are set up to mitigate the impacts of climate change, environmental degradation, and protracted conflict. To implement education responses, flexible and adaptable funding models that include funding Education in Emergencies, such as the inclusion of crisis modifier funds, are key to building resiliency into the foundation of education projects.

CRISIS RESPONSE RESULTS

NIGERIA

60 SCHOOLS developed school safety plans focused on **SGBV PREVENTION** and expanded psycho-social support services

In targeted regions almost **15,000 CHILDREN (close to 9,000 of them girls) RE-ENROLLED IN SCHOOL** during project implementation

COLOMBIA

GIRLS' SCHOOL ENROLMENT INCREASED BY 15% in crisis-affected schools targeted by the *Beyond Borders* project

The percentage of **GIRLS** who **REPORTED POSITIVELY** on the **SAFETY** of their **SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT INCREASED** by **19%**

DRC

609 EDUCATION ADMINISTRATORS were trained in developing a **CRISIS RESPONSE PLAN,** which they implemented in their schools

85 SCHOOLS implemented measures to **REDUCE THE RISK OF VIOLENCE** in and around schools

DISTANCE LEARNING DURING A CRISIS

When schools must close in response to extreme weather events, disease outbreaks, or insecurity due to conflict, distance learning programs can help ensure that learning continues.

Often, crisis-affected rural communities lack telephone access, electricity, and internet connectivity, further limiting children's access to learning resources. Pre-recorded audio and radio broadcast lessons help to fill in gaps for children who are out of school and reinforce concepts for students experiencing face-to-face learning disruptions. Led by trained volunteer teachers, community-based distance learning programs support children's foundational learning, and they provide out-of-school children with a path to return to school.

In DRC, over 17,000 children participated in Listening Clubs which met twice a week during the COVID-19 pandemic, alternating by grade levels. Teachers guided students through pre-recorded audio lessons, reinforcing concepts with workbook activities. The Listening Clubs improved social cohesion in areas where children were affected by conflict. Many had been out of school, and the program provided motivation for children to return to learning, as well as an incentive for parents to enrol them in school.

In Nigeria, communities established 60 Reading Circles to support distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Volunteer teachers led groups of 20 children using solar-powered radios to access the government's educational radio programs. The project also developed and distributed workbooks to complement the radio-based curriculum. These materials proved to be effective even after the lockdown ended, as a resource for independent learning.

In Colombia, distance learning was adapted to meet the unique needs of *caminantes*, migrant girls and boys who cross the border on foot. Children received education kits containing literacy, numeracy, and SEL activities, plus a lightweight solar-powered radio preloaded with built-in audio learning content. Parents received a guide to support their child's learning and well being while on the move, with information on how to access services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our approaches to basic education, SEL, inclusive education, and crisis contexts in our Charlevoix girls' education portfolio highlight the interconnected nature of these factors when it comes to improving foundational learning. The following list distills some key recommendations that have emerged from review and reflection of our projects in Colombia, DRC, and Nigeria:

- Design teacher professional development programs that build teachers' competencies on effective strategies to support foundational learning

- Ensure education programs are held accountable to foundational learning outcomes, through specific indicators and assessments

- Design literacy, numeracy and SEL assessments that balance standardization with contextualization

- Incorporate strengthening children's growth mindset into foundational learning activities

- Invest in targeted remedial and accelerated learning programs to address learning losses, particularly for the most underserved children

- Strengthen activities with family and community engagement

- Prioritize development of local learning materials, along with positive messaging about girls' education and child rights

- Mainstream gender-responsive and inclusive approaches

- Integrate MHPSS responses, such as SEL play-based pedagogies, into education programs design

- Invest in climate-resilient education systems

- **Provide** flexible funding to allow education systems to promptly respond to crisis situations, such as education in emergencies interventions, crisis modifiers, and emergency preparedness planning

A WAY FORWARD: BUILDING CRISIS RESILIENCY IN EDUCATION SYSTEMS

As part of Save the Children's commitment to foundational learning outcomes, we are focused on strengthening the resiliency of education systems to ensure that learning does not stop during a crisis so children can return safely to school and learning spaces where their foundational learning is prioritized.

Gender-Responsive School Risk Assessments

Schools may need support to better understand and prepare for the risks their students face. A gender-responsive School Risk Assessment identifies gender-based threats, such as protection issues for girls and boys on the way to school, threats to female teachers, or recruitment of boys into militarized groups. It also assesses the likelihood of anticipated climate and conflict shocks and effects on girls, boys, and school actors.

School Improvement and Emergency Preparedness Plans

These plans outline key improvements required for schools to address identified risks, such as improved fencing and perimeter security, improved information management, and clear procedures in the event of an emergency or extreme weather event. Involving women and girls in school-level safety and security committees can help ensure that gender-related risks are identified and that plans are communicated via channels likely to reach girls and women.

Anticipatory Action

A system to link early warnings and triggers to actions designed to protect families, communities, and public services (including national education systems) ahead of a hazard. For example, in an area where extreme flooding is expected, Anticipatory Action funding can be used for food aid and materials for radio-based learning programs for children to learn at home when they cannot get to school. Anticipatory Action addresses humanitarian crises proactively rather than reactively, with the goal of saving lives and reducing the impact of hazards on education infrastructure, education personnel, learners, and their communities.

Climate Resiliency

Climate change impacts education in many ways. Extreme weather events can damage school infrastructure and learning materials, and displace families who may face language and cultural barriers as they relocate. Building resiliency to climate change into education systems not only prevents learning losses, but can also improve communities' resilience in the face of climate-related events. A climate-smart education system involves prioritizing foundational learning, teaching about the impacts of climate change, and strengthening climate change mitigation, adaptation, and resilience-building[5].

Education in Emergencies

Save the Children developed the Day 1 Approach to enable a rapid and quality response to humanitarian crises. It encapsulates operational and technical elements to outline every aspect of an education response, with a focus on children's learning and wellbeing. Local country office teams are central to Day 1 planning, with regional and global working groups and task teams in place to support. Topics covered include risk-informed methods to deliver education in emergencies, localized response capacity, sectoral coordination accountabilities, financial mobilization, and operational linkages[6].

ENDNOTES

[1] Tracking Progress on Foundation Learning, UNICEF

[2] Here's How We Turn This Learning Crisis Around, World Bank

[3] Promoting Psychosocial Wellbeing Through The Power of Play, Right To Play

[4] Dweck, C.S. (2008). Mindset. Ballantine Books

[5] Powering Climate Resilience Through Inclusive Education & Gender Equality, IISD

[6] Education In Emergencies Day 1 Approach, Save the Children

RESOURCES FOR A DEEPER DIVE

SEL in Education Programming

Safe Schools

Enabling Teachers

Lessons in Literacy report

Child Wellbeing position paper

Anticipatory Action framework

Catch-Up Clubs Impact

Save the Children

In partnership with

Canada

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