

The Safe Learning Model



A Class 3 pupil at Baptist Rowalla Primary School, in Tonkolili, Sierra Leone, engages in a Literacy. Photo Credit: Michael Duff, 2014

Significant Findings

- Children reported higher levels of feeling good and doing well when they had enough water, felt healthier, and did more chores.
- Analysis of data collected at endline indicated that intervention group performed better overall than the control group on the EGRA.
- Caregiver literacy was associated with EGRA performance, with children who reported that their caregiver could read or write scoring significantly higher.
- Performing chores at home more often was associated with higher performance on the EGRA suggesting potential inter-linkages with feelings of competency and self-efficacy and reading performance.
- Statistically significant, positive correlation between literacy and wellbeing scores at endline.
- Children observed positive attitudes towards boys education more often than positive attitudes towards girls education

Context of the Pilot

During the period between September 2017 and May 2018, Concern Worldwide, Concern Sierra Leone and the University College Dublin (UCD) School of Education conducted a pilot evaluation of the Safe Learning Model; an integrated intervention model developed by Concern Worldwide. The working assumption behind the Safe Learning Model is that children's educational progress will be enhanced when they live in communities where there is more support for gender equality and children's wellbeing. This has led Concern to consolidate and expand separate projects on teacher training and development, child literacy, social and emotional learning, adolescent sexual and reproductive health (ASRH), and community decision making and planning, that had been running in the Tonkolili district of Sierra Leone, into a single, comprehensive model designed to support children and communities.

“children’s educational progress will be enhanced when they live in communities that are underpinned by support for gender equality and children’s wellbeing.”

¹ This briefing is based on original research undertaken by Devine, D; Sugrue, C; Symonds, J; Sloan, S; Kearns, M; Samonova, E; Capistrano, D and Crean, M; University College Dublin, School of Education.

The pilot phase allowed Concern to develop effective methods of delivering the Safe Learning Model as an integrated programme. It also enabled the UCD research team, working in partnership with Concern, Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEST), Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs (MSWGCA) and NestBuilders International (NBI), to explore the feasibility of evaluating the intervention, gain insight and understanding of children's everyday lives in Sierra Leone, and develop research tools and protocols that can be used during a full-scale evaluation of the Safe Learning Model. The pilot report outlines the methodology, tools, procedures and activities that were developed and took place over the one year pilot phase, in addition to outlining findings from the pilot study. Finally, recommendations for the full-scale evaluation of the Safe Learning Model, commencing in September 2018 are given, based on learning experiences during the pilot.

Research Objectives of Pilot Study

- To assess the feasibility of implementing the full Safe Learning Model;
- To assess the feasibility of undertaking a randomised controlled trial evaluation of the Safe Learning Model;
- To begin the development of a theory of change depicting how the Safe Learning is proposed to impact on children, schools and communities;
- To provide initial indications of impact of the Safe Learning Model on literacy and wellbeing outcomes after 1 year;
- To provide historical and socio-cultural contextualisation of children's everyday lives, education, and gender dynamics in rural Sierra Leone;
- To assess the feasibility of the qualitative dimension of the study in terms of sample size, access and participation of key informants;
- To provide initial indications of the cultural sensitivity and appropriateness of methods and to adjust their shape and implementation according to children's and local social actors' worldviews and usual social dynamics
- To trial the range of methods appropriate to the study of children's everyday lives both inside and outside of school, including visual ethnography
- To promote children's voice and active participation during the research process

Design

The pilot evaluation was designed as a mixed methods study comprising both quantitative and qualitative components. The quantitative component involved a quasi-experiment trial. The qualitative component involved an in-depth case study of one community and interviews with personnel involved in the intervention design, management and delivery.

Sampling and recruitment of participants took place initially at the community and school level. The sample for the pilot evaluation was 10 schools, of which five were allocated to receive the full Safe Learning Model. The remaining five continued as normal and did not receive any elements of the Safe Learning Model. The potential challenges associated with fieldwork meant that, for the purpose of the pilot, a maximum 30 children per school were selected to participate. After a thorough consent process, students were randomly sampled by the research team such that a gender balance similar to that of the full class was maintained. The final sample therefore involved 293 Class 1 students in 10 schools. For the pilot study, a single school was selected for an intensive qualitative case study of children's everyday lives in Sierra Leone. The qualitative component of the research focused on 20 children within the case study primary school's Class 2. Within this class, four case study children were selected for further in-depth work, along with their families (which included parent/primary carer, grandparent/elder, older sibling).

Data Collection Tools: Quantitative Measures

The Safe Learning Model aims to impact on children's literacy and wellbeing, thus both were measured as outcomes in the intervention and control arms of the pilot sample. Two further outcomes, children's perceptions of gender equality and gender violence, were also measured. As a pilot study, the focus was on the development of appropriate measures (in terms of sample age and cultural factors) that were feasible to administer. Each outcome and measure, and their administration in the pilot study, is described in detail below.

Outcome	Measure
Literacy	Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) consisting of six subtests: letter identification, letter sounds, familiar words, invented words, reading passage and comprehension. In the pilot study, the EGRA was administered on a one-to-one basis with Class 1 students using Tangerine.
Child Wellbeing	The Child and Adolescent Personal and Social Assessment of Wellbeing (CAPSAW) was designed specifically for the trial and consists of 32-items, that can also be used as a brief measure of 8-items in either of the personal, peer, teacher or family domains.
Gender Equality	The gender equality scale was designed to assess whether children's experience of education in Sierra Leone differs based on gender in school, home, and peer contexts.
Gender Violence	The gender-based violence measure consists of 12 questions focused on violence that the children may have witnessed against family members and people at school. The questions assess exposure to violence against four different categories of people (girls, adult women, boys, adult men), in three different contexts (home, school, in the wider community)

In addition, information about the school and community was gathered from head teachers via a structured interview and demographic information was collected from children during the individual assessments, to gain an insight into the background and home characteristics of the study sample.

Qualitative Fieldwork

In order to produce an intergenerational analysis of children's everyday life, interviews in the qualitative pilot community were conducted across several generational cohorts, including children, youths, adults, teachers, and elders. Interviews focused on local social actors' cultural perceptions, narratives, and interpretations of issues such as "education", "literacy", "gender", "wellbeing", and the Safe Learning Model intervention. These interviews were carried out in both group settings and as individual interviews.

Qualitative fieldwork involved the use of child participatory research methods (including observant participation and visual ethnography). Ethnographic data ("thick description" of exemplar episodes, case studies, and "real life vignettes") were generated, with a particular focus on piloting questions on the following areas:

- Children's practices (friendships, time use, space use, play, work, inter-generational relationships, emerging gender identities and gendered practices, transitions, perceptions of risk, and wellbeing, sources of social support and social networks; attitudes to school, literacy);
- Teacher practices (literacy, numeracy, learning climate, gender perspectives, life history, experiences of the safe learning intervention/supports);
- School (leadership) practices (culture/values, policies, resource allocation, curricular and extra-curricular activities, gender perspectives/practices including attitudes toward gender-based violence/safety in school, life histories; experiences of safe learning intervention support);
- Family/community practices (parent/grandparent and sibling relationships/dynamics, work, traditions, gendered practices, norms customs, family /inter-generational histories, community supports/integration/services).

As part of observant participation methodology and child-centred qualitative research, the UCD researcher spent time with the children in class, at home, in the bush or in the farm using a strategy known as "guided tours led by children". During these tours, researchers took pictures of these journeys and related social settings as their relevance was pointed out by children.

Key Pilot Findings

Child Wellbeing

Analysis of pilot data found that children's subjective wellbeing (personal, peer, teacher, family) was unrelated to whether they were in the intervention or control group or were male or female. Wellbeing was also unrelated to main caregiver literacy, having electricity at home, and household size. Furthermore, it was unrelated to missing school due to illness, and whether children had enough to eat, despite there being visible variance in how much children reported having to eat across the sample.

Rather, wellbeing was significantly related to the time children spent doing domestic and manual chores, having enough water to drink, and feeling healthy, with higher amounts of time doing chores, water and health relating to higher amounts of personal, peer, teacher and family wellbeing. In conclusion, children reported higher levels of feeling good and doing well when they had enough water, felt healthier, and did more chores. This last finding presents an interesting fit with our model of wellbeing, where we presumed that wellbeing is based on developing competencies to do well in one's society / culture. In this sample, children's feelings of competence clearly relate to doing domestic and manual chores in the community. This example also connects with data emerging from the qualitative analysis into children's everyday lives and the key role of strong familial bonds and inter-generational solidarity in building a sense of belonging, competency and validation within the community.

Literacy

Overall, scores on all subtests of the EGRA were low at baseline, with a high percentage (46%) of zero scores returned. This is unsurprising given that testing took place early in the school year, in the first year of primary school. At endline, conducted at the end of the academic year, students in both intervention and control schools demonstrated improvements, with a decrease in the number of zero scores returned (22%). Baseline scores showed few differences between students in the intervention and control groups. Analysis of data collected at endline indicated that, after controlling for baseline scores and adjusting for clustering, the intervention group performed better overall than the control group on the EGRA. While this difference was not statistically significant, it provides preliminary indication of change in the expected direction, and may indicate that the Safe Learning Model is having some effect on the intended outcomes after one school year.

Findings indicated that caregiver literacy was associated with children's literacy levels at baseline, with children who reported that their caregiver can read or write scoring significantly higher. Performing chores at home more often was also associated with higher performance on the EGRA suggesting potential inter-linkages with feelings of competency and self-efficacy and reading performance.



Class 1, RC Primary School. Matotoka Community, Tonkolili District, Sierra Leone
Photo Credit: Michael Duff, 2015

There was a statistically significant, positive correlation between literacy and wellbeing at endline as indicated by the EGRA and CAPSAW scores. In line with the working assumption underpinning the Safe Learning Model, exploratory analyses were conducted to assess whether wellbeing was a significant predictor of literacy at endline, after controlling for baseline literacy performance. The above impact analysis was repeated with the endline CAPSAW total score added

as an additional independent variable. This indicated that children's self-reported wellbeing was a significant predictor of literacy, with a one-point increase in the CAPSAW predicting a 16-point increase in the EGRA after controlling for baseline EGRA score and intervention status.

Gender Equality and Violence



School Clubs drama skit on gender, UMC Primary School, Masengbeh, Tonkolili, Sierra Leone
Photo Credit: Michael Duff, 2014

It was found that, overall, children observed positive attitudes towards boys education more often than positive attitudes towards girls education. This difference remained significant when looking at intervention schools only; in control schools, however, there was no significant difference between scores on the two subscales. Qualitative analysis lends some context to these patterns in terms of gendered dynamics within the children's everyday lives, the positioning of women/girls in the local community and the impact of initiation/secret societies and gendered roles/expectations.

The issue of gender-based violence did not explicitly emerge in the qualitative field work. Issues of corporal punishment of children did arise and was frequently noted but without reference to gender. Given the sensitivity of the issue, the exploratory nature of the research in the pilot in terms of context and cultural mapping, the main study fieldwork will provide more extensive opportunities for exploring this. A key issue will be ensuring single gender focus groups, and ensuring that interviews with girls/women are led by a female fieldworker to ensure female participation.

Recommendations for Main Trial

Qualitative

- Sample selection of case study field sites to include:
 - Faith denomination/governance (Muslim, Catholic, Government, Community)
 - Large/small/accessibility
 - Language/ethnicity (ensuring representation across the three groups: Temne, Khuranko, Limba)
 - Other possible factors to include subsistence vs commercial agriculture (cash crops) /proximity to mining sites
 - Ebola outbreak: quarantined vs unreached communities
- Revise sampling for qualitative fieldwork by reducing number of individual interviews with children. Core focus will be on group work/activities with children in study grade, alongside intensive inter-generational case studies of 16 children. Extend group interviews to school management committee, and youth sample (male and female).
- Reduce time in each field study site to four weeks (rather than 7 weeks in pilot school). This is adequate given longitudinal element of the main study and repeat visits to each case study site over the main study.
- Conduct group interviews in single gendered groups, including youth groups.
- Extend observation of classroom life through naturalistic observation field notes of classroom practices to provide more detailed indicators of within class dynamics for both teachers and children.
- Adapt visual/photo elicitation methodologies and local mapping activities.
- Ensure fieldworkers selected for the qualitative fieldwork have positive dispositions to rural communities /familiarity with local cultural context.

Quantitative

- As whole-class administration of outcome measures proved unsuccessful, individual assessments should be carried out during every year of the main study.
- Children's school attendance may act as both an outcome and a moderator of the programme effects on other outcomes, and thus should be collected at the individual student level, ideally at the end of each term, in both the control and intervention groups.
- Implementation of different components of the programme may vary in terms of quality, fidelity and dosage. Concern and UCD should work together to maximise the potential of the data routinely collected by the Monitoring and Evaluation team in Concern Sierra Leone, so that implementation factors can be assessed quantitatively alongside outcomes.



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