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# LITERACY ACHIEVEMENT AND RETENTION ACTIVITY (LARA) UGANDA

## ACTIVITY BACKGROUND

Implemented by RTI International and World Vision in close partnership with the Government of Uganda, USAID's Literacy Achievement and Retention Activity (LARA) project (2015-2021) aims to improve early grade reading and retention among 1.3 million students by 1) strengthening capacity to deliver early grade reading in three local languages and English; and 2) building a positive and supportive school climate by reducing school-related gender-based violence (SRBGV). Social and emotional learning (SEL) is explicitly embedded in LARA's theory of change which posits that reduced incidence of SRBGV leads to improved school retention and learning, which prepares children for continued academic achievement and better life outcomes.

## KEY FINDINGS

### DESIGN AND CONTEXTUALIZATION

LARA's theory of change (TOC) has an explicit focus on Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and is two-fold. The TOC hypothesizes that *first*, students' academic and social development is positively impacted if there is a favorable and supportive school climate where teachers deliver quality instructions; and *second*, student retention in primary grades and learning outcomes are higher in schools that mandate a zero SRBGV tolerance policy.<sup>2</sup> LARA's assumption is that with strengthened social awareness and self-confidence fostered through weekly Uganda Kids Unite activities and a positive learning environment, students will be better equipped to avoid violence in and around school, report violence as bystanders or survivors, and seek help from trusted and caring adults when needed. Moreover, students will be better able to enjoy and fully engage in learning if there is less fear of humiliation and punishment.

### BEST PRACTICES

- Based on the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework, SEL competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making were contextualized and integrated across program activities.
- Journeys Handbook for Pupils is a critical tool for teachers - it helps them conceptualize life skills in a more concrete manner, facilitate discussions on SRBGV, and try to improve school climate.
- LARA implemented a lesson-based Journeys Handbook for Pupils to enhance students' sense of agency to discuss, avoid, report, and seek assistance for all forms of SRBGV including bullying, psychological intimidation, corporal punishment and sexual violence. Although the implementation of activities in this handbook was inconsistent and incomplete, the activities were well received when they took place.
- LARA has a robust monitoring and evaluation system that uses various instruments to periodically collect and triangulate data on program performance and impacts.
- Strategic stakeholder engagement was critical for program implementation. LARA has received government buy-in and community support and Journeys is now a mandatory extracurricular program<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Information provided by LARA key informant.

<sup>2</sup> USAID | Uganda Literacy Achievement and Retention Activity (LARA). Activity Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Plan (AMELP). Revised Version: February 26, 2016.

*“When you look at our theory of change, you realize that SEL forms a very important role when it comes to creating a positive school environment that is violence free. Because if children have a voice, they're able to challenge, they're able to report violence perpetrated against them and their peers, then violence will reduce in the schools. And if violence is reduced in the schools, then children will enjoy school. They will stay in school throughout the primary cycle. They will participate in classwork, without fear of humiliation and punishment.” – Monitoring Evaluation Director*

Grounded in a positive interdependency of stakeholders, a multi-pronged approach was conceptualized to meet LARA's second objective of improving children's retention, participation and perseverance in primary schools. This includes sensitizing teachers, students and school management committees about SRGBV recognition, prevention and response using the Journeys training manuals developed by program staff, as well as supporting community engagement efforts that promote positive attitudes and beliefs toward gender equality and balanced power relations. Using the Journeys for Teachers Handbook, teachers are trained to detect early signs of bullying to promote a safe and inclusive learning environment for all students, regardless of their gender, disability status and physical appearance. Moreover, although the school is central to achieving the desired outcomes, the results framework also includes parent engagement and community mobilization as key entry points. These stakeholders are purposely selected to ensure the presence of an enabling academic environment where students feel safe, cared for and respected by their teachers and peers, and have proper mechanisms to report acts of SRGBV. The Journeys for Community Handbook serves as a tool to facilitate community level discussions and activities that enable individuals to recognize gender stereotypes and different forms of violence, respond to SRGBV using reporting mechanisms, as well as work collaboratively with school staff to design and implement prevention measures.

Guided by the CASEL framework, SEL concepts were contextualized to align with local perceptions of agency, teacher-student relations, and parent-child communication among others. Through extensive pilot and cognitive testing, SRGBV frameworks and activities were adapted to the Uganda context where there is high incidence of bullying, corporal punishment and sexual harassment.

*“Uganda is a culture rich country. If you don't approach it from the context of Uganda, you are likely to find a lot of resistance and the uptake would quite be low. So borrowing from the CASEL model, we had to see how it really works within the Ugandan context. We had consultations to inform the choice of themes and see how to approach them to create a safe and positive learning environment.”*

*– SRGBV Component Lead*

## **IMPLEMENTATION AND MEASUREMENT**

LARA has been implemented in 31 districts across Uganda using a phased approach in close collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES). Schools were randomly assigned to the treatment and comparison groups, with the former receiving interventions on reading instruction and SRGBV prevention. Change agents were selected based on their status in school, and their ability to mobilize school staff and regularly facilitate discussions on creating a safe and supportive school environment. Headmasters were given ownership of the program because school teachers were more likely to follow the curriculum under their direction. The training program for teachers was modified shortly after implementation once program staff realized that LARA did not take into consideration teachers' SEL competencies and their perceptions of gender norms and violence, which influence program delivery. LARA also collaborated with and through existing government structures and policies to facilitate cooperation among students, teachers, parents and community members to achieve program objectives.

*“If the headmaster supports it, then the teachers will implement it. When the parents see the head teachers or the teachers talking to them about the benefits of it, they will also be motivated to implement. So, in our thinking, everybody can actually be an advocate as long as he or she understands the logic behind it. The critic today can be an advocate tomorrow.” – SRGBV Component Lead*

LARA undertook a mixed-methods, longitudinal measurement approach to track results and adapt implementation to improve performance. Indicators that measure changes in SRGBV outcomes over time were purposefully developed to align with existing systems, including the MoES National Strategy and Action Plan on Violence Against Children in Schools. Both individual and school-level data have been collected using various instruments, including training attendance registers, classroom observation forms, school and community checklist to monitor school climate improvement and SRGBV prevention initiatives, qualitative interviews, and surveys on adult attitudes about gender equality and student perceptions of school climate and SRGBV.

Findings from RTI’s<sup>3</sup> indicate that, after three years of implementation, students in the treatment group demonstrated improved SEL competencies such as increased cooperation among peers, compassion, expression of ideas and trusting relationship with teachers. Teachers felt they were more approachable, friendly and understanding which led to improved student-teacher relations. Significantly more treatment schools than those in the comparison arm recorded a decline in corporal punishment, suggesting that exposure to the Journeys handbook had a positive impact on teachers. However, boys reported a higher prevalence of sexual violence, whereas girls experienced higher rates of bullying than their male peers. Finally, although school staff demonstrated more gender equitable attitudes, the majority of pupils in the treatment group had unfavorable perceptions as earlier.

*“Where our boys come from, the culture promotes more of boys than girls. The culture teaches girls to be more submissive than boys. And these are the gender stereotypes and social norms that we are trying to remedy. To show them that apart from their biological traits - boys and girls are all children. They deserve the same equality and same chances. But the generational reinforcement by the parents, by the society that you are a girl, you are a boy is a prominent challenge.” – SRGBV Component Lead*

In addition, NORC at University of Chicago was contracted by USAID to conduct independent performance and impact evaluations of LARA. Consistent with RTI’s findings, the impact evaluation after three school years of program implementation indicates that students held more gender inequitable attitudes than teachers and caregivers, and that Journeys handbook fostered better communication between teachers and caregivers about learner safety.<sup>4</sup> The evaluation also found that students continue to feel particularly unsafe at certain locations in and around the school compound, including latrines which are typically dirty, lack privacy and increase risk of sexual assault, the school perimeter where strangers usually lurk, and the journey to and from school. Contrary to RTI findings and despite the role of SEL in LARA’s theory of change, NORC’s external evaluation found that SEL activities did not improve student retention, attendance or academic performance after three years of implementation. Moreover, there was no significant decrease in school violence or in the use of violent disciplinary methods by the teachers. Although teachers perceive corporal punishment as an ineffective disciplinary method, evidence indicates that a large percentage continue to use it.

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<sup>3</sup> RTI. Uganda School-Related Gender-Based Violence Longitudinal Study – Occasion 2 Report. March 25, 2020

<sup>4</sup> NORC. Uganda Literacy Achievement and Retention Activity (LARA). Midterm Impact and Final Performance Evaluation Report. June 2020.

## LIMITATIONS

There are several factors which hindered implementation of LARA's SRGBV component. *First*, many teachers received only English versions of the Journeys handbook and therefore, found it challenging to implement the activities outlined in the handbook.

*Second*, the LARA SRGBV and SEL component was an extracurricular activity that took place outside school hours. Teachers' regular workload and insufficient training compromised their ability to effectively cover all topics in the handbook, which led to missing and skipping content. Given the time and resource constraints, teachers were also more likely to prioritize curricular activities over SEL activities because curricular activities are scheduled during school time and schools are rated based on students' academic outcomes.

*Third*, change agents have been unable to fully engage parents as part of the LARA community outreach efforts. It was especially difficult to engage men who perceived child care and education as women's responsibility. Program staff also encountered resistance from teachers who had deep seated cultural beliefs and gender stereotypes that conflicted with new teaching instructions.

*"But in the schools, there are some teachers who do not believe in this approach. They think it is additional work for them and take it as an optional activity in the school. They think that they should only concentrate on academic work for which they are paid. They want to concentrate on academics because schools are rated based on academics. In one of the districts, a big number of teachers did not embrace the program and they did not want it to be implemented in their schools. But we have continued to engage them."* – Monitoring Evaluation Director