

## The Safe Learning Model



Class 1 student at Benevolent Islamic Primary School in Makinh Sierra Leone 2015  
Photo Credit: Michael Duff

### Significant Findings

- Higher increases in average child wellbeing in intervention compared to control schools, with increases significantly higher among girls than boys.
  - Significant decrease in EGRA zero scores (baseline of 45% decreased to 26% after one year) with no significant gender differences, but significantly higher improvements in intervention schools for some tasks.
  - Significant, substantial increase in proportion of children reporting domestic chores, or work outside the home, but this did not reduce playtime.
  - Girls tend to do domestic chores more frequently than boys, but both boys and girls experienced a similar increase in this work.
  - 56% of the children reported being whipped or caned by their teachers and about 59% by their parents.
  - A higher proportion of boys were whipped or caned by teachers and girls by their families, but gender differences were not significant.
- Fewer incidences of direct violence (physical and psychological violence) reported between baseline and post-test 1. Lower average level of direct violence in intervention compared to control, but differences were not significant.
  - Children's perception of positive attitudes toward gender equality among teachers increased, but among family decreased from baseline to post-test 1.
  - In schools that teachers considered as very safe for pupils, children perceived a higher level of positive gender equality attitudes from teachers in comparison to schools not considered as very safe.

### Context of the Research

Developed by Concern Worldwide, the 'Safe Learning Model' adopts a holistic approach to the education of children in extreme poverty, in order to realise sustainable improvements in children's literacy, wellbeing and gender equality (including gender-based violence) in schools and communities. The model combines a comprehensive educational programme with interventions that support teaching practices, as well as gender-based violence prevention and response. In order to evaluate the effectiveness of this integrated model, University College Dublin (UCD) School of Education is conducting a three-year longitudinal study with approximately 3,000 children from 100 primary schools in Tonkolili, Sierra Leone. Through a mixed methods design, the study aims to evaluate the model through a randomized control trial of its implementation across 100 communities. The study examines wellbeing, gender equality and literacy development of a cohort of pupils and their everyday experiences in school and at home and ultimately how this may be affected by the programme<sup>2</sup>.

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

This brief presents initial data of the first year of implementation (2018/19), providing an overview of the general findings related to children's lived experiences. As the study remains ongoing, and in order to maintain research integrity, results directly related to the effectiveness of each level of the model will not be released until the conclusion of the study and as such, it is not yet possible to make assumptions related to the effectiveness of the various levels of intervention. It is important to note that current findings relate to data collected before the outbreak of COVID-19 and therefore does not reflect the impact of school closures on children's education, gender equality and wellbeing.

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on the Safe Learning Model and main study contact: Amy Folan, Senior Education Advisor, Concern Worldwide [amy.folan@concern.net](mailto:amy.folan@concern.net)

## Key Year One Findings

Over the first year of intervention, although poverty and lack of access to basic services remain a significant challenge to children's overall wellbeing and quality of life in Tonkolili, evidence emerges of small but statistically significant changes in literacy and wellbeing outcomes among the study population.

### Socio-Cultural Dynamics in Everyday Life in Rural Sierra Leone

Measures of the socioeconomic status of children in the sample confirms high levels of poverty within the study population and little variation in the experience of that poverty within the region. Alongside economic hardship, the everyday experiences of children are shaped by a system of communal values centred on intergenerational care, reciprocity and respect for elders. These values are especially relevant to the focus of the study as they frame wider community practices and attitudes towards children's work, education and their contribution to family livelihoods and household economy through contributions to domestic work, subsistence farming and working in the mines. Compared to baseline, there has been substantial increase in the proportion of children who reported doing domestic chores or work outside the home in the study communities, irrespective of socio-economic status. Despite the higher workload, this did not result in a reduction in playtime with children generally view this work in a positive light referring to the 'usefulness' to the family.

One of the most significant aspects of children's everyday lives in school and at home is the frequency of 'flogging'/corporal punishment. While illegal in Sierra Leone, corporal punishment remains a central disciplinary technique and characteristic of adult-child relationships in the home and school with 53% of children reporting they were whipped or caned by their teachers and 58% by their parents. In the study communities, the hierarchical positioning of adults relative to children is taken as given, as is adult's rights to physically punish children. In addition, despite all intervention groups having a lower average level of direct violence compared to the control group, none of those differences were statistically significant.



### Gender Dynamics in Everyday Life in Rural Sierra Leone

While younger children in the study found it difficult to articulate gender dynamics in their lives, differences in gender expectations/practices were evident through in-depth field observations and children's narratives of how duties in the household were shared and dispersed. Despite traditional constructs of masculinity and femininity remaining, the research highlighted some shifts in the positioning of women within the household and increasing time being spent by them doing paid work (including petty trading), however women's work outside the household (and contribution to family finances) is not associated with any changes in decision-making processes within families.

The data suggest that girls tended to perform domestic chores more frequently than boys, leading to time poverty for girls that was perceived by teachers to negatively affect their engagement in school. However, parents valued the education of both their sons and daughters. Girls' education is perceived as a route through which a girl may acquire better opportunities that will enhance family survival strategies over the long term. At the same time, existing practices of gendered labour division contradict these expectations, as parents do not alter their expectations of the contributions girls make to family work.

On average, children perceive that attitudes to gender equality have increased for teachers but decreased for their families over the first year of the study. This was reflected in children's responses to parental and teacher attitudes to boys and girls going to school and completing their schooling. However, interviews also show that teachers tend to perceive girls as less 'brilliant' than boys due to girls' time poverty, in addition to assumptions of fundamental differences between the behaviour and cognitive abilities of girls and boys.

### Children's Wellbeing



Overall, positive trends in physical, social and psychological wellbeing were noted across the 100 schools with children in intervention schools experiencing a higher increase in their average level of wellbeing compared to children in control schools. Data indicates improvements in subjective health and psychological wellbeing for both boys and girls, with girls seeing a significantly higher increase in levels of wellbeing as compared to boys.

### Education/Schools, Teaching, Leading and Learning

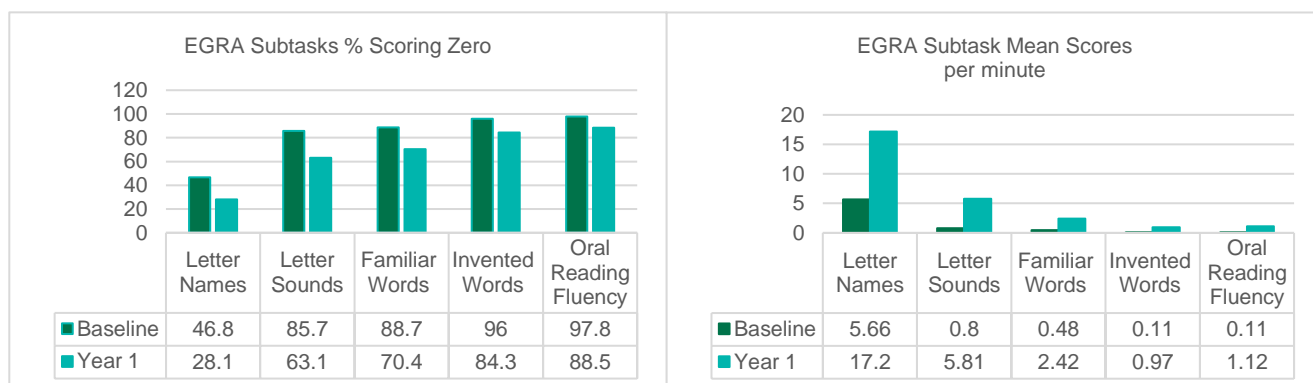
Findings confirm the continued prevalence of unapproved schools and a high number of teachers not paid by the government (66%), undermining the positive potential and impact of the Sierra Leone Government Free Quality Education policy. In the sample, 79% of schools not funded by the government had to secure funds from the local community; the remaining 21% received funds from faith-based or non-governmental organisations. Across the 100 schools in the sample, only 31% of teachers are qualified, with 34 schools not having any qualified teachers and even in approved schools, some teachers remain unpaid through lack of qualification. Qualifications and payment of teachers are central to the provision of quality education with findings suggesting a child whose teacher is paid by the government has 76% increased chance of being present in school at the end of Class 1 compared to children taught by unpaid teachers. However, structured classroom observations indicated little difference between the pedagogical practices of qualified and unqualified teachers, with both subsets of teachers displaying high levels of didactic, teacher-centred teaching and low emphasis on creativity, analysis and reasoning in instructional support.



Safety at school was another important school process variable considered in the study design and is an important indicator of wellbeing. Findings confirm that schools across the study are generally perceived as safe in spite of the levels of corporal punishment inferred from interviews with children. In schools that teachers considered as very safe for pupils, children perceived a higher level of positive gender equality attitudes from teachers in comparison to schools not considered as very safe.

### Children’s Literacy Attainment – baseline patterns

With respect to literacy, there was a significant decrease in the proportion of children who scored zero in the reading assessment, with no significant differences between boys and girls. Improvement was seen in all mean scores across all subtasks, with the difference more significant in lower order skills. For some subtasks, the improvement among pupils in intervention schools was significantly higher in comparison to pupils in control schools. Overall, our findings suggest that both boys and girls still face difficulties in terms of reading development with a large proportion of children being unable to read and comprehend words at the end of Class 1.



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