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EMBEDDING SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN LITERACY AND TEACHER TRAINING IN AFGHANISTAN

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ABSTRACT

This field note contributes to understanding of the challenges in and opportunities for supporting social and emotional learning (SEL) in the education in emergencies context, with a particular focus on embedding social and emotional skills into literacy learning in the early grades of primary school. In Afghanistan, the current reality is that many children and their teachers have been exposed repeatedly to adversity and highly stressful situations, such as attacks on their schools. Research shows that exposure to crises affects learning and the wellbeing of students and teachers alike. In this article, we describe how SEL was embedded in the early grade literacy curriculum and teacher training in Afghanistan, and in education support systems and practices. We further elaborate on the challenges faced and lessons learned throughout this process. The experience of integrating SEL into an early grade literacy curriculum has been positive, and initial feedback on the approach suggests that it promises to continue to be so. However, further research is needed in both Afghanistan and other contexts to more fully understand the impact of embedding different SEL practices in early grade reading materials and classrooms, and in preservice and in-service teacher training. Note: This field note was written prior to the change of government in Afghanistan in August 2021.

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EDUCATION IN A PROTRACTED CRISIS ENVIRONMENT AND THE AFGHAN CHILDREN READ PROJECT

Education in Afghanistan has suffered greatly from the conflicts that have taken place there over the last few decades. However, since 2001, Afghanistan has made significant progress in education delivery, including improved infrastructure. More than 14,600 schools have been built, and student access to school has increased from less than 1 million in 2001 to 8.2 million in 2012 (UNESCO 2015). And yet, the reality in Afghanistan is that many children and their teachers continue to be exposed repeatedly to adversity and highly stressful situations. For example, attacks on schools that result in the destruction of property or the injury or death of teachers increased by 45 percent between 2018 and 2019 (UNICEF 2019), which highlights the need to address social and emotional wellbeing in schools.

In this context, with funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Afghan Children Read project began its collaboration with the Afghanistan Ministry of Education (MoE) in 2016. The project focused on building the MoE's capacity to provide good quality early grade reading (EGR) education. The interventions thus far have included reviewing and updating policies related to EGR; developing new EGR materials; training teachers and coaches to provide quality EGR education; and creating awareness in the target communities about the importance of EGR. The EGR materials and training were piloted between 2017 and 2020 in Afghanistan's Herat, Nangarhar, Laghman, and Kabul provinces and included more than 1.2 million students, 18,640 teachers, and 2,085 schools. The expectation is that, by the end of the project, the MoE will implement the curriculum and related activities at the national level.

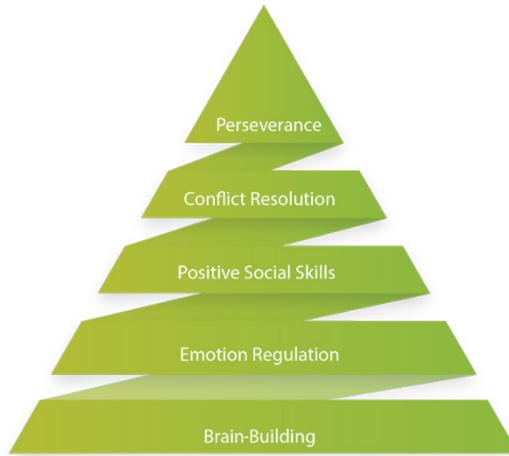
Although the project's mandate and primary focus is on EGR, the fragile context in Afghanistan in which this education improvement is taking place cannot be ignored. Relevant research has demonstrated that exposure to conflict and crisis can create toxic stress and negatively affect learning and the wellbeing of students and teachers in various ways, including depression, anxiety, aggression, or poor memory and information retrieval (Schleicher 2018; Schonert-Reichl 2017; Shriberg 2009). At the same time, research shows that the "harmful effects of toxic stress can be mitigated or even reversed when children are exposed to safe and predictable learning environments and have positive, nurturing relationships with key adults, such as caregivers and teachers, who actively participate in explicit Social Emotional Learning (SEL) activities" (USAID and Education in Crisis & Conflict Network 2018, 1). However, despite the anticipated benefits of SEL, little

documentation is available on how closely the project staff members have worked with education leaders to implement SEL programming that is sustainable and relevant in a context rife with conflict.

The SEL framework used in Afghanistan is based on competencies identified by the International Rescue Committee (IRC 2016), based on their experience with SEL implementation and research in countries affected by crisis and conflict. The framework recognizes five SEL competencies that build on one another and often are presented in a pyramid that indicates developmental and cumulative skills (Figure 1). The competencies are as follows:

1. *Brain-building* helps people to focus attention, remember instructions and concepts, successfully juggle multiple tasks, and plan for the short and long term.
2. *Emotion regulation* enables people to understand emotions and manage their feelings in a positive manner.
3. *Positive social skills* enable people to relate to others in a positive way by understanding their feelings and behavior, and to respond in a way that promotes positive social interaction and reduces conflict.
4. *Conflict resolution* helps people address any problems and conflicts that arise in a positive manner.
5. *Perseverance* enables people to push through challenges and continue to work toward a realistic goal.

In Afghanistan, these competencies were operationalized for young children and refined in various crisis and conflict contexts (IRC 2018). In this field note, we describe the experience of integrating SEL with EGR in Afghanistan, including the opportunities this approach created, challenges encountered, methods used to overcome these challenges, lessons learned, and considerations for future relevant government-led, sustainable programming.

Figure 1: The SEL Competency Pyramid

Source: IRC (2016)

EMBEDDING SEL INTO EGR SUBJECT CONTENT

In 2016, when Afghan Children Read and the MoE began working on a new EGR curriculum, a discussion developed around how SEL could become part of early grade primary education, either as a separate subject or embedded in the EGR curriculum. This was a timely discussion, as the MoE was already involved in curriculum reform, including looking at the number of subjects taught in the early grades. Given their preference to reduce the number of subjects, the MoE recommended embedding SEL into the EGR curriculum. This approach is supported by current evidence, which shows that classroom teachers can help students develop social and emotional competencies by directly teaching these skills using engaging curriculum materials and implementing specific instructional and classroom-management practices (Durlak et al. 2011). To ensure that this embedded SEL approach would be implemented in the classroom, teachers were given preservice and in-service training in SEL and follow-up coaching, thus creating the opportunity to support a multipronged SEL approach in a protracted crisis environment that went beyond the usual early grade literacy subjects.

SEL IN EARLY GRADE LITERACY MATERIALS

One of the project's first activities was to develop a new set of literacy materials for grades 1 to 3 (students ages 6-11). An MoE team, led by an international literacy expert and supported by international SEL experts, worked to contextualize

current research on reading and writing (National Reading Panel 2000) and SEL (IRC 2016) for the Afghan languages and script (Rahbari and S  n  chal 2010; USAID 2020a), culture, and education context (USAID 2020b). In grades 1 and 2 lessons, the SEL competencies were implicitly integrated into activities, reading texts, comprehension activities, and writing activities. Each lesson had an SEL competency as a crosscutting theme, and the reading text and comprehension activities supported the development of the competency (USAID 2020c). For example, most of the decoding activities contained in the literacy lessons already supported the brain-building competency, and it was easily included in the materials (for a more detailed explanation, see Ayari, van Ginkel, and Muhib 2019). The grade 3 curriculum allowed for more explicit SEL skills-building through the literacy lessons. Led by an international expert, the MoE developed a detailed scope and sequence for SEL competencies (USAID 2020c). The scope included the five SEL competencies, and the sequence was based on the hierarchical order in which these competencies function (see Figure 1). Each competency was assigned for a few weeks, and SEL focus areas related to the competency were developed for each week, starting with brain-building and ending with perseverance. For example, emotion regulation was practiced in weeks 8, 9, and 10, and each week had a particular SEL focus area (see Table 1).

Table 1: Example of Scope and Sequence for SEL as Part of the EGR Scope and Sequence

Unit 3: Weeks 8, 9, and 10			
Week	8	9	10
	I-do	we-do	you-do
Theme	Family		
Subthemes	Respecting each other at home Helping each other at home	Family economics Mother	Patience Father (poem)
Genre	Narrative		
Subgenre	Fiction		
SEL competency	Emotion regulation		
SEL focus area	Identify and name a variety of feelings	Describe how different situations make you feel	Identify and demonstrate emotion-management strategies

This allowed students to work on developing SEL competencies in an explicit, sequenced, and systematic manner. During the week, students read stories that incorporated these objectives then completed comprehension activities focused on discussing feelings and identifying emotions. On the fifth school day, listening and speaking activities were focused fully on these objectives, and students completed a creative writing exercise in which they expressed their feelings and strategies for managing them.

The new curriculum materials were piloted for two years, during which the project collected information from teachers, students, parents, and other key stakeholders (see Challenges Encountered and Lessons Learned, below).

IN-SERVICE TEACHER TRAINING

Embedding SEL in the new EGR materials created a need to provide an in-service teacher training (INSET) on SEL for teachers at the pilot schools; the training included how to use the new EGR materials. Development of the INSET program was simultaneous with the materials development. Teachers in the pilot schools received a 12-day training, including a 90-minute session on the theoretical background of SEL concepts. During the remaining training days, the teachers learned how to use the new literacy materials, which included teaching SEL activities and topics. After one year, the teachers took a five-day refresher training, which included a module on SEL. The teacher's guide that accompanies the EGR materials gave teachers guidance on SEL, and on how to develop a positive classroom environment. We refer to this as a healing classroom, a safe place for students to focus on their cognitive development and their social and emotional development (IRC 2018). However, it bears restating that the project mandate and its primary focus are EGR, which effectively limited the training time spent on SEL.

COACHING AND SEL

A coaching system to support the teachers who were implementing the new EGR curriculum in the classroom was set up and piloted by the project. Trained senior teachers served as coaches in their schools. Coaching occurred at the individual and group level. Individual coaching took place at least once a month, during which the coach observed a class and filled in a rubric on how well the teacher applied various skills. The classroom observation included a five-point SEL rubric that evaluated the degree to which the teacher

1. addressed SEL competencies, including brain-building, emotion regulation, positive social skills, conflict-resolution skills, and perseverance, in accordance with the literacy instructional materials;
2. focused on listening and speaking skills and obtaining feedback from students; and
3. provided additional support to needy students and helped them improve their social and emotional behavior through consulting and modeling.

After the class observation, the coach and teacher discussed the coach's observations and identified action points for the teacher.

Group-based coaching was organized through monthly teacher learning circles, during which teachers and their coaches meet to discuss issues related to teaching EGR. The teachers and the coaches set the agenda for the meetings, which included relevant SEL-related issues. Research on the coaching showed that it provided excellent on-the-job support for the teachers in both literacy and SEL (USAID 2019).

PRESERVICE SEL CURRICULUM

From the start of the implementation in 2016, the project staff worked with the MoE's teacher education department to develop modules for an early grade diploma course for teachers. The project originally was tasked with providing a series of four modules focused on EGR: Foundations of Language Development in Early Grade Education, Methods of Teaching Literacy in Early Grades, Methods of Addressing Early Grade Literacy Problems, and Methods of Strengthening Literacy for Students with Special Needs. When the MoE's teacher education department saw how Afghan Children Read had embedded SEL into the EGR materials and the INSET, they requested a fifth module: Social Emotional Learning Skills for Early Grade Students. These five modules were designed to be taught at the MoE's 34 public teacher training colleges (TTCs), which were responsible for both in-service and preservice teacher training. The TTCs offer a two-year teacher diploma for grade 12 graduates and a five-year diploma for grade 9 graduates (Goddard, Bakhshi, and Frideres 2018). Given that this module was a new approach for the MoE, it was designed as an introductory survey module to ensure that foundational SEL content was presented in an interactive and evidence-informed manner. The module was divided into 16 weeks, two sessions per week, and covered the content presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Social Emotional Learning Skills for Early Grade Students Course Sessions

Week	Content
1	Orientation to Social and Emotional Learning
2	Social and Emotional Wellbeing for Students and Mindfulness
3	SEL Research
4	Brain-Building
5	Emotion Regulation
6	Positive Social Skills
7	Conflict Resolution
8	Perseverance
9	Modeling and Integrating SEL across the Curriculum
10	Sensitivity to Learners' Needs in SEL
11	Teacher Wellbeing and SEL Programs
12	SEL from the Afghanistan Perspective
13	SEL and the Whole School Approach
14	Assessing and Measuring SEL within a Classroom
15 and 16	Final Project

Each first weekly session of the module was a lecture, while the second session was interactive and included practical activities that responded to the lecture content. During the development of the module, great care was taken to work with the MoE to ensure that the content was contextualized. For example, some language for mindfulness activities was considered inappropriate and was changed accordingly.

Reviews of the previous week's session were embedded in the module design and offered at the beginning of each week; reflections on new content were shared at the end of each week. These activities gave the module instructors feedback on how their students (preservice teachers) were processing and interpreting the module. Students were assessed through midterm and final exams, portfolio journal entries, participation in and quality of class activities, and a final essay. A pretest and posttest, adapted from an IRC model test (IRC 2016), were developed to give students some background on what they would be learning (pretest) and enable them to measure what they learned (posttest) over the 16-week module.

The module's practice-based pedagogy gave students opportunities to role play, develop SEL activities around a particular competency, and implement activities with their peers, then to process these experiences as both "teacher" and "student" and reflect on what they learned from completing the activities and from observing them. Knowledge of how the brain works is behind this approach; the neural

wiring is strengthened each time an individual practices a new behavior or skill, thus “practice makes permanent” (Willis 2018). The module was student centered and scripted so that the instructor could model the behaviors she or he expected students to practice. This was done so that, when they became teachers, they would have had relevant experience from their training and from the SEL module.

CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED AND LESSONS LEARNED

While it is still too early to see the full impact of this embedded approach to SEL in the literacy curriculum and in the teacher training and support system, the development process and initial feedback on the pilot implementation has produced some lessons on the various aspects of integration that we outlined, including materials development, in-service teacher training, coaching, and preservice teacher training.

MATERIALS DEVELOPMENT

Embedding SEL in the literacy curriculum in the early grades posed the challenge of finding a balance between SEL and the mandatory literacy content. In Afghanistan, Dari or Pashto literacy (reading and writing) is scheduled for six weekly time slots of 45 minutes each. This is the minimum time needed to teach and practice initial literacy skills, which makes it challenging to include SEL. However, we recognized that SEL was key to the students’ wellbeing and that including it would enable them to learn more effectively. To address this challenge of time, SEL was implicitly included in as many activities as possible, such as reading texts, comprehension questions, and word-recognition strategies (see Embedding SEL into EGR Subject Content, above).

Piloting the new materials provided insights from a broad range of stakeholders. The pilot data showed that stakeholders had positive reactions to SEL being embedded in the early grade literacy materials. The stakeholders also indicated that the illustrations and stories reinforced the students’ positive behavior. One focus group participant remarked, “Compared to the previous curriculum, this curriculum has created an unprecedented variety of children’s tastes that strengthened the child’s sense of wellbeing and integrity by a hundred percent” (USAID 2018). Another focus group member commented that “the minds of the children have become stronger—they are alert, more active than before” (USAID 2018). In addition, all the teachers expressed that various aspects of the lessons had helped students develop their social and emotional learning skills (USAID 2018).

Based on the early evidence from the pilot, embedding SEL in literacy materials may support students socially and emotionally by

- strengthening their sense of wellbeing;
- sharing positive behavior with friends and family members;
- increasing their ability to stay alert and active; and
- helping them develop the skills to help fellow classmates.

These initial findings suggest that this embedded approach is possible without interfering with the time students need to learn crucial basic literacy skills. As other research has already shown (Durlak et al. 2011), it seems that SEL can be embedded naturally and easily into evidence-based EGR pedagogy.

IN-SERVICE TEACHER TRAINING

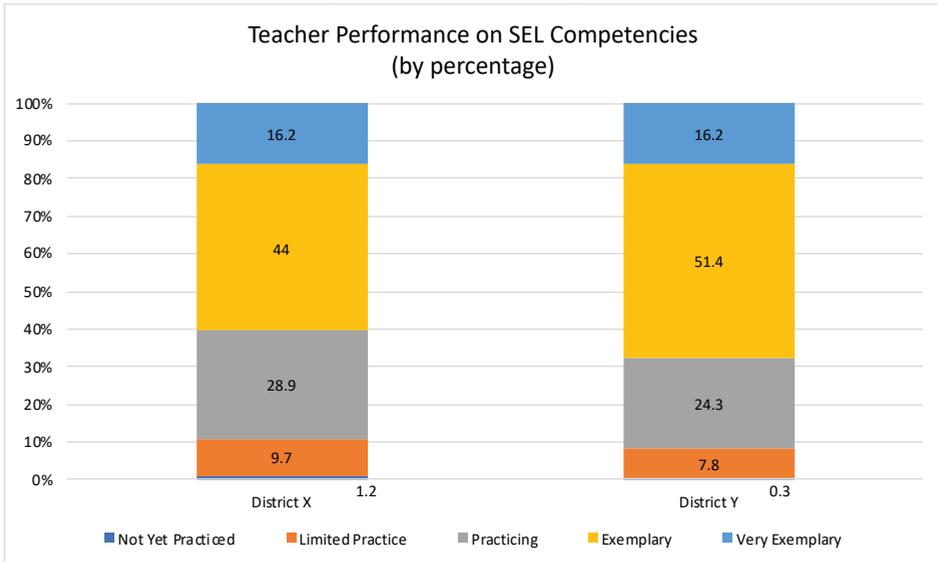
Feedback from teachers on integrating SEL into the INSET was generally positive; however, two areas may require follow-up. First, teachers indicated that they found the training on SEL approaches too short to fully understand and apply them. Teachers made similar comments about the training for using the new literacy materials, which suggests that the issue lies more with the length and nature of the in-service trainings than with the SEL training content. Providing teacher training on the job means it must be short and efficient; the full content is often covered during preservice training. When teachers were observed by their supervisors in their classrooms during the pilot, it was apparent that the short training, combined with the well-developed materials and coaching, helped both teachers and their students improve their SEL skills.

Second, some teachers had concerns about activities that required students to be physically active in the classroom when practicing SEL competencies, such as jumping up and down to get their heart rate going. While implementing the model, we found that physical activities were not always appreciated, especially when they took place in a mixed-gender environment, such as a teacher training or a classroom. Some teachers suggested that these activities be replaced with “inspirational” activities that allow children to remain seated and to engage in mental rather than physical activities.

COACHING

As previously stated, the teachers indicated that the INSET was too short for them to grasp all the issues related to SEL. In response, the coaches provided the teachers with continuous professional development. During classroom visits, the coaches used the rubric to indicate how well teachers were implementing different aspects of the new curriculum, including SEL, using the five categories (see Figure 2). These data were helpful in providing targeted support. For example, Figure 2 illustrates how well teachers in each district were applying the SEL competencies in the classroom.

Figure 2: SEL Coaching Data



The data presented in Figure 2 show that a few teachers still do not promote SEL: about 10 percent have limited practice in teaching SEL, while about 25 percent are teaching it but could still improve, which illustrates the need for follow-up with both teachers and coaches about implementing SEL competencies.

Over time, the coaching seemed to help allay teachers' concerns around the insufficiency of the in-service training. Moreover, feedback on similar innovations in other countries (Pflepsen 2019) indicates that it takes several years for teachers and coaches to become fully familiar and comfortable with new literacy methodologies, so comfort with SEL techniques may also take some time.

PRESERVICE TRAINING

Developing the preservice module presented some challenges. The first was fitting the content and activities within the time allotted. The MoE stated that preservice teachers taking the module could not work outside the module hours; therefore, readings and assignments had to fit within each one-hour class. The second was not knowing the TTC instructors' capacity in SEL, or their more specific knowledge of child development, child psychology, and pedagogy. Therefore, they required a highly scripted teacher guide. Due to these factors, instead of the MoE personnel writing the module with the guidance of an international expert, international SEL experts wrote it and then piloted and validated it while making several revisions.

The module has since been piloted with a group of TTC instructors and MoE personnel. Postpilot evaluations indicated that most participants in both groups strongly agreed (92% and 82%, respectively) or agreed (8% or 18%, respectively) that the learning outcomes of the module were important for their roles, and that the training enhanced their professional expertise. All the participants agreed that the module content was relevant and appropriate (Afghan Children Read 2018).

The participants did suggest, however, that further contextualization was needed for some of the activities, especially those that support mindfulness. For example, a breathing activity asked participants to “breathe out the bad thoughts and breathe in the good.” As a result of the pilot, during the revisions of the module the breathing activities were rewritten to say, “Focus on the light,” and they asked participants to think, “The light is in me, I am the light. I shine light on everyone and everything around me.” The feedback had noted that, in the Afghan context, the reference to “badness within” was seen as inappropriate, whereas the affirming reference to the “light within” was appropriate.

This feedback demonstrates another lesson learned: while it was possible to develop the integrated SEL approach using experts from outside Afghanistan, it was important that these experts understood the need to adapt SEL competencies and activities to the context. This enabled a productive synergy to develop among the outside experts, the MoE curriculum developers, and the community and religious leaders who helped identify alternative activities. This open-minded, collaborative approach was critical in adapting SEL competencies and activities to the cultural and religious context of Afghanistan. Many of the SEL skills integrated into the literacy curriculum—friendship, conflict resolution, patience, and perseverance—align with Afghan values, morals, and behaviors. However, more research is needed to confirm this early evidence, identify additional

SEL skills and values that are specific to the context, and develop contextually appropriate activities for practicing SEL competencies.

CONCLUSION

Early evidence based on the implementers' observations and participant feedback and analysis indicate that students using the EGR materials made noticeable changes in their behavior and knowledge of SEL content. The teachers and parents confirmed this and reported that the children's social and emotional wellbeing had improved. Embedding SEL implicitly in the EGR content allowed sufficient time to build early grade reading skills while ensuring that the students also were exposed to SEL competencies. Despite teachers' concerns about having too little time for the SEL training during their INSET, the posttraining feedback indicated that the well-developed EGR materials compensated for the short training and that the uptake by teachers was promising. It also showed the importance of relying on international experts, who were able to work with their national counterparts to ensure that the SEL values and activities aligned with Afghanistan's cultural and religious values.

Attending to student and teacher wellbeing in crisis and conflict contexts is essential, but hope for the sustainability of SEL instruction depends on the MoE and its vision for the curricular design. The Afghanistan MoE understood the need to embed SEL in the existing primary education curriculum and materials, and because it was engaged in primary and secondary education curriculum reform at the time this activity was taking place, the literacy curriculum and materials provided the first opportunity to embed SEL. Afghan Children Read took this opportunity to expand SEL into the student materials, and into teacher training and professional support materials and approaches. At the onset of COVID-related school closures, the project responded to community interest (as expressed through the Shuras, or councils) to include SEL resources in home-based learning.

The development of the preservice SEL module may help address the shortcomings of in-service training, as it will provide new teachers with a solid foundational knowledge of SEL and how to integrate it into their teaching practice—and to recognize its benefits for their own wellbeing. Further studies may demonstrate whether the new diploma course will support teachers' application of SEL, as they will have had 32 hours of SEL class time to learn and practice, in contrast to the existing teachers who have had only 90 minutes of in-service SEL training. The MoE is also looking to provide more substantive INSET training to current teachers so

they can be certified in the early literacy and SEL modules designed for delivery at the TTCs, which would provide the foundation for a certificate program.

In this field note, we aimed to enrich understanding of the challenges in and opportunities for supporting SEL in the education in emergencies context. We explained that SEL was embedded in the EGR curriculum for grades 1, 2, and 3, and described the opportunities that arose to incorporate SEL into both teacher training and coaching. The initial feedback on this approach suggests that social and emotional skills and subject learning, in this case literacy, can be integrated effectively, even in a fragile education context that is functioning during an ongoing crisis. More research is needed to fully understand the process of working with education ministries to embed SEL across subjects as a way to improve teaching and learning for teachers and students in crisis and conflict environments.

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