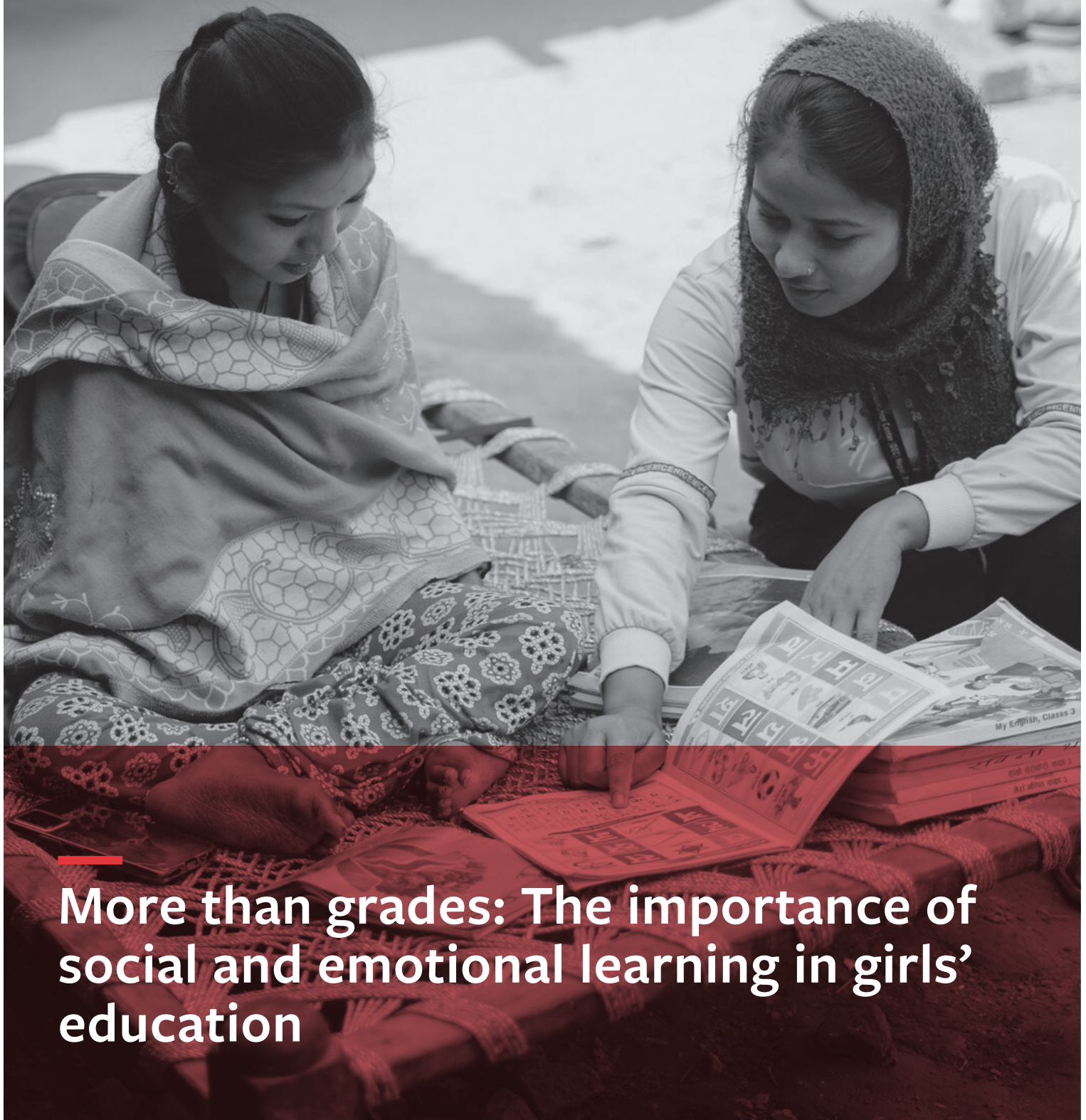


APRIL 2023

## LEARNING BRIEF #4



# More than grades: The importance of social and emotional learning in girls' education

Girls'  
Education  
Challenge



The **Girls' Education Challenge (GEC)** is the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's 12-year, £855 million Global Fund which aims to improve the educational opportunities of the world's most marginalised girls. The GEC is comprised of two types of project: 1) GEC-Transition (GEC-T) projects, which work within schools and support girls most at risk of dropping out; and 2) Leave No Girl Behind (LNGB) projects, which target highly marginalised girls who have already dropped out or who have never been able to enrol in school.



## There is more to education than exam results and grades. Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) defines quality education as going *beyond academic competencies and attainment to promoting and facilitating wellbeing of the self and of the other.*<sup>1</sup>

Social and emotional Learning (SEL) makes a vital contribution to this aim, as it nurtures the health and development of children and young adults. This is increasingly important in the context of higher levels of anxiety and depression, and declining mental health and wellbeing in adolescents. It is also key to mitigating the impacts of the pandemic including school closures and increased violence towards women and girls.

The value of SEL is increasingly being recognised and included in education interventions and programming.<sup>2</sup> There are many frameworks and approaches to SEL<sup>3</sup> but no ‘one size fits all’ and much of literature around SEL is based on the experience of middle or high-income countries.

Learning itself is an intrinsically social and interactive process, and SEL helps students to develop life skills in a nurturing environment with supportive adults and peers. By building skills and competencies around the whole child, evidence shows that SEL can promote sustained positive mental health and psychosocial wellbeing among adolescents and is linked to wellbeing in adult life.<sup>4</sup> SEL can also improve academic performance.<sup>5</sup> Girls’ Education Challenge projects explicitly set out to support marginalised girls and central to this aim is the recognition that marginalised girls need additional support over and above learning inputs to access, engage and thrive in education.



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<sup>1</sup> Chatterjee Singh, N. and Duraipah, A. K. (Eds.) (2020). *Rethinking learning: a review of social and emotional learning frameworks for education systems*. New Delhi. UNESCO MGIEP

<sup>2</sup> In the FCDO Women and Girls strategy, the three aims of education, empowerment and ending violence are all supported and achieved through SEL

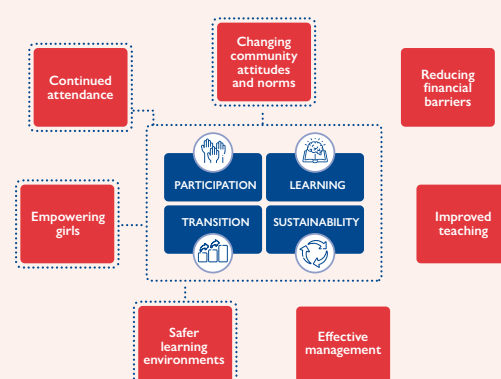
<sup>3</sup> Social and emotional learning | EEF (educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk), What We Know, and What We Need to Find Out About Universal, School-Based Social and Emotional Learning Programs for Children and Adolescents – CASEL <https://casel.org/>

<sup>4</sup> Jones, D, Greenberg, M, and Crowley M (2015). “Early social-emotional functioning and public health: The relationship between kindergarten social competence and future wellness.” *American Journal of Public Health* 105, no. 11: 2283-2290; Sorrenti, G, et al. (2020) *The causal impact of socio-emotional skills training on educational success*. University of Zurich, Department of Economics, Working Paper 343

<sup>5</sup> Cipriano, C., et al (2021)., The state of evidence for social and emotional learning: A contemporary meta-analysis of universal school-based SEL interventions. *Child Development* <https://osf.io/r246m>

### The Girls’ Education Challenge Learning Brief series:

To capitalise on its vast portfolio of 41 projects, operating across 17 countries, the Girls’ Education Challenge (GEC) has compiled a wealth of project learning regarding key interventions related to girls’ education. While these Learning Briefs are rooted in both quantitative and qualitative evidence, they are not research papers or evidence reports. Rather, they provide a synthesis of learning from GEC intervention designs and implementation approaches that have been paramount for supporting improvements in girls’ learning. The GEC projects take a holistic approach to improve the educational environment and conditions that support improved learning, participation, transition and sustainability outcomes. This Learning Brief is focused on Social and Emotional Learning which contributeto achieving the highlighted outcomes:



## Bringing social and emotional learning to those in most need

Education is a well-documented protective factor to mitigate the negative effects of stress on developmental outcomes and wellbeing.<sup>6</sup> Conversely, unsafe learning environments can also be a risk factor for poor mental health. Learning from the GEC illustrates that those who need education and SEL support the most, such as marginalised adolescent girls, may be the least likely to access it. This is for the following reasons:

- Many marginalised adolescent girls are not in school or have never been to school, which can increase the risk of poor mental health and social isolation, as well as harmful behaviours and social/gender norms.<sup>7</sup>
- Adolescent girls tend to have poorer mental health outcomes compared with boys.<sup>8</sup> Girls face restrictive gender norms which impact negatively on school attendance and dropout. These include extra domestic duties, vulnerability to sexual violence, menstruation, and in some contexts, early pregnancies and expectations of early marriage. They are often taught from a young age to be submissive, and have limited decision-making power both within the household and in the wider community.
- To improve learners' wellbeing, schools need to be safe, nurturing and healing environments, underpinned by positive relationships. Without this, children can experience toxic stress, violence and abuse from teachers and peers.<sup>9</sup> Girls with disabilities are particularly vulnerable.<sup>10</sup>

- Unfortunately, many girls across GEC Baselines Evaluations have reported feeling unsafe on the way to and from and/or in schools. Classrooms are often not nurturing environments due to a lack of resources, over-crowded classrooms, and prevalence of negative behavioural practices such as corporal punishment and harassment. Schools in disadvantaged communities are the most likely to be resource poor with undertrained teachers and staff shortages.
- Across most education systems, the focus is still on academic learning rather than on social and emotional skills, and so there is a lack of activities and curricula in formal schools that explicitly aim to build social and emotional skills.

This Learning Brief collates information on GEC project approaches to SEL and the lessons drawn from implementation. It is intended to support governments, donors and implementing partners in their efforts to design and implement SEL in education provision. It concludes with recommendations for government, schools and non-formal learning spaces and organisations implementing a SEL programme.

**“Learning from the GEC illustrates that those who need education and SEL support the most, such as marginalised adolescent girls, may be the least likely to access it.”**

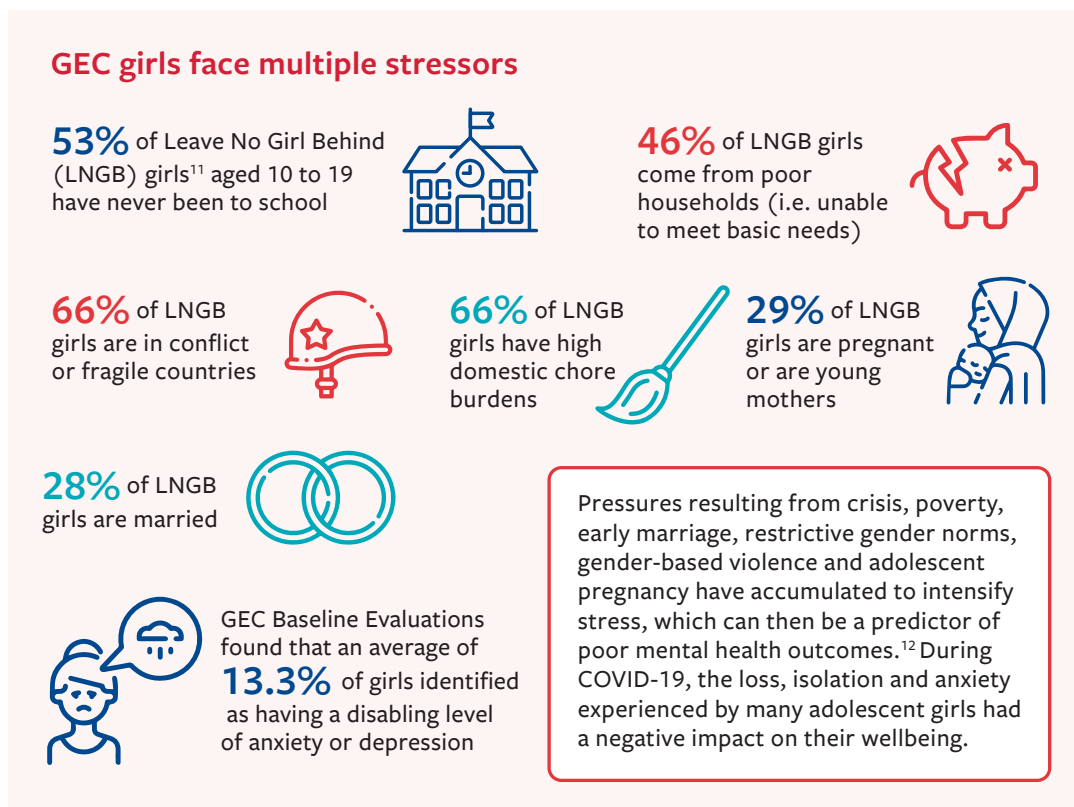


Figure 1: The multiple stressors that GEC girls face

<sup>6</sup> Barry, M., Clarke, A and Dowling K, 'Promoting Social and Emotional Wellbeing in Schools', Health Education, vol. 117; no. 5, 2017, pp. 434–451. UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children 2021: On My Mind – Promoting, protecting and caring for children's mental health*, UNICEF, New York, October 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Epstein, S, et al (2020), 'School Absenteeism as a Risk Factor for Self-harm and Suicidal Ideation in Children and Adolescents: A systematic review and meta-analysis', *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, vol. 29, no. 9, pp. 1175–1194; Esch, P, et al. (2014), 'The Downward Spiral of Mental Disorders and Educational Attainment: A systematic review on early school leaving', *BMC Psychiatry*, vol. 14, no. 37, p. 237

<sup>8</sup> Campbell, OLK; Bann, D; Patalay, P; (2021) The gender gap in adolescent mental health: a cross-national investigation of 566,829 adolescents across 73 countries. *SSM – Population Health*, Article 100742. 10.1016/j.ssmph.2021.100742.

<sup>9</sup> Moore, Sophie E., et al., 'Consequences of Bullying Victimization in Childhood and Adolescence: A systematic review and meta-analysis', *World Journal of Psychiatry*, vol. 7, no. 1, 22 March 2017; Chatzitheochari, S, Parsons, S and Platt, L. (2016) 'Doubly Disadvantaged? Bullying experiences among disabled children and young people in England', *Sociology*, vol. 50, no. 4, 2016, pp. 695–713

<sup>10</sup> Devries KM, Kyegombe N, Zuurmond M, et al (2014) Violence against primary school children with disabilities in Uganda: a cross-sectional study. *BMC Public Health*. 141017

<sup>11</sup> The GEC has two funding windows:

1. The GEC-T window supports marginalised girls in the formal school system who are in danger of dropping out
2. The LNGB window supports girls who have dropped out of school or have never been to school

<sup>12</sup> World Mental Health Report. (who.int).

## GEC project approach to social and emotional learning

The 41 projects implemented across the GEC spanned 17 countries with very different contexts. Some operated in emergency and protracted crises and SEL interventions mainly focused on psychosocial support. Given the long-term goal of GEC projects working to create conditions where girls can thrive through education, GEC projects have drawn from four intervention approaches to support this, as set out in Figure 2.

**Level 1 – Laying the foundation for SEL:** Being in a safe learning environment with supportive adults, cohesive relationships, stability and structure can support basic psychological and social needs. This provides the foundations for social emotional learning.<sup>13</sup> In the GEC, this includes not only getting girls into school, but providing support to girls, teachers, school management and communities to ensure that girls are in safe, inclusive and nurturing learning environments. Projects also work with families and communities to strengthen the socio-ecological system of support for the girl and counteract gendered biases and negative perceptions of gender equality.

### Level 2 – Learning social and emotional skills:

This focuses on activities that explicitly aim to build social emotional skills, essential for wellbeing and learning for all children. It draws upon the culture in which it is embedded and will be localised to each specific context. Projects work across both formal and non-formal learning spaces to promote social and emotional skills, as well as involving families and communities in the learning and delivery of SEL to provide more holistic support.

Across the GEC, projects have positioned SEL largely within their life skills frameworks, which are then integrated across their whole programme. GEC projects look at what SEL skills look like at different ages and stages of development. The SEL curriculum is focused on:

1. **The self** (self-management, self-awareness)
2. **The other and society** (social awareness, communication and relationship building)
3. **Agency, behaviour change and action** (cooperation, responsible decision making).

<sup>13</sup> INEE background paper on psychosocial support and social and emotional learning for children and youth in emergency settings

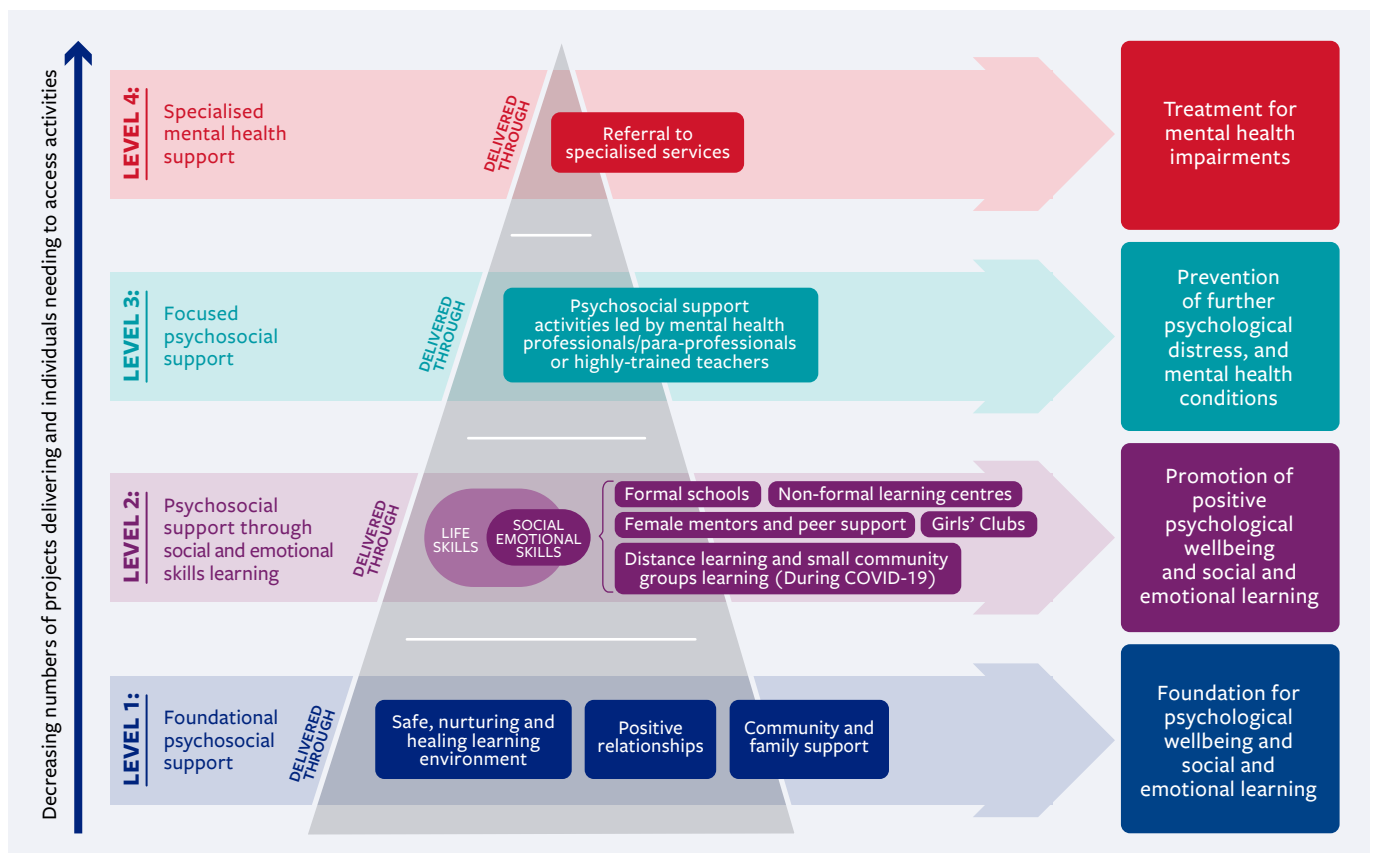


Figure 2: Project approaches to SEL – 4 levels of intervention



**Level 3 – Focused psychosocial support:** This is provided to those who present with psychological distress and are at risk of developing mental health conditions, e.g. preventative psychological interventions, such as psychological first aid, general counselling and mentoring. GEC projects worked with specialist mental health professionals who then trained para-professionals, often teachers or mentors.

**Level 4 – Specialised mental health support:** This is given to children and young people with psychological issues that require specialised mental health support. Projects worked with specialist organisations to include targeted counselling and linkages with referral systems.

At each level, more and more technical competencies, formal training and supervision is needed to provide safe and effective care, treatment and support. Projects that worked at levels three and four partnered with specialist

disability and mental health organisations. While the provision of specialised mental health support was beyond the remit and budget of projects, some did shift to work at this level due to high baseline rates of depression and anxiety.

This framing of SEL within a psychosocial support (PSS) approach became increasingly important during COVID-19, when project surveys found that girls had been severely impacted by restricted movement and isolation, increased chore burden, food and livelihood insecurity, and increased risks of domestic violence, child abuse and exploitation.<sup>14</sup> SEL alone was not enough, so many projects pivoted to include more psychosocial and mental health support at levels three and four to improve adolescents' ability to cope with shocks and stressors. On the whole, these psychosocial and mental health support activities have continued after schools reopened.



<sup>14</sup> [https://girlseducationchallenge.org/media/k0lbfq5f/fttf\\_covid-19\\_gec\\_project\\_response\\_june\\_2020.pdf](https://girlseducationchallenge.org/media/k0lbfq5f/fttf_covid-19_gec_project_response_june_2020.pdf)

## What did the social and emotional learning approach achieve?

SEL was included in life skills and Girls' Clubs, where specific areas of SEL skills were taught. These skills were included in measurements of life skills indices, self-esteem and self-efficacy measurements. However, SEL is not the only factor to increase in these scores. Where SEL competencies were measured on their own, projects saw an average increase of 23% in the girls' ability to apply social and emotional skills to their lives.

Projects' external evaluations demonstrated links between improvement in SEL – such as life skills, self-confidence and self-esteem, self-efficacy and leadership – and other outcomes, including learning and successful transition (see *diagram 3*).



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<sup>15</sup> Based on 14 projects' evaluation data

<sup>16</sup> Based on 10 projects' evaluation data

<sup>17</sup> Based on 4 projects' evaluation data

<sup>18</sup> Based on 16 projects' evaluation data

<sup>19</sup> Based on 4 projects' evaluation data

<sup>20</sup> Based on 2 projects' evaluation data

<sup>21</sup> This is for projects who specifically focused on SEL such as communication, conflict resolution, emotional regulation, social awareness and resources. Based on 3 projects' evaluation data

Measurement of SEL was not uniform across projects due to the variation in contexts, barriers and the societal pressures that girls face. In this Learning Brief the evaluation data has been grouped under the heading of SEL. However, it is worth noting that projects had indicators that responded to the theme of SEL, in particular:

- Changes in girls' self-esteem, self-efficacy, confidence and sense of agency and empowered to make good choices for herself.
- Changes in attitudes and perceptions towards girls' and girls' education among male and female family and community members, educators, boys and government officials.
- Improvements in the quality and effectiveness of teaching, facilitation and support to learning (including life skills).

	Baseline	Mid/Endline	Increase
<b>Self-esteem:</b> general feelings of self-worth or self-value (the extent to which we value, like, accept or approve of ourselves) <sup>15</sup>	57%	67%	↑10%
<b>Self-efficacy:</b> the belief in one's capacity to succeed at tasks <sup>16</sup>	63%	72%	↑9%
<b>Self-agency:</b> the process of making decisions and taking actions <sup>17</sup>	70%	82%	↑12%
<b>Life skills index (including SEL)</b> <sup>18</sup>	62%	72%	↑10%
<b>Improved relationships</b> <sup>19</sup>	50%	85%	↑35%
<b>Leadership and civic action</b> <sup>20</sup>	50%	59%	↑9%
<b>SEL scores</b> <sup>21</sup>	61%	84%	↑23%

Diagram 3: The results of measuring Social and Emotional Learning



## Impact of SEL interventions

1. Increases in SEL scores correlate with improved learning outcomes.
2. Higher levels of self-confidence and self-esteem correlate with improved learning outcomes.
3. Higher levels of self-efficacy and agency correlate with improved learning outcomes.
4. Improvement on life skills index scores correlates with successful transition.
5. Higher levels of self-efficacy and agency correlate with improved transition.
6. Increase in leadership scores is associated with improved transition.
7. Being a member of a [Girls' Club](#), where SEL skills are taught, improves learning outcomes.
8. Girls who participated in Girls' Clubs or felt more included and respected by their communities were more likely to successfully transition.
9. Girls with disabilities whose self-esteem increased, feel included and respected by members of their communities, and those who were members of a Child-to-Child Club had higher literacy scores.
10. Participation in Girls' Clubs was also a statistically significant predictor of academic self-efficacy, indicating that Girls' Club's support girls to feel confident in their academic abilities.
11. Retention in learning during COVID-19 was strongly predicted by girls' SEL scores.
12. Girls with greater psychosocial wellbeing had higher attendance rates.

Overall, the number of girls who reported experiencing intense and frequent feelings of depression and anxiety at a level that affects their psychosocial functioning, as measured in the Washington Group of Questions for Child Functioning, have decreased over the time of project implementation. This was measured during and post COVID-19, where globally rates of mental health issues doubled amongst adolescents, with girls particularly affected. At every evaluation point, for most projects, the majority of beneficiaries with a disability were counted due to having daily feelings of anxiety or depression, which can be affected through an accommodating environment. Overall, anxiety and depression rates went from 13.3% at baseline, to 7.96% at the latest evaluation points. While we cannot claim causality, projects likely had a positive effect of providing protective factors against anxiety and depression. Projects provided an accommodating and supportive learning environment by building self-confidence, skills to manage stress and improve communication and conflict resolution.

Projects found that seeing improvements in their learning outcomes gives girls more confidence to receive and practice key aspects of the SEL curriculum. This has led to a shift in girls' belief in their ability to deal with future challenges and has increased their self-efficacy and agency. Conversely, projects have found that bullying, harassment and stigma around disability and other prejudices can lower self-esteem, self-efficacy and learning outcomes – leading to lower attendance and girls dropping out of school. Projects have worked to create inclusive and safer environments and [address school-related gender-based violence \(SRGBV\)](#). Girls' (including girls with disabilities) sense of safety and belonging has increased in those schools.

**“Projects have worked to create inclusive and safer environments and address school-related, gender-based violence”**



## Factors for success

This section draws out the core elements that have influenced the success of SEL programming. It discusses the elements of project design and implementation (using the four levels in the GEC approach) that were key in driving this success and provides brief but important reflections.<sup>22</sup>

### Design phase

- 1. Embedding SEL into a strong Theory of Change (ToC):** The GEC overall ToC clearly sets out how SEL will contribute to girls' improved learning and eventual life outcomes. It uses the social-ecological model to show how a project must operate at different levels of a learner's social, education, household or community environment. Activity at the level of the girl herself alone is unlikely to lead to sustainable change. Working in an isolated way risks girls experiencing discouragement and disempowerment when making changes in her perceptions and management of self, engagement with others and ability to make decisive life choices. Projects that were most thoughtful about integrating SEL as part of their ToC, clearly articulated the SEL skills they wanted to develop and how SEL contributes to the desired change in a particular context.
- 2. Prioritising contextual and cultural relevance:** Projects have found that off-the-shelf social and emotional programmes need to be contextualised, even if they have strong evidence of impact in another country. Most widely used SEL programmes in the Global North focus on individual skills. However, across Africa, there is a strong cultural principle of Ubuntu, which focuses on building and maintaining community.<sup>23</sup> Focusing on individual capacity needs to be balanced with seeing empowerment within a context dependent and communal approach.

- 3. Focusing on gender, equity and social inclusion (GESI) transformation:**<sup>24</sup> While SEL is known to make a sustainable impact on children's learning and lives, there is much less evidence on its impact around gender equality. GEC results across the portfolio found that enhancing girls' SEL provides an important pathway for female empowerment – achieved by raising girls' self-esteem and confidence, improving education outcomes, promoting positive mental health and wellbeing, and contributing to changes in gender norms in schools, families and communities. Across GEC projects, there is a strong emphasis on supporting girls to build their power from the inside out, take action in their lives, and work together with others to create positive change.

As part of the GEC design process, projects were expected to conduct comprehensive GESI analyses around girls' needs and capabilities, and how they could be addressed. Projects were encouraged to look at how gender, power, privilege and culture interact with social and emotional skills development. During consultation, girls wanted to improve their social and emotional skills so they could continue their education; improve their communication and negotiation skills within the household and relationships; interact with peers and with trusted adults; and manage stress. [Team Girl Malawi](#) (Link Education International) used this consultation and analysis to inform and prioritise their social and emotional skills programming, introducing role plays and games. For example, girls are taught how to deal with unwanted sexual advances, assert their sexual rights using strong and confident body language, maintain eye contact, and use an appropriate firm voice and assertive tone.

**“School is now more exciting. Due to the support we receive... there is more cooperation and engagement between students, parents and teachers.”**

**Student,  
AGES, Somalia**

<sup>22</sup>For more detail on the interventions themselves, as well as additional evidence collected on these, please contact [learningteam@girlseducationchallenge.org](mailto:learningteam@girlseducationchallenge.org)

<sup>23</sup>Evidence here is based on 10 projects' evaluation and Di Filippantonio, G (2022). *How can an autoethnographic approach contribute to an understanding of cultural appropriateness of SEL in the global South?* Masters dissertation, University College of London, London.

<sup>24</sup>GEC defines a GESI transformative approach as Actively seeks to engage with and transform gender and social inequalities in the long term to achieve sustainable change, gender equality and reverse social exclusion. Gender stereotypes and discriminatory norms are challenged, and the project seeks to transform unequal power relations between social groups, boys and girls, men and women through changes in roles, status and through the redistribution of resources.



### CASE STUDY: The importance of contextualising curriculum

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) managed two projects, one in Sierra Leone and one in Pakistan. They used the same base curriculum, but contextualised it differently, based on the needs of the girls. In Sierra Leone, the **Every Adolescent Girl Empowered and Resilient (EAGER)** project found that values of togetherness and connectedness were important as key components of self-awareness, particularly for vulnerable girls. So they developed and used interpersonal skills to advance collective wellbeing, remaining loyal to the values of Ubuntu. The same curriculum was adapted in **Teach and Educate Adolescent Girls with Community Help (TEACH)** in Pakistan to include awareness raising for parents and communities to support the girls' social and emotional needs. Built into the social and emotional approach was also a strong gender component, which aimed to transform norms that discriminated against girls' inclusion and meaningful participation in their society.



4. **Ensuring SEL is sensitive to emergency and protracted crises contexts:** Implementing SEL requires an understanding of conflict dynamics to ensure adaptation and consultation processes are appropriately inclusive and avoid the risk of doing harm. Project design requires an awareness of how decisions could affect power and interpersonal relations. Projects in Somalia, Pakistan, Nigeria and Sierra Leone used conflict-sensitive approaches to SEL. In Somalia, the [Adolescent Girls' Education in Somalia \(AGES\)](#) project reported that girls felt more empowered to stop ongoing conflicts at their schools and generally felt safe while at school.

5. **Building in strong mechanisms to inform learning and adaptive management:** Rigorous monitoring has helped projects to determine what is and is not working and modify accordingly. Programme staff can identify and address unintentional negative consequences. From inception, projects have designed tiered feedback mechanisms, including from girls, to provide learning and evidence for programme adaptation. This meant that programmes could adapt, or pivot quickly as new information became available, which proved especially important in crises or fast-changing contexts. COVID-19 highlighted the ever-important need to focus on young people's emotional resilience and wellbeing.

6. **Intentionally measuring SEL competencies:** Across the GEC, social and emotional skills are measured through knowledge of life skills, including SEL components, or proxy indicators such as increases in girls' self-esteem, agency and self-efficacy. Many projects have also included more specific definitions and measurements around SEL competencies including communication, friendship and sense of belonging, conflict resolution and goal setting. SEL core competencies were shown to contribute positively in the way girls see and treat themselves and others and their ability to manage relationships and stress. Projects have directly linked SEL to improved relationships with partners and families, specifically through a focus on equal roles and rights in relationships, conflict resolution and problem solving.



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Each project uses Washington Group questions to inform prevalence rates, and more responsive, focussed programming for girls with disabilities. Projects with adolescents identified a significant number of girls with affective/psychosocial difficulties, drawing attention to 'invisible disabilities' and the need for wellbeing and mental health and psychosocial interventions to be mainstreamed alongside individual support. These data sets enabled projects to think more deeply about mental health, create protective learning environments and partner with organisations who specialise in disability or mental health.<sup>25</sup>

At baseline, **EAGER** found that girls had high levels of hostile attribution bias<sup>26</sup> and moderate levels of emotion dysregulation.<sup>27</sup> Through tracking these indicators and working to address these issues, the project could show significant improvement across all domains of SEL, including assertive communication, emotion regulation and reduced hostile attribution bias. Girls said they could better control their tempers, solve problems and resolve conflicts within their households and communities.

<sup>25</sup> These evaluations are not used to screen or diagnose students for deficits (e.g., behavioural or emotional problems). Instead, the GEC has focused on girls' strengths and capacities, and M&E has served to highlight the need for competencies to be emphasised in instruction and practice. Projects have measured how the implementation of SEL instruction, training, technical support and environmental factors are impacting girls, and then made appropriate adjustments to promote a safe and nurturing learning environment.

<sup>26</sup> Hostile attribution bias is when a person assumes hostile intent in ambiguous situations – which research shows is highly associated with aggressive behaviours. <https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.1418572112>

<sup>27</sup> Emotion regulation is the ability to recognise, evaluate, modify, and manage emotions in a personal and socially acceptable way. Dysregulation is when one or more negative emotions are experienced either overly intense or exceedingly long and fail to be adaptive. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8573252/>



#### CASE STUDY: Including anxiety and depression

Monitoring and evaluation data showed that girls in project areas in Somalia had very high rates of anxiety and depression. This strongly informed adaptations to the programme design for **Somali Girls Education Promotion Programme (SOMGEP)** and **AGES**. The teams incorporated more SEL and mental health and PSS (MHPSS) approaches into the programme to strengthen girls' social and emotional resilience. For example, they advocated with Ministries of Education at all levels to break the silence on mental health; targeted training to teachers on working with children with psychosocial impairments; and adapted materials for the Girls' Empowerment Forums to be more appropriate to girls' needs. Peer systems of support were also strengthened to encourage friendships amongst the girls, and their more consistent attendance in sessions.

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## Implementation phase

### Level One: Laying the foundation for SEL

**Creating a safe learning environment:** Not only does every girl need to feel safe from threats or harm, but she needs to have a sense of belonging and be in an environment that promotes positive and trusting relationships between learners and with educators or adults. Projects found that psychological abuse or corporal punishment by educators, or bullying and harassment by peers, as well as harmful gender norms at home, or in relationships, can lead to reduced academic and life skills outcomes. To create safe learning environments, safeguarding and SRGBV work has increasingly focused on positive discipline with teachers, addressing bullying and harassment in schools and shifting norms and attitudes with families and communities. Interventions successfully decreased levels of bullying, abuse and corporal punishment in schools, while girls were more likely to report SRGBV they received or saw.

**“We were taught to help each other face challenges together and always keep each other’s secrets. We are our sister’s keeper to ensure that all of us succeed.”**

Student, EAGER, Sierra Leone

**Strengthening peer support:** Building healthy interpersonal connections and strengthening peer support is vital for helping adolescent girls to mature. Many girls have limited opportunities to socialise with their peers due to restrictive socio-cultural settings. Projects found that when girls feel a sense of solidarity, that they are ‘in this together’, then there is a safer, more equitable environment for developing social and emotional skills.

**Involving families:** SEL considers the whole socio-ecological system within which a child or adolescent develops, including the vital role played by significant others, and particularly parents and carers. For children with higher risk of anxiety or depression, the role of these adults becomes even more important. It is vital to work with partners or husbands for older girls too. GEC projects assessed the skills, competencies, attitudes, habits, knowledge and support parents or carers need, while catering for the parents’ social and emotional needs. They then worked out how to do this best, in a way that ultimately supports the girls with whom they are working.<sup>28</sup> It is equally as important to understand how interactions can be negative if significant adults are reinforcing harmful gender norms and attitudes. Tensions can emerge if values taught at the learning space are different from those taught at home.

**“Since the arrival of EAGER, I can now talk with people and have time for friends. We sometimes sit down as friends and share advice for achieving our goals.”**

Student,  
EAGER, Sierra Leone

<sup>28</sup> For example, Leonard Cheshire, Kenya provided support groups for parents, and Team Girl Malawi, Making Girls Great, Ghana, and SAGE, Zimbabwe provided positive parenting training.



### CASE STUDY: The importance of working with parents

In Nepal, the **Empowering a New Generation of Adolescent Girls with Education (ENGAGE)** project (VSO) shows how close work with parents can result in enhanced social and emotional skills. An intervention was designed for parents and caregivers of girls with severe disabilities to help develop their own social and emotional skills, and then support those of their girls. As a result, all parents developed individual six-month action plans which focused around SEL and practical life-skills actions, and enacted them, together with their children.

In **TEACH**, Pakistan, much of the focus was around not only building the capacity of the girls to have SEL competencies, but also for parents to have increased awareness of their daughters’ value, and the social and emotional needs of their daughters. This led to a significant increase in the girl’s perspective of her recognition, position, and input into the family. Sessions for parents also included topics of their own emotional management and learning to strengthen communication and develop empathy with their daughters. By the endline, most caregivers knew about how to manage their own stress and to support their daughter’s stress management. Almost all girls felt that there had been an increase in their ability to make decisions in the household and felt that they had increased recognition and respect from their family and peers. This contributed to increased self-esteem and confidence amongst the girls.



## Level Two: Social and emotional support programmes

**Engaging through Girls' Clubs:** Across the GEC, most projects work with some form of Girls' Clubs to promote girls' wellbeing and help them understand and cope with physical and emotional changes. Girls' Clubs are facilitated by a female mentor or peer leader who has received additional training – and most have a 'curriculum' structured around interactive discussion as opposed to teacher-centred delivery of content. In weekly safe spaces, girls catch up in subject areas, learn about their sexual and reproductive health (SRH) rights, form friendships and share experiences. When SEL skills are used to support girls to learn about their SRH rights, they gain self-advocacy skills related to self-awareness, self-management and personal agency, as well as facilitating personal and group reflection about concepts related to gender and power. This is particularly important in learning how to protect their body and maintain healthy boundaries. For more on the GEC approach to Girls' Clubs, see [GEC Learning Brief: A space of their own](#).

**Positive teaching methodologies to build SEL:** Where possible, projects integrated SEL approaches across foundational subjects, such as literacy and numeracy, along with financial literacy and life skills. This meant shifting the understanding of SEL from a separate set of learning targets to part of the learning process regardless of

subject. This happened through reflective learning approaches to teaching, encouraging group work, discussion after activities on learning, and using girls' stories and illustrations to teach academic competencies.

Experiential learning, or learning by doing, is also important for SEL, as it promotes creativity, critical thinking and openness to new ideas, relates to lived experience, and allows girls to practice and apply these competencies beyond the learning space. Projects have integrated experiential learning, including critical reflection, role play and drama, personal writing exercises and use of case studies to facilitate group discussion. It is vital that girls are supported rather than directed, so they experience agency.

**Linking SEL into girls' transition to work:** For older girls who are out of school, GEC projects help prepare them for work, providing the social and emotional skills – such as self-control, positive self-esteem, communication, problem solving, critical thinking, goal setting, resilience and decision-making – that will lead to positive economic outcomes.

**Engaging female mentors:** Projects found that young female teachers or facilitators have a critical role to play in gender transformative SEL, supporting adolescent girls to navigate inequities in their communities. Girls feel that they can relate more to young female mentors.

### CASE STUDY: Developing life skills empowers girls and young women

In Zimbabwe, the [Supporting Adolescent Girls' Education](#) project (Plan International), girls worked with local artisans to learn a craft. In very conservative communities, the perception of young women and their value in the community has changed as they now earn money and contribute to household income. They have also become role models and serve as mentors to other young women. As a result, these young female entrepreneurs see themselves more positively too. In Uganda, the [GEARR-ing Up for Success After School \(GEARR\)](#) project (PEAS) had a life skills and livelihoods programme that supported young people to develop skills that equip them for life outside of school. This included leadership, self-confidence, emotional resilience, and positive relationships. It also empowered learners with skills for work such as business planning, cultural and political history, and planning and financial management.

### CASE STUDY: Inspiring and supporting girls

In Nepal, the [Sisters for Sisters](#) project (VSO) engages 'Big Sisters' (local women with training in SEL skills) to mentor, inspire and motivate their 'Little Sisters', encouraging them to go to school, speak out in lessons, and unlock their potential. Outside the classroom, Big Sisters act as role models, sharing their own experiences, and offering invaluable advice around relationships and SRH.



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### Supporting the SEL and capacity of mentors and teachers:

Projects found that modelling SEL competencies, skills, language and practices is one of the most powerful techniques for mentors and teachers. As a first step, they need support in safeguarding their own emotional wellness and health, providing them with what they need to integrate SEL into their classrooms. This was particularly critical in COVID-19 and other crisis and conflict contexts where teachers were dealing with their own social and emotional trauma or stress. Projects also found that teachers need ongoing training to practice and teach SEL behaviours, and guidance to ensure that they do not unconsciously pass on any biases or social norms.

### Engaging girls' views and participation in SEL programming:

Girls' active participation allows them to exercise their agency, feel a greater sense of control, be heard, and have a greater chance of their specific needs being taken into account. This can strengthen SEL. However, there is always a risk of tokenism with participation, where girls are present (i.e. on committees or in focus group discussions), and decisions are made without meaningful consultation or representation. Too often, GEC projects found that girls' participation in social and community or even project consultation activities is often limited to where they are only physically present without any form of authority to control decisions regarding their participation. This is an area that projects are still working to improve. Efforts are underway to encourage girls to participate actively in monitoring and assessing various aspects of the project.

**Including girls with disabilities:** Education programmes that build social and emotional skills in a positive learning environment can foster inclusivity and reduce barriers that keep girls with disabilities, minorities or other types of marginalised learners from accessing and benefiting. GEC projects have found that including girls with disability in SEL work reduces stigmas, increases their self-worth and provides them with a sense of belonging. Non-disabled students learn to have less fear of those who act or look different to them.

## Level Three: Focused psychosocial support

### Adapting quickly to provide PSS during crises:

During COVID-19 and school closures, GEC projects found that girls were experiencing high levels of psychosocial distress, because of increased social isolation, caring responsibilities and economic difficulties. SEL alone was not enough, so many projects pivoted to include PSS, including psychological first aid<sup>29</sup> to improve adolescents' ability to cope with shocks and stress. With effective training and ongoing support, teachers or mentors learned to provide basic PSS for their girls.

In Kenya, the [Kenya Equity in Education \(KEEP\)](#) project (WUSC) works with girls in Kakuma and Dadaab refugee camps and the surrounding communities for whom conflict, displacement and extreme poverty have made access to education extremely challenging. The project has employed female counsellors and set up communities of practice which the counsellors support at the school level. Counsellors also train mentors who provide support to their peers on issues such as stress and conflict with friends. The counsellors oversee the running of life skills sessions and provide training and support to teachers. There is a high demand for counselling, and it has had a positive impact on girls' wellbeing and confidence. Girls report that the most useful aspects have been emotional support, strategies to deal with stress and emotions, goal setting; self-discipline and focus; increased self-belief and confidence; problem solving; career help; how to resist negative cultural practices such as early marriage; and assertive communication (in relationships). Others said that counselling has helped reduce dropout and teenage pregnancy.

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.who.int/publications/item/psychological-first-aid>  
Psychological first aid (PFA) is provided to people following a serious crisis event. PFA involves humane, supportive and practical assistance for people who are distressed, in ways that respect their dignity, culture and abilities.



### CASE STUDY: Developing leadership skills

In Zimbabwe, the [Improving Girls' Access through Transforming Education \(IGATE\)](#) project (World Vision) ensured that young female peer leaders played important roles in supporting aspects of the project. This included recruiting learners for community learning centres, monitoring the distribution of learning materials, providing peer support to struggling learners, and leading regular SRH discussions on a variety of topics, such as peer pressure, early marriage and menstruation. Offering girls tangible roles and responsibilities was effective in developing their leadership abilities, including self-confidence, assertiveness, visioning and organisation.



#### Level Four: Specialised mental health support

**Including mental health support and referral mechanisms:** Many projects have partnered with specialist disability and mental health organisations to provide counselling and referrals when necessary. Teachers need the skills to recognise symptoms in children and know how to refer them to the necessary mental health services. This training should be done in close conjunction with safeguarding, GBV and child protection specialists, as the team need to have a good understanding of the systems in country, as well as the associated risks with referral (such as re-traumatisation within police reporting). Considerable harm results if referrals are made but appropriate or specialised services are not available. Coordination is needed with other sectors (e.g., health ministries and social services) to ensure linkages are made.

#### What limits the success of SEL interventions?

- Insufficient dosage, phasing and sequencing often leads to a fragmented approach. Success of SEL interventions is driven by a focused, concerted efforts to improve outcomes that are relevant, contextual and measurable.
- Limited capacity of mentors and facilitators results in ad hoc implementation with gaps. Teaching SEL skills requires specialised understanding and effective support from teachers. SEL does not work with directive teaching but needs suitable participatory and experiential approaches.
- Any SEL intervention will be reduced in impact if the surrounding environment is not conducive, e.g. if spaces are unsafe, including the presence of corporal punishment, lack of empathetic or quality teaching, bullying and harassment.
- Great SEL interventions that introduce sensitive topics can backfire without the buy-in from parents and communities.
- Consideration of gender or social inclusion barriers is key to effective design and implementation. Without purposefully adopting a gender and social inclusion lens, interventions will not be targeted to the population that needs them most.
- Understanding the socio-ecological model is critical to support girls. It is impossible to realise success when girls themselves are expected to take on the sole responsibility for their own agency. Support from family and community is needed.



## Value for money

There are some strong examples of how value for money is driven by SEL activities across GEC projects. Analysis of project budgets indicated a range of cost ranging from £2 to £20 annually per beneficiary.

**EAGER's** SEL activities had an annual cost per beneficiary of £14. Although high costs were driven by mentor and teacher stipends, training and the construction of safe spaces, these supported girls to improve their relationships with friends and peers, and the project demonstrated significant improvements across all domains of SEL. Evaluations showed that these improvements were then applied across their lives, and were shown to contribute to further success in post-endline evaluations. EAGER's practices were also very efficient. They used psychometric measures to assess and track improvements across all domains of SEL overtime and consulted girls' feedback on safe spaces from the onset to ensure the intervention was relevant.

Interestingly, although **TEACH** shared a similar approach as EAGER, SEL was delivered at half the cost of £7 annually per beneficiary. TEACH did not set up safe spaces, which formed part of EAGER's SEL costs. The TEACH project also kept costs low by using the same base curriculum as the EAGER project but contextualised differently based on the needs of the girls. Girls' SEL scores improved from baseline to endline, especially for married girls, and girls who obtained better SEL skill index scores at endline had a better overall average mean score in literacy and numeracy assessments. Therefore, the project demonstrated very good value for money.

**VSO** were able to deliver SEL activities at an annual cost per beneficiary of £20. Over 90% of the project's costs were driven by allowances for Big Sisters, who were trained in SEL skills and played a pivotal role as role models and mentors to younger girls in the project. The enhanced girls' skills by collaborating with parents and caregivers of children with severe disabilities in developing their own SEL skills, and in return, they were able to support their own girls with SEL. With equity at the intervention's core, all parents successfully developed individual action plans for their children which focused on SEL and practical life-skills.

**AGES** were able to deliver SEL activities at a very low annual cost per beneficiary of £3. Improvements in SEL had a positive impact on girls' literacy outcomes, learning scores, and girls were more likely to remain in school. Additionally, AGES were able to reduce inefficiencies through their regular review of evaluation data, which helped them to inform adaptations to the programme design throughout the course of the project.





## Recommendations

### Government

**1. Develop a contextually appropriate SEL framework:** Ensure a shared vision and plan to promote SEL by bringing in multiple stakeholders to build commitment and coordinated efforts. Key elements include:

- Inclusive processes: meaningfully consulting with children and parents is also key in intentionally considering the needs of diverse groups
- Consensus on approaches and agreed competences (students know/can do)
- Definition of competencies with all stakeholders (government officials, teachers, headteachers, community leaders, child education and mental health experts)
- Clearly define and measure SEL skills levels of children and teachers to support the design and implementation of interventions for all learners, sending a clear message that social and emotional outcomes are a priority

**2. Strengthen wider psychosocial and mental health support systems** for children, adolescents, and their parents or caregivers. This is not only across education, but across the broader cross-sectoral framework of health and social services. Key government ministries should lead integrated responses to prevent, respond to and protect children and young people from all forms of violence, exploitation, abuse and neglect.

**3. Integrate SEL across the curriculum:** Teachers should be trained to explicitly teach and integrate SEL across all subjects. Delivering it in one-off lessons can lead to tokenistic, superficial and fragmented interventions. Students should apply skills across all subjects and observe them being practiced by adults and peers.

**4. Provide appropriate professional development for teachers,** including fostering SEL competencies among teachers so that they can teach and model SEL skills and adapt the curriculum for a diverse classroom. Staff are more likely to support pupils if their own needs and competencies are addressed. It is important to hire and support female teachers, as they are likely to face similar issues related to systemic gender inequality and discriminatory social norms as their female students.

### Schools and non-formal learning spaces

**1. Consider the whole socio-ecological system within which a child develops i.e. a whole school approach to SEL, mental health and wellbeing.** SEL skill development is embedded into daily interactions and practices inside and outside the classroom and through partnerships between the school, parents and the wider community. It is vital to build family-school-community partnerships that can support children at home and in other out-of-school settings. Of particular importance is school climate and culture, where students feel a sense of belonging and community. Arrange counselling and/or SEL focal points in schools and ensure that school management has prioritised continuous professional development for these focal points.

**2. Go beyond just promoting physically and emotionally safe learning environments.** Children's potential for social and emotional development and thriving is amplified when the school environment is positive, safe and nurturing. Preventing, eliminating or mitigating threats to safety requires a range of programmes. Recommendations on this are here: [GEC SRGBV Learning Brief](#).

**3. Partner with and educate parents.** Parents need to reinforce their children's social and emotional development at home, by modelling communication, conflict resolution and empathy, and building their own SEL needs. Feasible, relevant entry points for social and emotional skill development with families include parent teacher trainings, the Parent Teacher Association or joint homework set with children.

**4. Understand and address the needs of students.** SEL programmes should focus on creating an enabling environment for students to develop social and emotional competencies. Targeted PSS programmes can work through teachers, mentors and guidance without replacing legal, health, protective or other social services. Distinct mental health concerns need referrals to additional services. All relevant staff need training on referral pathways to child protection and/or age-appropriate health services for learners. All existing referrals need to be survivor centred, child sensitive and easily accessible, including for children with disabilities.

**5. Facilitate positive peer relationships.** Girls often need support to build healthy interpersonal connections. Many adolescent girls reported limited opportunities to socialise with their peers. Safe spaces such as Girls' Clubs, or extracurricular activities can allow girls to make friends or build connections with other young people. Setting up peer mentors or a buddy system can support these positive relationships.

**For organisations implementing a SEL programme:**

**1.** Use evidence to advocate for SEL and PSS across education systems. After COVID-19, student wellbeing and mental health has gained global attention. It is important to build on this momentum and gather evidence around the contribution of SEL.

**2.** Integrate SEL into current theories of change, complete with clear assumptions, definitions, dosage and measuring tools, setting out what practice looks like in terms of methodology, i.e. sequencing and how practice will lead to improved outcomes and help organisations to understand why those practices work, and how to improve implementation.

**3.** Adopt a flexible, adaptive management approach that leans on evidence, particularly from girls themselves, to inform decisions. Feedback from monitoring needs to influence ongoing implementation and address risks to girls' wellbeing.

**4.** All relevant staff need training on referral pathways to child protection and/or age-appropriate health services for learners. All existing referrals need to be survivor centred, child sensitive and easily accessible, including for children with disabilities.

**5.** Address stigma around mental health and psychosocial needs. Organisations need to work with government, media and other stakeholders to break down stigmas around mental health and promote positive social and emotional wellbeing and mental health, how to recognise signs of distress in themselves and in others and seek help.

**6.** Include SEL and PSS support as key components of non-formal learning and vocational training for out-of-school children and youth. This could include pathways to transition to formal education or work. Evidence shows that SEL will contribute to both economic development outcomes as well as learning outcomes for youth. For SEL integration into vocational or economic empowerment skills training, it is important that the skills taught are informed by market needs and opportunities.

**7.** Ensuring that children and young people have a voice and are heard in SEL and PSS programmes. This is also important for those who have lived and gendered experience of mental health conditions. Projects must ensure that they actively involve the girls they seek to support in a genuine way, with girls given power decisions. For SEL projects, girls should get a chance to see how their SEL is applied beyond the learning space, and how it is allowing them opportunities on social awareness, civic engagement and leadership. Girls are likely to see positive results from their use of agency and recognise the respect they are getting.





Girls'  
Education  
Challenge



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