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The *Journal on Education in Emergencies (JEiE)* publishes groundbreaking and outstanding scholarly and practitioner work on education in emergencies (EiE), defined broadly as quality learning opportunities for all ages in situations of crisis, including early childhood development, primary, secondary, non-formal, technical, vocation, higher and adult education.

IMPROVING SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL HEALTH: EXPANSION OF TEACHER AND STUDENT WELLBEING DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS IN HONDURAS

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ABSTRACT

The Honduran education system was caught off guard when COVID-19 struck the country. With effectively no training or preparation and very few resources, educators across the country began providing distance learning classes in mid-March 2020. Overnight, educators faced significant obstacles in their quest to keep young people studying—teaching classes to students they could not see and engaging young people who lacked technology. Teachers and students began to experience social-emotional problems. This field note describes how the United States Agency for International Development's Asegurando la Educación project transitioned in-person social and emotional learning (SEL) activities in 135 schools to provide virtual SEL support to hundreds of thousands of beneficiaries across the county. We outline the SEL interventions that contributed to the lowest national dropout rate in five years, and enrollment rates in Asegurando's 135 schools some 5 percent higher than the national average. Finally, we believe this field note will contribute to the evidence base for how SEL can improve mental health and school retention during future crises.

INTRODUCTION

The Honduran education system was caught off guard when COVID-19 struck the country in mid-March 2020. In their quest to keep young people studying, educators across the country with effectively no training or preparation and very few resources began providing distance learning classes. Overnight, these educators had to deal with significant new obstacles, such as teaching classes to

students they could not see and engaging students who lacked technology. Almost immediately, educators and students began suffering toxic levels of stress that negatively affected learning outcomes.

While the United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) project Asegurando la Educación (Ensuring Education) implemented effective, in-person social and emotional learning (SEL) activities, the project had never attempted remote implementation.[1] In an effort to transition the existing in-person SEL activities to distance learning formats that would meet the needs of 4,190 teachers and 84,376 students in 135 schools, the Asegurando team found cost-effective ways to provide SEL skills to hundreds of thousands of additional beneficiaries. Their efforts also contributed to the nation's highest retention rate in years.

This article contributes to the evidence base that describes how SEL can improve retention by reducing school communities' toxic stress during a pandemic, while also demonstrating how implementers can extend the reach of SEL models to a greater number of beneficiaries.

BACKGROUND

SEL Education as a Protective Factor

In emergency settings, SEL skills are critical tools for building resilience among children and youth. Research has demonstrated that SEL programs that promote students' emotional health can improve their coping strategies, academic performance, and completion and graduation rates. These programs, which also benefit teachers, can improve student attendance, engagement, and motivation. The resulting improvements in faculty and student mental health can lower their stress, anxiety, and depression (INEE 2016, 10-13; INEE 2018).

In 2017, Asegurando began working in 14 schools in the Honduran cities with the highest rates of violence and crime: Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula, Choloma, Tela, and La Ceiba. By 2019, the project had expanded into 135 schools with high rates of school-based violence—gender-based violence, bullying, drug trafficking, substance abuse, self-harm, and gang recruitment and intimidation—with the goal of strengthening education's role as a protective factor in students' lives.

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[1]   This article uses the term "social and emotional learning skills" to refer to particular abilities and competencies that are often identified by interchangeable terms such as "psycho-social skills," "social emotional skills," and "life skills," among others. See, for example, Yorke et al. (2021) and INEE (2016, 13).

In the face of this array of violent challenges, the project established its Safe Learning Spaces program with a foundation of dedicated educators who served as key social referents for young people (López, Ferrer, and Gutiérrez 2009). Findings from Asegurando's baseline School Safety Study (Asegurando la Educación 2018, 2019) substantiated the premise that education is a protective factor. Nearly 94 percent of the more than 11,400 students surveyed reported that they always or almost always felt safe in the presence of their teachers. Within the conceptual framework of child protection and education in emergencies, the project sought to consolidate the school as a safe space by providing physical, psychosocial, and cognitive protection; promoting a sense of hope and stability; offering access to social services; promoting conflict resolution; supporting gender equity and girls' empowerment; and enhancing wellbeing (INEE 2016, 5).

SEL played a central role in the transformation of school campuses from loci of violence to safe learning spaces. SEL helps to provide young people with many advantages, including better general mental and physical health, constructive interpersonal relationships, improved academic performance, and reduced at-risk behavior, such as substance abuse and criminal activity (Ortiz et al. 2020, 7). When students encounter violent environments in and out of school, SEL "can help children respond to difficult and unexpected situations in a calm and emotionally regulated manner" (Yorke et al. 2021, 4). Students with greater SEL skills also enjoy lower levels of stress and perform better academically (Edel Navarro 2003; López, Ferrer, and Gutiérrez 2009; Rodriguez-Leonardo and Peralta 2020).

Asegurando's Safe Learning Spaces Program: Prepandemic

In 2017, Asegurando gradually began improving school safety in order to boost enrollment and retention for the 84,376 students in 135 schools. The project implemented activities in the schools and cultivated in-person, professional relationships with principals, teachers, students, and parents/caregivers. Fifteen field staff members oversaw Asegurando's Safe Learning Spaces program, a package of 14 mutually reinforcing in-person interventions aimed at mitigating violence and creating healthier education environments. By the end of the 2019 academic year, 94 percent of participating school principals reported that their schools were safer than when the project started (Asegurando la Educación 2020).

Asegurando's SEL Response: Prepandemic

Three key SEL strategies played a central role in the 14 interventions to create safer, healthier school campuses. First, the Teacher Wellbeing program focused on self-care and psychological first aid to reduce educator stress that was negatively affecting their students' motivation, wellbeing, and academic performance (Ramberg et al. 2020). Next, the sports-based SEL program fortified the five core competencies outlined in the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning framework: self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decisionmaking (CASEL 2020). Finally, Staying Positive, a 16-week program based on cognitive behavioral therapy, helped vulnerable youth improve their behavioral and education outcomes, self-awareness, self-control, and decisionmaking. In fact, findings from a prepandemic study suggested that, after completing Staying Positive, 71 percent of students became more motivated toward their studies, 65 percent exhibited improved behavior, and 59 percent increased their academic performance (Asegurando 2019). Educators' reduced tension, fewer fights, and improved interpersonal interactions contributed to the success of the program. Some 83 percent of Staying Positive students completed the school year, and 69 percent of those re-enrolled in 2020 (Asegurando la Educación 2020). Asegurando also developed the Executive Leadership Program for Principals, a program centered on principals that enabled them to experience basic SEL concepts firsthand.

COVID-19 AFFECTS STUDENT WELLBEING

In early 2020, COVID-19 began to have a negative effect on the mental health of students across the globe. Young people suffered from anxiety, frustration, depression, social isolation, and uncertainty about the future "at critical points in their emotional development" (Rodriguez-Leonardo and Peralta 2020; University of Notre Dame 2020, 6-7; United Nations 2020, 2). A study that analyzed the effects of this confinement in Italy and Spain found that 77 percent of parents reported that their children had difficulty concentrating, 39 percent demonstrated irritability and restlessness, 38 percent nervousness, and 31 percent had feelings of loneliness (United Nations 2020, 12). "The main sources of distress" for adolescents were "concerns about their family's health, school and university closures, loss of routine and loss of social connection" (13). The University of Notre Dame (2020, 6-7) reported emotional health concerns about educators, students, and parents in Colombia very early in the pandemic.

Indeed, Honduran educators in the Asegurando schools reported an increase in child poverty, domestic and sexual abuse, emotional stress, and dropouts.[2] The suspension of in-person classes almost certainly left many students feeling the loss of education as a protective factor. No longer was the foundational figure of the teacher in the classroom serving as the central stabilizing social-emotional force as it had been before the pandemic. Like most of the rest of the world, Honduran students, teachers, and families were forced to navigate uncharted territory.

ASEGURANDO SEL ACTIVITIES: PANDEMIC

For the education community in Honduras, the COVID-19 crisis presented an emergency every bit as real and threatening as school-based violence; isolation, uncertainty, domestic violence, and greater economic strain all contributed to toxic stress. Asegurando and the country's ministry of education (MOE) launched a set of SEL activities specifically designed to reduce toxic stress and improve the learning outcomes of attendance, performance, and retention. By the summer of 2020, the project had undertaken several virtual SEL activities focused on helping children and young people stay in school, continue to learn, and advance toward graduation. Asegurando's key SEL interventions for teachers, students, and families became the foundation on which the MOE established SEL as one of the three essential pillars in its June 2020 report, *Safe Return to School in the Wake of COVID-19 National Strategy* (Secretaria de Educación de Honduras 2020). Like the rest of the education system, Asegurando had to "build the plane while flying," which led to many new lessons learned. One of the earliest lessons had to do with providing online programming. On April 6, 2020—a mere few weeks after the lockdown went into effect—Asegurando, with outreach support from USAID and the MOE, launched its Securing Your Wellbeing campaign with a Facebook Live event titled, Facing the Changes with Self-Care. Unfortunately, the live event froze up a few minutes after the session kicked off, due to the low internet bandwidth in the home of the staff member facilitating it. As a result, the team started using Facebook Premieres, which are prerecorded sessions that incorporate live chats with the audience.

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2   To monitor the evolving condition of educators and learners, including families' livelihoods, mental health, safety, school attendance, and learning, Asegurando conducted rapid surveys with 135 school principals via WhatsApp (with a 2/3 response rate).

Teacher Wellbeing

At the outset of COVID-19, increased responsibilities and toxic stress began taking their toll on educators in many countries, including Peru and Colombia (University of Notre Dame, Peru, 5-6; University of Notre Dame, Colombia 6-7). Teacher wellbeing was found to be essential to the healthy recovery of education communities (Chile 2020). As a result, Asegurando adapted the in-person teacher wellbeing program in Honduras to a virtual program that prioritized restorative practices (Secretaria de Educación de Honduras 2020, 22-23). It included a series of seven webinars and twelve short videos intended to empower educators to reconnect and rebuild eroded relationships, and to promote self-care and resilience in response to unhealthy levels of fear, loss, isolation, and anxiety. The team facilitated dozens of restorative discussion circles for educators, including one session for a vice minister of education and her cabinet. The successes achieved through these circles in restoring relationships and helping the education community recognize and talk about grievances sometimes came at the expense of Asegurando team members' own wellbeing. This was particularly true for team members who facilitated a large number of the sessions and/or were going through personal challenges themselves. The Asegurando leadership responded with corrective strategies, such as promoting self-care among staff members and training teachers to conduct the circles.

Student Wellbeing

The need to strengthen SEL among students emerged as a priority early in the pandemic in many countries. For example, a study of 205 students ages 12 to 19 from 9 states in Mexico conducted during COVID-19 shelter-in-place measures demonstrated a correlation between higher levels of social-emotional skills and lower levels of stress among middle and high school students (Rodriguez-Leonardo and Peralta 2020). In Peru, UNESCO's Horizontes program responded by strengthening children's SEL, giving special attention to the needs of adolescents (University of Notre Dame 2020; UNESCO 2018).

In Honduras, Asegurando adapted key SEL components of its in-person, sports-based SEL and Staying Positive programs to produce 25 short videos designed to promote youth SEL as a way to improve retention. Called Influencer 504, the program invites youth to become the "best version of themselves."[3] The MOE broadcast the videos on their official TV channels and social media platforms, which exponentially expanded the program's reach almost overnight. The project

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3   Influencer 504 appealed to the young generation familiar with the term "influencer," referring to social media figures, and "504" as Honduras' international calling code.

also posted the videos on YouTube for easy access and established an Influencer 504 Ambassadors program with the MOE that identified a youth representative to promote SEL in each of the 18 departments (or states).

Naturally, many vulnerable students required additional one-on-one attention, such as those suffering from abuse, discouraged to the point of dropping out, or forced into exploitative labor. Some schools in Colombia scheduled appointments for psychological support through Facebook using Google Forms (University of Notre Dame 2020, 4). In Honduras, Asegurando adapted foundational elements of its in-person Staying Positive program into a youth and family telecounseling program operated by school counselors. An important element of the MOE's strategy (Secretaria de Educación de Honduras 2020, 24) was the use of telecounseling via phone and WhatsApp to work with youth on the brink of dropping out and their families to find solutions to keep the students in school. Counselors made referrals for psychological or social support when appropriate, helped adapt schedules, and offered other support. Perhaps more importantly, as the project team had learned in 2019, educators' most effective tool sometimes was listening. "When educators listen, at-risk students and families tend to respond more positively" (Asegurando la Educación 2020, 13). The telecounseling program, although it reached a smaller number of youth, proved effective in keeping vulnerable youth engaged and studying.

Younger students needed special attention. The Chilean MOE broadcast programs on Canal TV Educa Chile to help children ages two to eight confront emotions of shame, happiness, anger, and fear (Ministerio de Educación 2020). In Honduras, Asegurando incorporated Calming Corners, an SEL activity for younger children, into the MOE's strategy and expanded the intervention into shelters when the twin hurricanes Eta and Iota struck Honduras in November 2020 (Secretaria de Educación de Honduras 2020, 22). Throughout the 2021 academic year, Asegurando continued providing support to youngsters in hurricane-affected areas.

CASTING A WIDER NET

Asegurando had the most thorough impact when the team could engage educators, students, and parents in person and on a regular basis. The concentrated efforts to implement all 14 initiatives in a school will naturally yield the greatest results. Spending hours each day consulting, offering technical advice, problem-solving, and providing individual attention is preferable to a shorter, virtual engagement.

Moreover, an eight-hour in-person workshop is likely to produce better results than a one-hour webinar.

However, switching from the delivery of in-person SEL activities to virtual platforms beginning in April 2020 offered an unprecedented advantage: access to a much larger target group. Before the pandemic, the project might reach dozens of schools in a region, or at best 135 schools across the five selected cities. After March 2020, seven TV stations across the country broadcast Asegurando's 30-second public service announcements. Whereas the project had limited implementation in five cities across three departments before the pandemic, by late summer 2020, Asegurando was reaching 198 cities in all 18 departments. Before COVID-19, the project implemented SEL activities in 135 schools in three of the country's departments, with a total enrollment of 85,000; by the middle of the 2021 academic year, SEL activities were reaching nearly 8,630 schools with a total enrollment of 1,112,634. While the instruction was not as impactful as in-person attention, the greater reach of Asegurando's SEL programming was a catalyst for introducing SEL concepts to education communities that had never even heard the term or received USAID education support. Suddenly, SEL became a priority for thousands of schools and their principals, teachers, learners, and families.

The in-person Staying Positive program reached 200 participants in 2019; in contrast, the three youth and family telecounseling webinars reached 3,600 counselors from 1,451 schools, with a total enrollment of 478,100 students.

Asegurando's in-person, sports-based SEL program, which was conducted in physical education classes that reached 6,240 students in 107 schools in three departments prior to the pandemic, evolved into the Influencer 504 program that had reached 500,000 viewers through national education TV channels and YouTube by the end of October 2021.

The Securing Your Wellbeing awareness campaign gradually expanded the circulation of SEL videos, messages, graphics, and posts to reach over six million people, including international audiences, through eighteen radio stations, seven TV stations, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube (Asegurando la Educación 2021).

RESULTS

The findings from a rapid survey of 101 principals and 382 teachers from the 135 schools participating in Asegurando, which was conducted in October 2021, suggest that SEL programming has served to reduce toxic stress, improve communication, resolve internal conflicts, and improve the retention of at-risk students. Some 91.1 percent of the principals and 92.4 percent of the teachers either agreed or strongly agreed that the Teacher Wellbeing and Restorative Circles programs had helped reduce toxic stress levels, while 90.1 percent of the principals and 92.2 percent of the teachers either agreed or strongly agreed that these interventions improved communication and helped to resolve internal conflicts in the schools. Equally important, 88.1 percent of the principals and 88.5 percent of the teachers either agreed or strongly agreed that these two SEL activities helped to reduce the school dropout rates of at-risk students.

When asked about SEL for students, 92.2 percent of the principals and 94 percent of the teachers either agreed or strongly agreed that, in most cases, the Influencer 504 SEL program helped improve the mental health of youth. In addition, 90.3 percent of the principals and 89.4 percent of the teachers agreed or strongly agreed that the program was helping to reduce the dropout rate of at-risk students, and 92.2 percent of the principals and 93.7 percent of the teachers agreed or strongly agreed that Influencer 504 promoted leadership and empowered youths to become a positive influence on their peers.

91 percent of the principals and 92.5 percent of the teachers either agreed or strongly agreed that Calming Corners helped reduce toxic stress in younger children, while 84.7 percent of the principals and 87.8 percent of the teachers either agreed or strongly agreed that the activity contributed to a reduction in the number of younger children who abandoned school (Asegurando la Educación 2021).

CONCLUSION

There is no substitute for in-person attention, long training hours, interaction with more than one student at a time, and face-to-face engagement. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the fact that Asegurando could concentrate dedicated team members inside the 135 schools to implement all or part of the package of 14 interventions that comprise the Safe Learning Spaces program ensured greater impact.

When Asegurando "went virtual" with its 10-minute Influencer 504 video on YouTube, it could not reach the same level of interaction, engagement, and oversight that the in-person sports-based SEL session had before the pandemic. However, the project's virtual SEL programs did reach millions of teachers, students, and parents during the pandemic and almost certainly helped to keep a great number of young people studying and curbed dropout rates. Preliminary data for 2020 show that the dropout rate was much lower than predicted, about 2.3 percent nationwide, compared to 5.39 percent a year earlier; in fact, this was the lowest rate in five years (Ministry of Education 2021). If the final official figures remain consistent with the preliminary data, then the repercussions of COVID-19—travel restrictions, closed borders, a lack of jobs, etc.—were likely contributing factors. However, never before in the history of Honduras had the education ministry and program implementers, like Asegurando, invested so heavily in awareness-raising, multimedia SEL courses, and other activities that facilitated retention.

In early 2021, when countries in the region lifted travel restrictions and the Honduran economy began reopening, a large number of young people either refused to enroll in school, stopped attending, or dropped out altogether to pursue other options than during the first year of the pandemic. However, enrollment rates in Asegurando's 135 schools remained high, 101.06 percent, compared to 95.51 percent for the rest of the country (Ministry of Education 2021)[4]

Interventions related to teacher and student wellbeing were, of course, not the only ones that boosted retention. Asegurando, other USAID implementing partners, the MOE, and many stakeholders mobilized resources, made donations, and found solutions to keep young people studying.

Finally, the COVID pandemic created the need for an entirely new way of reaching educators and students. Virtual capacity-building, webinars, and social media campaigns that emerged during the pandemic have demolished barriers and opened minds to alternative ways to engage beneficiaries. Many of us in the development community will never return to the old conceptualization of program design and targets. While there are advantages to focusing resources on in-person activities, which will likely remain a large part of future program designs, we will balance that approach with distance-learning activities, social media, and multimedia events that reach much larger audiences.

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4   The figures are based on most recent enrollment data. The 100 percent target is based on an analysis of the previous five years' enrollment figures, 2015-2019.

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