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EQUITY, INCLUSION, AND SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

USAID/DEVELOPMENT, DEMOCRACY, AND INNOVATION
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this paper is to provide recommendations for quality integration of social-emotional learning (SEL) and inclusive education, which considers and meets the needs of all learners, into pre-primary and higher education programs. This paper identifies areas where SEL can be stronger, especially in its implementation, and offers an examination of how SEL approaches advance equitable and inclusive education goals. Using Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as a framework to make SEL more accessible for all learners, this paper builds upon previous work that centers on equity in SEL.

The paper addresses the following questions:

1. How does SEL advance equity?
2. How can SEL be more equitable?
3. How can the UDL framework be applied to SEL programs and curricula?
4. What promising programs or activities that promote equity in SEL already exist?

Text box 1. This paper defines learners as students from pre-primary through higher education delivered in formal or non-formal settings, including out-of-school youth.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The purpose of this report is to provide recommendations for quality integration of social-emotional learning (SEL) that meets the needs of all learners from pre-primary through higher education. SEL, equity, and inclusion are priorities within the [2018 USAID Education Policy](#). This report examines how inclusive learning environments impact the development of social, emotional, and soft skills. Building on previous work that aligned SEL and Universal Design for Learning (UDL), this paper offers examples of how to transform and strengthen education systems and make SEL accessible for all learners.

USAID developed this paper after a series of consultation meetings with disability and inclusion experts, education experts, and members of the SEL working group. USAID also reviewed relevant policy programming documents, identified activities that focused in this area, and informal interviews with external partners. This report reflects best practices and evidence from empirical research, examples from USAID-funded programs, and internationally recognized frameworks. Specifically, it focuses on foundational skills development, youth workforce development, and higher education programming. However, pre-primary education is another area worthy of attention and exploration for the next step of this work.

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

The 2018 USAID Education Policy provides this definition for social and emotional skills: “a set of cognitive, social, and emotional competencies that children, youth, and adults learn through explicit, active, focused, sequenced instruction that allows them to understand and manage their emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.” Within USAID, the term “social and emotional skills” is interchangeable with “social-emotional learning,” while “soft skills” is the term used when referring to youth workforce development and higher education.

SEL and soft skills development supports all learners in their overall well-being. It supports them in identifying their emotions and needs, increases their confidence, enables them to name those needs. It encourages them to develop their self-advocacy skills, which links them with educational, workplace, and community tools that meet their needs. For youth in particular, soft skills development leads to increased agency, enabling them to employ their skills and aspirations and make their own decisions about their lives.

SEL and soft skills development bolster opportunities for building and sustaining supportive relationships in multiple ways: relationships with self, peers, educators, school communities, parents, caregivers, and larger community. These relationships lead to more understanding and inclusive school and workplace environments. Inclusive SEL contributes to safe and positive practices and policies for everyone.

For more information, see the [Social and Emotional Learning and Soft Skills USAID Education Policy Brief](#), USAID’s [SEL in Basic Education How-To Note](#), and USAID’s [Social and Emotional Learning \(SEL\) Systematic Review](#). For considerations during distance learning, see USAID’s [Delivering Distance Learning in Emergencies document](#).

EQUITY, EQUALITY, INCLUSION, AND JUSTICE

The terms equity and equality are conflated; however, the two terms have distinct meanings. Equality is the state of having an equal number of resources and equal access to those resources. Equity takes this a step further and examines how structures and systems of oppression create barriers to those resources, even if there are equal resources. Equity is “a reassessment and redistribution of resources (human, institutional, and financial) in education with the goal of reducing or eliminating systematic inequality in outcomes. In this sense, equity is a path to achieving equality”. In education, it means “every student has access to the resources and educational rigor they need at the right moment in their education, regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, family background, or family income” (Aspen Education and Society Program 2017). This means that for SEL to be equitable, it cannot be as a tool to promote conformity to dominant norms and values (Kaler-Jones 2020).

Used without a critical lens, SEL risks achieving the opposite of what it promises. An example of this would be using SEL as a tool for disciplinary classroom management that discourages learners from expressing their emotions, so they do not disrupt classrooms or workplaces. Instead, SEL programs should encourage learners to name their emotions and develop strategies to express them in healthy ways. To “do no harm,” SEL programs must be based on learner strengths, not remediation. Programs must be context-specific because there is no “one-size-fits-all” model for inclusive SEL.

Additionally, SEL cannot be implemented without examination of the greater sociopolitical context (Simmons 2019). When discussing social awareness, we should recognize that topics like power and privilege perpetuate inequity. We cannot be self-aware if we do not understand how structural and systemic oppression impacts our experiences. Since learners have multiple identities influenced by multiple forms of oppression, *intersectionality* is applicable to SEL. Intersectionality is a necessary framework because it references not only identity, but the “institutions that use identity to exclude and privilege” (Crenshaw 2015). To be in service of equity, SEL provides a foundation for engaging in brave conversations (relationship skills), and self-reflection (self-awareness), and examining privilege and oppression (social awareness) to combat bias and injustice.

SEL is deeply intertwined with understanding our relationships with self, others, and the world. As such, SEL requires systems strengthening strategies. For example, as outlined in section 2.1 in this paper, there must be a conducive environment for SEL to happen. If there are punitive disciplinary practices that promote control and compliance, educational spaces are not conducive to the self-expression, self-exploration, and relationship-building that is required for SEL.

SEL can be a *vehicle* for equity because the development of social and emotional skills leads to environments where children, youth, and adults feel respected, valued, and affirmed in their identities. It can create pathway for understanding multiple perspectives (USAID 2018a), which leads to openness and respect for differences. Equity requires structural shifts, and while SEL alone cannot dismantle structures and systems of oppression, it can be used as a tool to build more inclusive communities and more equitable societies (Simmons 2021).

Justice requires that we dismantle the barriers that cause inequity because everyone deserves the same economic, political, and social rights. Justice means equal rights exist in law, and there is equitable application of, and access to, those rights. More just educational and workplace environments distribute resources and access to those resources, address behaviors that sustain oppression, and incorporate inclusive mindsets, practices, and policies. SEL can be a tool for leveraging relationships and knowledge of self to examine and enact justice and to create more just systems led by community experience.

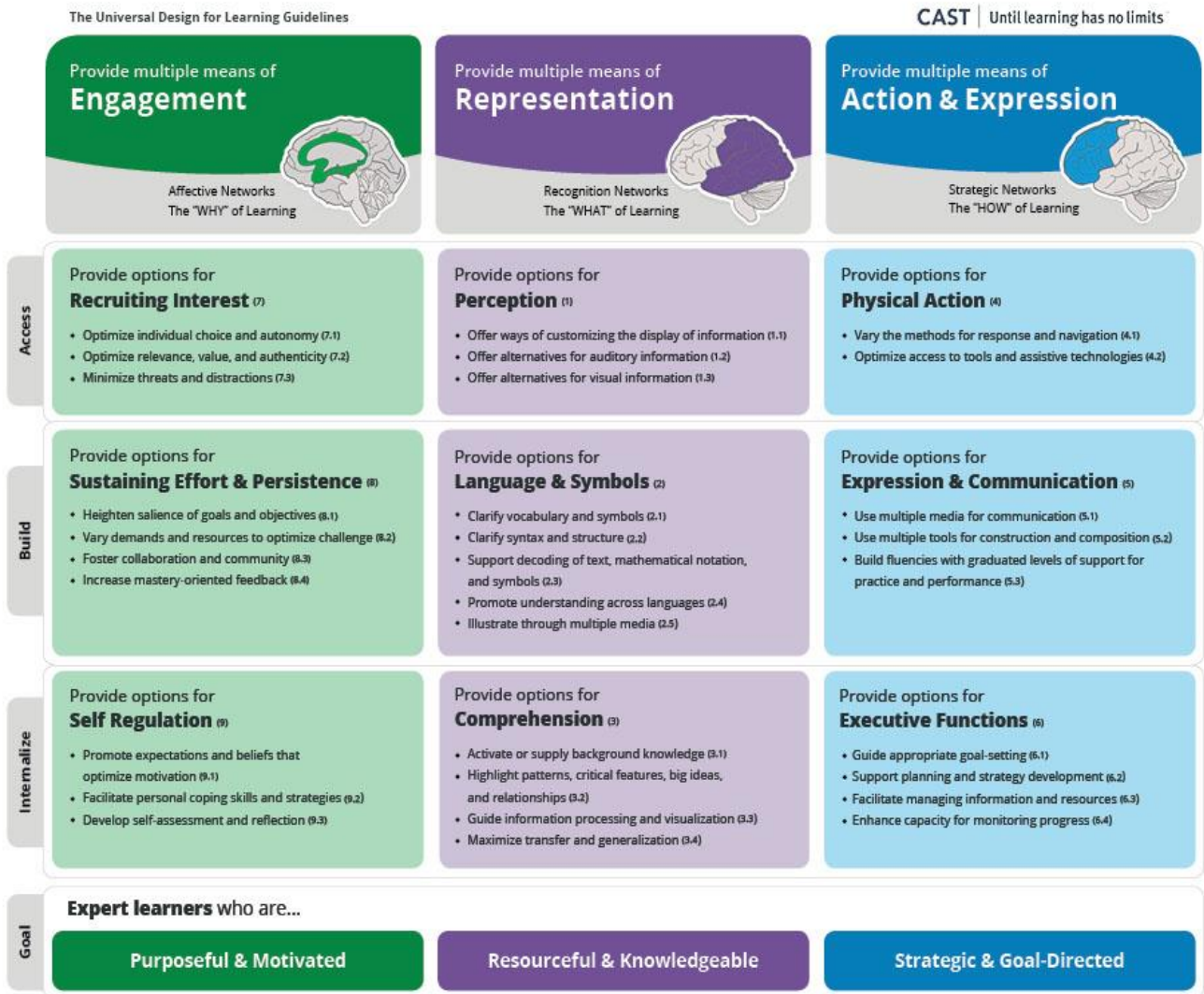
INCLUSION

The road to equity and justice is long and requires long-term investment and commitment. As we continue to work toward equity, education must also be inclusive. Successful inclusion involves using UDL as a foundation. To make SEL more inclusive, stakeholders at various levels of the education system should embrace UDL to make curriculum and pedagogy accessible to all students. UDL is a critical aspect of USAID-funded education programs (Hayes, Turnbull, and Moran 2018).

Based on scientific evidence, the [Center for Applied Technology \(CAST\)](#) developed the UDL framework, [a research-based set of principles](#) that guides the design of learning environments that are accessible and effective for all. It “aims to change the design of the environment rather than to change the learner” (CAST 2021), and research shows that UDL supports academic achievement, motivation, and comprehension (Dalton and Brand 2012). The UDL approach offers flexibility in how learners receive material, engage with content, and express their understanding of the information, and it builds on learners’ strengths. It removes barriers to minimize exclusion in learning, and by giving a variety of options to learners, it reduces stigma by honoring differences. Although UDL introduced the need to vary learning for learners with disabilities, educators now use it to make learning environments accessible and inclusive for all learners who have unique needs.

[The UDL framework involves three major principles: engagement, representation, and action and expression.](#)

Exhibit I. The Universal Design for Learning Guidelines



udlguidelines.cast.org | © CAST, Inc. 2018 | Suggested Citation: CAST (2018). Universal design for learning guidelines version 2.2 [graphic organizer]. Wakefield, MA: Author.

ENGAGEMENT

Engagement provides multiple mechanisms of motivation for learners by giving them options and choices to make the content most relevant to them. This principle involves three guidelines:

- Recruit interest by sparking curiosity for learning
- Sustain effort and persistence in facing challenges
- Self-regulate through harnessing emotions and motivation

An example of the engagement principle is when workforce development program instructors learn what an individual finds to be motivating, whether it be intrinsic or extrinsic, by setting individual and collective goals. Depending on how learners are motivated instructors and youth work collaboratively to develop prompts, reminders, or checklists for tracking goals. In a school setting, this also includes creating opportunities for learners to help co-design classroom activities, goals, and objectives, and be involved in class discussions. The engagement principle emphasizes that there is not one optimal means of engagement for all learners, so providing multiple options is crucial in creating and sustaining inclusive learning environments.

REPRESENTATION

The representation principle means offering information in more than one format to promote understanding. This principle has three guidelines:

- Perception (i.e., flexible content that does not only rely on one sense to communicate or relay information)
- Language and symbols (i.e., modes of communication that offer shared understanding)
- Help learners comprehend by supplying background knowledge and highlighting big ideas

An example of the representation principle in youth workforce development is when coaches or mentors help scaffold the tasks or skills youth are developing. Coaches or mentors could provide this information in a variety of ways, including giving explicit prompts for each step in a sequential process, providing interactive models, or offering constructive feedback on a skill that highlights further areas for growth while also emphasizing strengths. Learners approach content in multiple ways. Providing options for representing and scaffolding the content makes the content comprehensible regardless of how learners best comprehend it.

ACTION AND EXPRESSION

The action and expression principle provides more than one way for learners to show what they have learned. The principle has three guidelines:

- Using various methods of physical action for response
- Using multiple media for communication and expression
- Creating and implementing plans to maximize learning

An example of the action and expression principle in youth workforce development is when youth gain valuable experience by participating in volunteer opportunities to problem solve field-specific challenges

and then feel empowered to act. Seeing their efforts achieve positive change can have a profound and lasting impact on youth. Providing different modalities for expression enables learners to communicate in ways that are comfortable to them and in which they excel.

Together, these principles promote the goal of encouraging learners who are purposeful, motivated, resourceful, knowledgeable, strategic and goal oriented. While social and emotional skills alone cannot solve structural and systemic oppression, they can leverage community-building, build awareness, and provide the skills and strategies necessary to create safe, equitable, and inclusive environments. In alignment with USAID’s Education Policy, equity and inclusion must be a focal point when including social and emotional skill development so that all learners, especially those who are marginalized, have increased access to quality education that is safe, relevant, and promotes social well-being.

CROSSWALK OF SEL AND UDL FOR INCLUSIVE SEL

By using both SEL and UDL frameworks, learning environments become more inclusive places built on strong relationships. The table in [Annex II](#) highlights the alignment between SEL competencies and UDL tenets and provides practical examples to illustrate how they can create more equitable educational opportunities for all learners.

THE INTERSECTIONS OF SEL AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE PROGRAMMING

SEL and inclusive programming in the education sector have intersecting goals and objectives. Outlined in more detail below, SEL and inclusive programming in the education sector involve four overlapping themes:

- Safety as a prerequisite
- Contextualization
- Systems change
- Learner-centered pedagogy and programming

SAFETY

Creating a safe learning environment is a key principle of USAID-funded education programs. Learning environments must be emotionally, physically, psychologically, and intellectually safe. Physical safety addresses learning environment-related violence, marginalization, and bullying. For learners with marginalized identities who may experience identity-based violence, SEL promotes healthy relationships and can help make school spaces safer by increasing opportunities for community-building (USAID 2018a).

Text box 2. Identity-based violence is any act of violence motivated by how a perpetrator understands a victim's identity, for example, race, gender, and/or disability.

SEL builds relationships by deepening empathy and understanding among peers and colleagues of all abilities. It can also be a tool to educate about and instill equity in learning communities. For example, these skills are important for sexual and reproductive health and violence prevention (Gates 2016). The [Gender Equity Movement in Schools](#) used participatory methods to discuss how power dynamics influence gendered experiences. Socialization of, and belief about, gender roles develop early, so creating SEL programs that promote gender equality and equity through disrupting gender stereotypes is critical.

Another example of how SEL can be a tool to transform school spaces is using positive discipline and restorative justice approaches in place of punitive and exclusionary discipline policies (Restorative Practices Working Group 2014). Restorative justice practices resolve and reduce harm by bringing communities together to collaboratively pose solutions. The Indigenous practice of circle-keeping places members of a community in a circle, so that everyone is physically level, and everyone has an opportunity to share. This symbolizes the aim to balance and share power, a key lesson in disrupting larger structures and systems built on power imbalances. Practices like restorative justice help build a more positive school climate and culture through perspective-taking, authentic listening, empathy, and cooperative problem-solving.

[Safe Public Spaces](#) allow youth to gather, engage in activities, and express themselves freely. Without safe spaces, youth may feel vulnerable or intimidated. By providing youth with the space to develop their

skills and assets, build a career, and actively participate in their community, youth can fully realize their potential. For information and evidence on interventions that improve safety, consult Youth Power's [Safe Spaces Brief](#), the Education in Conflict and Crisis Network [Safety Gap Maps](#), or the [Evidence Pathways](#), as well as resources like the International Rescue Committee's [Outcomes and Evidence Framework](#).

Additionally, SEL and inclusive education can create intellectually safe spaces because it enhances accessibility of materials and content, empowering all learners to share their thoughts and opinions and make mistakes without fear of shame. [Tusome Pamoja](#), a five-year early grade reading program in Tanzania, sought to build learners' sense of safety and confidence by training teachers in social classrooms. In social classrooms, learners have opportunities to share their ideas freely and collaborate with classmates. When teachers receive training in the co-creation of social classrooms with supervisors and administrators, they realized that safety is not only about learners being free from the fear of bullying or punishment, but also that they feel safe voicing their needs and ideas.

Mentoring is an important aspect of creating safe workplaces for youth. [Programa Para o Futuro \(PPF\)](#) in Mozambique provided a combination of social support, a positive youth development approach, professional networks, and other adult support to help youth build agency and direction and help them navigate workplace norms and behaviors. Mentoring is crucial as youth build technical and soft skills.

Mentoring is also critical at the higher education level. A case study conducted in Guinea and Sierra Leone showed that women students felt more included in the classroom when women class assistants helped in the grading process (Bott and Ellsberg 2005). Additionally, the women class assistants provided social and emotional support to women students and made them feel more comfortable sharing their perspectives in class and providing them counsel.

Another way inclusive SEL provides a safe, stable learning environment is through the adoption and implementation of accessible routines and structured activities. The [Learning in a Healing Classroom](#) in Sierra Leone, Niger, and Lebanon uses daily mindfulness exercises three times daily to provide a structured practice that learners can also use when they are outside of the physical school building.

SEL alone does not ensure a safe learning environment. However, when implemented with equity at the center, rather than the promotion of conformity, it can be a mechanism that builds and sustains emotionally, psychologically, physically, intellectually safe, equitable, and inclusive spaces.

CONTEXTUALIZATION

With inclusive education and SEL, it is important to note that safety also requires that all educational opportunities are co-created and contextualized to the local environment so that SEL frameworks, pedagogy, and measurement ensure opportunities do no harm. Contextualization is the adaptation of examples and curricula to the local context, and defines skills, frameworks, and conceptualizations of skills are contextually relevant.

Many SEL frameworks are not currently implemented with equity or inclusion at the center, which risks SEL frameworks reinforcing Eurocentric, patriarchal, ableist norms and values. In some cases, SEL is used as a metric of compliance, control, and discipline. For example, using mindfulness and breathing exercises that require all learners to remain still and close their eyes can trigger some learners (Duane et al. 2021). Because mindfulness focuses energy and attention on one task in the present, learners can instead have the option for how to practice mindfulness, such as moving their bodies or creating art. To ensure that mindfulness practices are accessible for learners with disabilities, there should be multiple

options, such as listening to soothing music, holding objects with different textures, or exercises that involve breathing or movement. Mindfulness is a strategy that is also being employed in higher education settings as a way for students to manage stress, navigate adverse situations, and adjust to new environments (Conley 2015). When offered as a strategy with choice, it has shown to improve overall student well-being (Conley 2015).

Text box 3. Ableism is the discrimination and social prejudice against people with disabilities.

Additionally, SEL frameworks that have the [most empirical evidence](#) were designed and implemented for learners in the United States. The skills outlined in SEL frameworks, such as responsible decision-making, are different in various cultures and contexts. Therefore, it is important that Missions and implementing partners are aware of implicit and explicit biases they may bring into the design and implementation of SEL programming. While SEL frameworks emphasize individualistic characteristics, many cultures, and contexts regard collectivist characteristics as most important. As an example, [a study conducted in Tanzania](#) showed that teachers and parents viewed social skills like “respect” as important, while only teachers perceived individual competencies such as “being self-directed” as important.

Educational programming must assess if they have the capacity to support all learners (USAID 2018b). Without intentional universal design, SEL can be inaccessible to marginalized learners, including learners with disabilities (CAST 2018). SEL approaches need to consider multiple means of engagement and expression, while ensuring materials and approaches are accessible for all. As a practical example, some SEL curricula encourage learners to identify their emotions using a graphic chart that illustrates and details various emotions they might be feeling. If the chart is not properly customized or does not have an adaptation for learners with visual disabilities, they may be unable to participate in this activity.

In higher education, teacher training rooted in inclusive SEL can play a key role in teachers feeling supported to create inclusive classrooms and to contextualize SEL.

The [Guiding Principles for Building Soft Skills among Adolescents and Young Adults](#) identifies values and strategies that foster soft skills development among adolescents and young adults, aged 12–29, across different contexts and youth characteristics. There are, for example, creative ways to integrate soft skills learning into schools, families, communities, and potential employers. During the COVID-19 pandemic, workplaces had to adapt to protect the health and safety of employees. In El Salvador, [youth working at INTRADESA](#) used soft skills to adapt production from clothing to protective gear for healthcare workers, while following all healthcare protocols. As workplaces adapt to COVID-19, soft skills development needs to adapt to local demands, healthcare laws, and policies.

The USAID [How-to Note on Integrating SEL in Basic Education Programs](#) offers a validation checklist to understand cultural and contextual relevance in SEL programming. The considerations include age, stage, language, conflict or crisis, ethnicity or tribal group, disability, race, gender, and religion. There is a need for more evidence and programmatic examples that also consider sexual orientation and the role that heterosexism plays in inequitable structures and systems. When designing SEL programs across the education spectrum, this validation checklist serves as a contextualization resource.

LEARNER-CENTERED PEDAGOGY

UDL and SEL advocate for learner-centered curriculum and pedagogy. At its core, learner-centered pedagogy moves from the narrative that learners and youth need fixing, and instead places emphasis on changing systems to meet learners’ needs. In many contexts, learning has been teacher-centered, where

much of the learning takes place with the teacher as a lecturer. In teacher-centered learning, the teacher has full control of the classroom and learners' attention focuses on the teacher. This has been the traditional model of education, but it differs from learner-centered pedagogy, which meets the needs of each classroom and lesson. Learner-centered pedagogy includes learners in classroom decisions like planning, implementation, and assessment. By infusing choice and autonomy in lessons, all learners study more effectively because the curriculum and pedagogy meet their needs and are relevant to their interests and cultures.

Inclusive education develops individual strengths and talents. Asking learners what they enjoy and what their needs are helps them become more self-aware. In adopting learner-centered pedagogy, teachers should receive training and support in its application, as it is often different from their own educational experiences. What is best for the current learner may be different from past teaching practices.

For example, USAID partnered with [Questscope](#), an Amman-based international nongovernmental organization focused on youth social and emotional skills development, and the Ministry of Education in Jordan, to increase access to a 24-month, informal education program. The program used [participatory learning methods](#), which aims to develop relationships between a facilitator and learner through dialogue-based interactions. Learners work with the local community to understand challenges, analyze data, and propose solutions, which leads to stronger critical thinking skills.

Another example is when primary education learners develop SEL skills using children's books to practice perspective-taking and empathy. If a teacher used teacher-centered pedagogy, they might choose a book and read it aloud but not ask questions or provide learners with a book choice. This would not give learners an opportunity to reflect on their interests, share their understanding of the story, or practice their social-emotional skills. But with a learner-centered approach, SEL leverages children's books that discuss a character's emotions or decision-making or through pedagogy, in which a teacher might ask learners questions about a character's emotions and decisions. To make a lesson from a children's book more accessible, educators ask questions empowering students to self-guide their learning:

- Are there options for which books learners select?
- Is the display of information customizable to learners' needs and are there alternatives for visual and audio information?
- Do learners have a choice in how they express what they understood from the lesson?

For example, [All Children Reading Grand Challenge](#) launched a "[Digital Story Time](#)" for children and families that contains Kenyan Sign Language, captions in English and Kiswahili, music, audio narration, and access to online learning materials.

Culturally relevant, culturally responsive, and culturally sustaining pedagogies affirm the cultural identities of learners in curricula and pedagogy. **Culturally relevant** pedagogy is "a theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity, while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate" (Ladson-Billings 1995). Like culturally relevant pedagogy, **culturally responsive** teaching is "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them. It teaches to and through the strengths of these students" (Gay 2010). In other words, this pedagogy responds to students' talents and unique contributions. Curricular materials do not just relate to learners' interests, but they respond to and engage with learners' interests and experiences. **Culturally sustaining pedagogy** "seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural

pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling” (Paris 2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy centers the fluidity of culture. Culture is dynamic and shifts in varied ways. Learners may borrow, adapt, and extend cultural practices by blending what they learn at home, in their communities, with peers, and through other outlets (e.g., online). Culturally sustaining pedagogy honors the past while also encouraging students to explore, shape, and adapt new iterations of culture. Although theorized for educational spaces in the United States, these pedagogies provide a framework for centering learners’ cultures in curricula and pedagogy that are contextualizable to multiple settings. In essence, these pedagogies build on learners’ knowledge and incorporates their cultural practices as central to their learning experience.

Recognizing that access to resources can be a challenge, educators can use pedagogical strategies to build on existing resources. For instance, giving learners more than ten seconds of wait time after they ask a question so every learner can process the question can help, especially for schools and teachers that have limited resources and large classroom sizes (Spencer 2020). This strategy helps learners who may have auditory processing difficulties, while also building all learners’ social and emotional skills by practicing self-management. In youth workforce development, it is a best practice to offer flexible and inclusive training options (ILO 2014). Youth should receive extended training periods and materials that are available in multiple formats. This also requires employers to create environments where youth with disabilities feel confident advocating for themselves.

Text box 4. Auditory processing delays occur when individuals have difficulty hearing sound differences in words.

Inclusive SEL promotes goal setting by creating collective and individualized goal plans. Learners can lead this process by identifying goals and receiving feedback from teachers, mentors, coaches, supervisors, family members, or caregivers. Career centers, such as those in [Morocco](#) and [Egypt](#), train young people in soft skills development, including setting job and career-related goals, and provide them with career mentors and linkages to the private sector. Additionally, these career center services can respond to specific needs of people living with disabilities.

Goal setting is also a part of inclusive education through individual education plans (IEP), which are required by law in the United States if students receive special education services, but they are becoming more common in countries outside of the United States. Through self-understanding, reflection, and feedback, learners and teachers become more self-aware and notice areas of improvement, while also recognizing areas in which they are already excelling.

SYSTEMS CHANGE

Inclusive education and SEL require cultural, structural, and systemic shifts. Implementing SEL alone will not make education and youth workforce development more equitable. For example, placing students with disabilities into mainstream classrooms without shifts in curriculum and pedagogy does not make the classroom or school more inclusive (Chassy and Josa 2018b). Similarly, true SEL cannot happen unless there are structural and systemic adaptations and support. For example, if a school or work training program implements SEL, but then maintains harsh, discriminatory disciplinary policies and practices, it does not give learners the opportunity to practice reflection or empathy by engaging in restorative practices. In this case, SEL without structural and systemic shifts does not create an environment for SEL to happen, resulting in learners who do not feel safe making mistakes or practicing SEL without fear of retaliation or punishment.

The [Positive Youth Development framework](#) emphasizes the importance of enabling environments that develop and support youth’s assets, agency, access to services, and opportunities, while minimizing risks and protecting them. All educational environments—formal and informal—must not only promote SEL, but create environments conducive to SEL.

In SEL and inclusive education, there must be a cultural shift, and educators must regard learners as asset-based, rather than deficit-based. In inclusive education, it means no longer regarding learners with marginalized identities as a problem, but instead, equipping the educational system to meet their needs through the appropriate pedagogy, training, teaching support, and accessible environments (e.g., sign language, Braille, access to communication technologies, etc.). It means learners feel welcome and have the resources necessary to fully participate in the learning process without barriers. Simultaneously, educators, administrators, and the rest of the school community need to develop the knowledge, training, and resources to implement the necessary adaptation and accommodations to minimize learning barriers.

With SEL, educators, administrators, caregivers, policymakers, and donors must understand the value of non-academic skills. Education stakeholders can understand and value social and emotional skills by being aware of the compelling evidence linking social emotional development to other positive educational and behavioral outcomes.

Without structural changes like providing educators with adequate training to create and sustain classroom spaces that are inclusive, any efforts toward inclusion may cause harm. Educators must receive adequate training, development, and ongoing support, and be provided with the necessary training to teach and support learners through differentiated instruction. They should receive access to resources for learners with specific needs, such as speech-to-text and other forms of accessible communication. Educators should receive training in [UDL](#) and be supported in their own social and emotional well-being and development through ongoing training and reflection (Greenberg 2016) because when educators feel equipped and confident in their practices, learners can better understand how to identify and exhibit social and emotional skills. Part of the support for teachers must come from administrators. Administrators and school leaders must share beliefs and strategies that uplift SEL and inclusive education.

In many places, people with disabilities are especially stigmatized (Chassy and Josa 2018a). Supporting them requires creating and sustaining partnerships with local stakeholders, such as families and caregivers, community programs, and faith-based organizations, which help make the education and workplace systems more inclusive and contextually and culturally relevant. Providing parents and communities with resources and tools helps change negative attitudes and stigmas toward identities related to disability, gender, ethnicity, and others (Chassy and Josa 2018a).

[Special Olympics Serbia](#) uses unified sports to break down the stigma around learners with disabilities learners together through play-based activities and inclusive youth leadership. In Serbia, most children and youth with disabilities attend special schools even though inclusion in mainstream schools. The limited interaction contributes to prejudices and stereotypes that youth may hold into adulthood. Part of the Special Olympics model is for youth to develop Youth Activation Committees, which bring youth with and without disabilities together to plan awareness events and activities for the community. Th youth recognize each other’s abilities and in leadership-building opportunities helps them their abilities to the collective success of the team, while also building their personal leadership style.

In Serbia, Special Olympics participants implemented ten, each from a different municipality, and the committees planned 40 initiatives. One of the other principles of unified sports is meaningful involvement. This means youth cannot just be on a team or part of a committee, they must participate, engage, and co-lead the work. Co-curricular activities are also an important part of the learning process. Through the Special Olympics, learners engage in relationship-building, decision-making, and building self-concept, which are linked to breaking down attitude barriers that inhibit disability inclusion principles in everyday educational practices.

MEASUREMENT

National and regional assessments of social and emotional skills and soft skills are still relatively new, having come into use in the past ten years. Much of the current research on SEL fails to include demographic information in program evaluations, which leaves questions about whether learners with disabilities are included in the design, implementation, and evaluation of SEL programs (Daley and McCarthy 2020). This includes learners of different identities, as well. When collecting data, researchers should make sure they recruit people with marginalized identities as interviewers. Also, to ensure disaggregation by identity and intersections of identities, they should include a large sample size and collect data outside of schools and the workplace so that learners not captured in school-based and workplace surveys are included. USAID’s Center for Education suggests tools and approaches to collect data, particularly for learners with disabilities. For more information on best practices in collecting data on learners with disabilities, view the [Best Practices in Generating Data on Learners with Disabilities Brief](#) and [Collecting Data on Disability Prevalence in Education Programs How-to Note](#). For additional resources on equity measures, view the [Equity of Access Indicator Guidance](#).

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

SEL can be a lever for equity when integrated with inclusive education throughout the education spectrum. Together, SEL and inclusive education help better articulate overall equity goals and create more equitable, inclusive, caring, and just communities. This section outlines specific recommendations for donors, policymakers, and implementing partners to facilitate quality integration of equitable SEL.

DONORS AND USAID STAFF

- Fund more activities at the intersection of SEL and inclusive education. To make changes sustainable, grants must be long-term, so that implementing partners can institute policies and practices that center SEL and inclusive education as a norm. Ongoing funding is equally important to measure activity progress and effectiveness over time.
- Fund research and evaluation that looks at key evidence gaps, as much of the evidence on SEL does not explicitly disaggregate data according to learners' identities. Make sure programs are accessible and inclusive for all by examining experiences disaggregated by gender, age, disability, and other identities. This type of data will also help assess if programs are privileging or leaving out learners.
- When funding activities, explicitly name infrastructure-related interventions, such as ramps, accessible water and sanitation facilities, and classroom adjustments during the request for proposals and contract negotiation phases. With this information, implementing partners can identify the necessary funding, staffing, and partners/subcontractors in their consortium to effectively implement structural changes.

POLICYMAKERS

- Engage higher education institutions in activity design, as they work with industry, government, local communities, and global academic communities and can serve as a gateway to international dialogue. Higher education institutions also conduct research that informs policy and practice and can provide teacher training and other technical support.
- Include SEL and anti-bias training as a key component of all teacher training. This would require long-term policy planning, considerations at all levels of the education system (ministry, district, and school), teacher training curricula, and teacher training implementation. Specifically, support educators in their continuous self-reflection on how bias may show up in their practices.
 - Teachers, mentors, and coaches should receive training to identify and reflect on power, privilege, and bias, especially as it relates to social and emotional skills development. Training should incorporate opportunities to examine and understand diverse cultural values and traditions and provide strategies to contextualize social and emotional skills through a student-centered approach. Ongoing coaching support should include practice sessions, classroom observations with low-stakes feedback, and opportunities where teachers can share resources and questions and provide peer support, such as teacher learning circles.

- Policymakers should also support teachers in their use of diverse materials in their classrooms. The Global Book Alliance provides high-quality texts in languages children use and understand.

IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS

Text box 5. Implementing partners can share these strategies with practitioners. Although practitioners are not the focus audience for this document, they might find some of this information helpful.

Implementing partners should consider these factors in project design and implementation:

ADDRESSING ATTITUDES AND STIGMAS

- Programs should be gender and conflict-sensitive, age appropriate, culturally responsive, and use UDL to create more equitable learning environments by supporting individual learning differences.
- Programs should support making learning spaces accessible by creating inclusive environments and addressing attitude barriers, such as stigmas and deficit mindset.
- At the basic education level, teachers, administrators, support staff, and parents and caregivers should receive the necessary training and support accessible and inclusive education. For school leaders in particular, information should be provided for them to serve as champions of SEL and inclusive education and communicate the benefits to educators, parents, and caregivers. Educators and parents and caregivers should also receive ongoing support to develop and practice their own social-emotional skills, because learners look to the adults around them to model these skills. Part of this training and support should involve advocating for cultural shifts that support learners with disabilities so they can fully participate in economic, cultural, and social life.
- At the higher education level, faculty and institutional staff should receive the necessary training and support their learning institutions are inclusive. Faculty and staff should receive training on best practices for meeting the educational needs of all students and creating inclusive environments, including receiving training in UDL and gender- and conflict-sensitive practices. Training and ongoing support should explicitly address bias and discrimination.

Text box 6. Basic education programming refers to a wide spectrum of education programs and activities, from pre-primary through secondary education, delivered in formal or informal settings, to learners in school or out-of-school, including: 1) programs that prepare an individual to be an active, productive member of society and the workforce through providing them with measurable improvements in their literacy, numeracy, or other basic skills development; 2) workforce development, vocational training, and digital literacy programs informed by real market needs and opportunities and that result in measurable improvements in employment; and 2) capacity-building for educators, administrators, counselors, and youth workers that results in measurable improvements in student literacy, numeracy, or employment.

ENVIRONMENTAL

- Implementing partners should create learning environments that provide accessible infrastructure, such as ramps for wheelchairs, signs in large print and braille, accessible

sanitation, water, and hygiene stations, and sufficiently spacious classrooms. Classrooms and workplaces should also include multi-sensory materials so learners can express their knowledge and skills in multiple ways. Making schools and workplaces more accessible creates spaces that are physically, emotionally, and intellectually safe for all learners to develop social and emotional skills.

INSTITUTIONAL

- Honor [“Nothing About Us Without Us,”](#) meaning that learners with and without disabilities should be encouraged to express their thoughts, opinions, and needs and be central to the work to create inclusive schools and workplaces. Institutional shifts toward equity require shifts in power. Engaging learners in the program design and implementation process helps build key social and emotional skills, such as communication, self-advocacy, relationship-building, and collaboration.

COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION BARRIERS

- Environments should strive to be rich in sign and spoken languages. Materials (e.g., books or workplace documents) should be accessible and available in a variety of formats. View the [UDL Help All Children Read Disabilities Toolkit](#) training for more information on use of evidence-based practices and strategies that increase accessibility.

RESOURCES

USAID POLICIES AND STRATEGIES

- [2018 USAID Education Policy](#)
- [USAID Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Strategy](#)

SEL RESOURCES

- [SEL How-to Note](#)
- [Integration of Social Emotional Learning into Basic Education: Findings from Eight Case Studies](#)
- [Best Practices on Effective SEL/Soft Skills Interventions in Distance Learning](#)

DISABILITY INCLUSION RESOURCES

- [UDL Toolkit](#)
- [Disability Inclusive Education Toolkit](#)
- [Disability Inclusive Development Brief](#)
- [Inclusive Practices: Collaborating with People Who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing](#)
- [Making Youth Programs Accessible for Youth with Disabilities Starter Kit](#)

GIRLS' EDUCATION RESOURCES

- [Mind the Gap: The State of Girls' Education in Crisis and Conflict](#)
- [Pathways to Inclusive Education for Girls with Disabilities](#)

LGBTQI+ RESOURCES

- [Integrating LGBTQI+ Considerations into Education Programming](#)

MEASUREMENT RESOURCES

- [Measuring Equity in Education](#)
- [Handbook on Measuring Equity in Education](#)
- [Toolkit for Assessing and Promoting Equity in the Classroom](#)
- [USAID Education Disability Measurement Toolkit](#)

ANNEX I: PROMISING PRACTICES – DISABILITY INCLUSION CASE STUDIES

In this section, we provide promising practices from case studies in Egypt, Rwanda, and Mali in higher education, youth workforce development, and foundational skills development, respectively. USAID identified these three activities as strong in SEL and soft skills delivery and inclusive for and with learners with disabilities. The case studies show how SEL and soft skills development are adapted for different populations and contexts. In particular, the case studies offer examples of how activities are designing and implementing SEL and soft skills programming that center learners with disabilities.

CASE STUDY I: HIGHER EDUCATION

Implementers: The American University in Cairo	Location: Egypt
Target Group(s): Higher education students	SEL Domains/Skills Targeted: Relationship skills, decision-making, and self-management
<p>Description: The USAID Scholars program provides scholarships for underserved Egyptian students. The program’s intentional design ensured that 10–15 percent of enrolled students have disabilities. Students receive scholarships to attend one of five Egyptian public universities or two private universities to study agriculture, commerce, economics, computer science, and other fields. In addition to providing scholarships, the program supports students’ well-being, leadership, communication, and skills development training, entrepreneurship training, and job coaching. Around 65 percent of scholarship recipients receive an opportunity to study abroad in the United States for a semester or summer term. Students’ caregivers and parents also receive communication from the program to ensure students have holistic support. This program requires each university to nominate an on-campus coordinator who advocates for the needs of students with disabilities.</p> <p>In addition, USAID, in partnership with the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, established 18 sustainable career development centers at 11 public universities across Egypt. By the completion date in 2025, the activity will have established 30 centers at 22 public universities. The University Centers for Career Development have specialized support for students with disabilities.</p>	
<p>Evidence and Impact: The USAID Scholars program started in 2020 and will continue through 2030. The expected SEL results are improved decision-making and communication skills for students and that students are better prepared for employment through relationship-building skills and increased self-confidence through hands-on learning experiences. Since the program is still in the preliminary stages of implementation, currently there is no impact evidence to report; however, it can serve as a useful model.</p> <p>As of August 2021, the University Centers for Career Development has created 18 centers at 11 public universities in Egypt. Over 240,000 students benefited from the centers, and to serve students with disabilities more effectively, at least 70 staff members received training in disability equality. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the centers were transitioned to an online format. Since moving their services online in April 2020, they served over 97,000 students.</p>	
<p>References:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • USAID Scholars • Egypt Higher Education Initiative • Advancing Development Goals Workforce Development • Egypt Higher Education Career Center Development 	

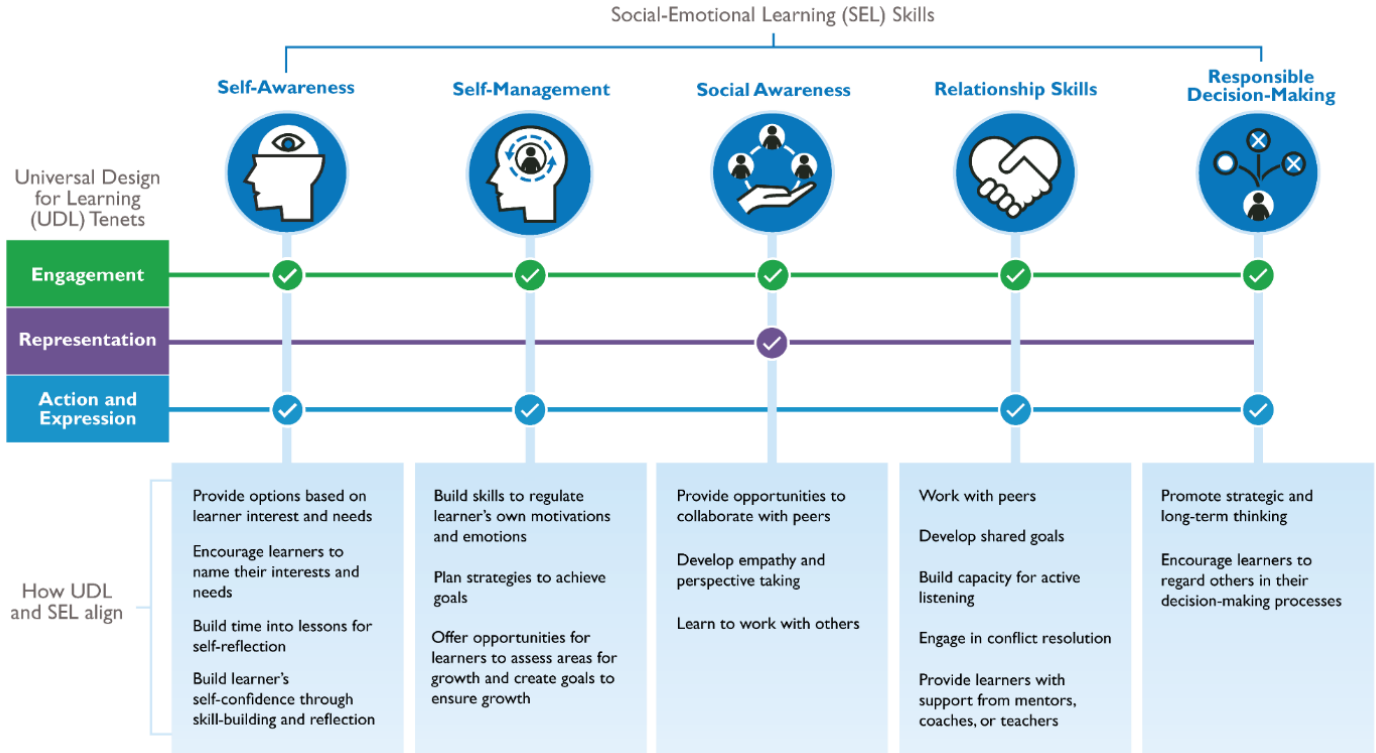
CASE STUDY 2: YOUTH WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

<p>Implementers: Education Development Center (EDC), Umbrella of Organizations of People with Disabilities in the Fight against HIV and AIDS in Health Promotion (UPHLS), Akazi Kanoze Access (AKA), Rwanda Union of the Blind (RUB), Rwanda National Union of the Deaf (RNUD), and UWEZO Youth Empowerment</p>	<p>Locations: Rwanda</p>
<p>Target Groups: Youth with disabilities</p>	<p>SEL Domains/Skills Targeted: Social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and decision-making</p>
<p>Description: The Umurimo Kuri Bose (UKB)/Employment for All activity offers Rwandan youth, particularly youth with disabilities, opportunities to work together to learn workplace skills, save money, and invest. The activity provides opportunities for youth to participate in Braille or sign language training, and all youth participate in resiliency and human rights training. Resiliency training provides youth with the tools to develop coping skills, overcome challenges, make healthy choices, and become more confident. The human rights training helps youth understand human rights protections and advocate for those rights in their own lives. UKB guides youth through setting short and long-term goals to create and implement their own personal development plans. Youth visit various workplaces, interview with different employers, and shadow employees to learn more about each workplace and distinct roles within the workplaces. Youth are placed at internship sites to receive direct work experience. UKB collaborates with employers to ensure their workplaces are more inclusive for youth with disabilities. For example, employers receive sign language training.</p>	
<p>Evidence and Impact:</p> <p>UKB aims to support the employment of 1,560 youth, of which 1,200 have disabilities. The program launched in December 2020, and the activity will continue for two years. Since the program is still in its initial stages of implementation, currently there is no impact evidence to report; however, it can serve as a useful case study to continue to follow.</p>	
<p>References:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • USAID Launches Umurimo Kuri Bose to Promote an Inclusive Environment for Youth with Disabilities for Employment • Making It Happen - One Year Later EDC Blog • Zero Project Conference 2021: USAID Partner Session on Employing and Empowering Youth with Disabilities 	

CASE STUDY 3: PRIMARY EDUCATION

<p>Implementers: Humanity & Inclusion UK</p>	<p>Location: Mali</p>
<p>Target Group(s): Primary education students</p>	<p>SEL Domains/Skills Targeted: Self-awareness, emotion regulation, social awareness, relationship-building</p>
<p>Description: The Reactivating Inclusive Education in Timbuktu (LIRE) activity in Mali offered positive education practices in northern classrooms to improve learners’ well-being and psychosocial skills, particularly empathy, emotion regulation, cooperation, confidence, and conflict resolution. Through this activity, teachers collaborated with trainers to learn sign language. Teachers also received training in the positive education approach and were assistance by itinerant teachers, who supported teachers and learners. The project provided learners with desks adapted to their size and a mobile blackboard that moved around the classroom. Parents and caregivers also received training to learn sign language.</p>	
<p>Evidence and Impact:</p> <p>In one study, researchers surveyed 1,224 children in Peace, Barize, and Alpha Saloum schools about a wide range of social and emotional skills and well-being indicators, including confidence in oneself and toward teachers, empathy, capacity for conflict resolution, politeness, cooperation, altruism, sociability, emotional regulation, and anxiety at school. Using pre- and post-interviews after four weeks for the first group of learners and after five months for a second group of learners, the study revealed that learners improved in several areas in the second group: empathy, the regulation of emotions, academic satisfaction, sadness management, anger management, self-confidence, and conflict resolution. The study findings also emphasized the need for continuous development, recognizing that there were stronger results for the second group of learners, who engaged in the positive education approach longer than the first group of learners.</p>	
<p>References:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mali Humanity & Inclusion 	

ANNEX II: SEL AND UDL CROSSWALK



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[Universal Design for Learning](#) is a framework to improve and optimize teaching and learning for all people based on scientific insights into how humans learn. The three main principles of UDL include multiple means of engagement, multiple means of representation, and multiple means of expression and action.