Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 expands the definition of quality education to foster “flexible skills and competencies that prepare learners for diverse challenges.” Indeed, social and emotional skills have emerged as core behavior-related skills necessary for children and youth’s learning and healthy development, and subsequently, social and emotional learning (SEL) has gained substantial attention as the “missing piece” in academic success, interpersonal development, and life success (Durlak et al., 2011; Elias et al., 1997; Jones et al., 2017a).

While there is no consistent or cross-national definition of SEL and its related terms (e.g. life skills, 21st-century skills, and non-academic skills), USAID defines social and emotional skills as 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 emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.” The term “social and emotional skills” is used in the context of both, formal or non-formal education programming, across all levels of the education system.

Given the potential impacts of SEL on children’s learning and well-being, the 2018 USAID Education Policy identifies social and emotional skills as a crucial learning outcome alongside academic outcomes for learners from pre-primary through higher education. To build evidence of SEL integration in low-income and crisis-affected settings, USAID commissioned NORC at the University of Chicago to conduct a series of eight case studies on SEL in USAID-supported basic education and youth programs across seven countries (Table 1). NORC’s cross-country case study research on SEL utilizes a comprehensive document analysis and semi-structured interviews with USAID staff and implementing partners to draw good practices and lessons learned in integrating SEL into program design, implementation, and measurement. The full report can be found here: Integration of Social and Emotional Learning into Basic Education Programming: Findings from Eight Case Studies. Links to the individual case study reports can be found in Table I. The purpose of this Brief is to present a summary of the 12 key research findings from this research on good practices for SEL design, contextualization, implementation, and monitoring.

2 The definition of SEL comes from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), which is being used by USAID (2019). For additional background information on SEL/soft skills, please refer to the USAID 2019 Education Policy Brief.
3 See additional details on related terminology and USAID’s approaches in USAID (2019).
RESEARCH METHODS

The study began by selecting nine current or completed USAID activities in which social and emotional skills were integrated into school-based and/or youth workforce development interventions (Table 1). While the Quality Instruction Towards Access and Basic Education Improvement (QITABI/Lebanon) activity and its follow-up activity, QITABI 2/Lebanon, were considered to be one case study in USAID’s initial selection, from the SEL programming standpoint, the two activities are substantially distinct and are therefore treated as separate activities.

**Table 1. Summary of Case Study Activities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Level of Education</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>Implementing Partners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Asegurando la Educación (ALE)</strong></td>
<td>Honduras</td>
<td>2017–2022</td>
<td>Primary and secondary (grades 4–9)</td>
<td>Crisis-affected</td>
<td>Formal</td>
<td>DAI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Empleando Futuros (EF)</strong></td>
<td>Honduras</td>
<td>2016–2021</td>
<td>Secondary and YWD (ages 16 to young adults)</td>
<td>Crisis-affected</td>
<td>Non-formal</td>
<td>Banyan Global</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Literacy Achievement and Retention Activity (LARA)</strong></td>
<td>Uganda</td>
<td>2015–2021</td>
<td>Primary (grades 3–7)</td>
<td>Stable, low-income</td>
<td>Formal</td>
<td>RTI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Pakistan Reading Project (PRP)</strong></td>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>2013–2020</td>
<td>Primary (grades 1 and 2)</td>
<td>Conflict-affected</td>
<td>Formal</td>
<td>International Rescue Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Quality Instruction Towards Access and Basic Education Improvement (QITABI)</strong></td>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>2014–2020</td>
<td>Primary (grades 1–4)</td>
<td>Crisis-affected</td>
<td>Formal</td>
<td>World Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Quality Instruction Towards Access and Basic Education Improvement, QITABI 2</strong></td>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>2019–2024</td>
<td>Primary (grades 1–6)</td>
<td>Crisis-affected</td>
<td>Formal</td>
<td>World Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Early Childhood Development Mass Activity (Sisimpur)</strong></td>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>2017–2021</td>
<td>Pre-primary and primary (ages 3–8)</td>
<td>Stable and Crisis-affected</td>
<td>Non-formal</td>
<td>Sesame Workshop Bangladesh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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4 “Conflict-affected” describes a country, region, or community that has experienced armed conflict and/or recently terminated armed conflict, or has been indirectly affected by conflict due to population displacement, reallocation of government resources, or diminished capacity. “Crisis-affected” describes a country, region, or community that is experiencing or recently experienced a crisis or been indirectly affected by a crisis. Crises include natural hazards, health epidemics, lawlessness, endemic crime and violence, and climate vulnerabilities (USAID, 2018).

5 “Formal” education are learning opportunities provided in a system of schools, colleges, and universities and other educational institutions. “Non-formal” education takes place both within and outside educational institutions and caters to people of all ages. Non-formal education programs are characterized by their variety, flexibility, and ability to respond quickly to new educational needs of children or adults. (USAID, 2018; INEE, 2010).

6 While the Quality Instruction Towards Access and Basic Education Improvement (QITABI/Lebanon) activity and its follow-up activity (QITABI 2/Lebanon) were considered to be one case in USAID’s initial selection, from the SEL programming standpoint, the two activities are substantially distinct and are therefore treated as separate activities.
KEY FINDINGS

SEL DESIGN PHASE

Key Finding #1: Agreeing on context-appropriate SEL terminology and SEL skills definition with in-country stakeholders facilitates effective SEL implementation.

Considering most SEL concepts and frameworks have been developed and researched in high-income countries (HIC)s, programs should pre-empt challenges and facilitate the effective implementation of SEL interventions by having an agreed-upon preferred terminology and definition of SEL, as well as specific competence areas and skills among local stakeholders in a specific country context. Local stakeholders include government officials, teachers, principals or head teachers, community leaders, child education experts, child psychologists, technical and vocational training agency officials, and private-sector representatives. For activities where social and emotional skills were clearly defined, key informants had a strong understanding of SEL and often referred to the SEL framework used in the activity.

Key Finding #2: Incorporating the role of SEL into a theory of change based on identified needs is critical to ensuring a consistent understanding and vision of SEL across stakeholders.

The majority of activities directly referred to social and emotional skills as a means to achieve other outcomes in the theory of change, such as reading skills, employability, and/or reduced school-level violence. When activities based such outcomes on specific SEL needs of the school and community, key informants had a more consistent understanding of SEL’s role in a theory of change. The specific needs were identified from needs assessments (ALE/Honduras and ECR/Nigeria) or evaluation findings of a predecessor activity (MYDev/Philippines and QITABI 2/Lebanon). For example, based on findings from a school safety needs assessment, the ALE/Honduras team included SEL in the activity’s theory of change to provide young learners with tools to analyze their feelings, regulate emotions, and ultimately improve school retention and safety.

“Social-emotional learning was included because, through a school safety study that we did at our target educational institutions, we saw that the target population had many socio-affective issues: youth with low self-esteem, youth who found no meaning in life, youth who have no clear goals, and many social-emotional, socio-affective-related conflicts and problems. So, we saw that to be able to improve school safety, not only should we improve the operator’s physical and safety conditions, but [we] also needed to address the emotional issues of each of the students, which would obviously allow for continuity, would make them stay at the educational institutions.” – Activity Staff, ALE, Honduras
SEL CONTEXTUALIZATION

Contextualization of SEL in the nine activities was analyzed based on the following:

- Contextualization of SEL competence areas and skills.
- Contextualization of SEL teaching and learning content.

Key Finding #3: Contextualizing competence areas and skills through a ground-up approach helps lay the groundwork for stronger SEL institutionalization.

For most activities, contextualization of SEL occurred after global SEL frameworks and competence areas were adopted (i.e. at the skills level). Exceptionally, QITABI 2/Lebanon undertook a comprehensive contextualization process, developing a draft national SEL framework with locally driven competence areas and skills (labeled as skill areas in QITABI 2) at the onset of the activity design. Facilitated by the activity team and its international resource partners, Lebanese national education authorities led the year-long, multi-step process to systematically identify locally-prioritized competence areas and skills across various SEL-related frameworks in use. The national education authorities believed this process was crucial in harmonizing and standardizing formal and non-formal SEL interventions to promote consistent outcomes. The team is now undertaking the critical last step of finalizing the draft national SEL framework through a qualitative research study where teachers, principals, students, parents, and policymakers are asked to validate the prioritized SEL competence areas and skills.

Key Finding #4: Contextualizing social and emotional skills through national curriculum mapping is effective at enhancing cultural and contextual relevance of SEL.

When it is not feasible to develop a locally driven SEL framework with unique competence areas and skills, harmonizing a global SEL framework with a country’s education curricula is an effective method of contextualization. For example, LARA/Uganda adopted Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)’s SEL framework, and then compared each lesson from the activity curricula to specific skills defined in the Ugandan national life skills curriculum to better contextualize and prioritize social and emotional skills.

Key Finding #5: Contextualizing SEL content through rigorous pilot testing with learners and educators is critical to design effective SEL interventions.

A rigorous pilot testing with learners and educators of SEL teaching and learning content, including SEL curricula and lesson plans, teacher training modules, mass media content, and supplementary reading materials, enables the development of culturally and contextually relevant SEL interventions. For example, Sisimpur/Bangladesh first contextualized Sesame Workshop’s global curriculum by prioritizing social and emotional skills that align with important local issues such as child labor, child trafficking, and child marriage. Before broadcasting TV show content and distributing supplementary reading materials, the Sisimpur team conducted several formative assessments with learners, teachers, and parents to gauge whether the newly developed TV episode segments and storybook content were culturally appropriate and effective in communicating the desired SEL messages.

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1 The report uses “competence area” as a domain, cluster, and categories of interrelated social and emotional skills or constructs. As such, the term represents a higher-order, aggregated concept than individual “skills,” following CASEL’s use of the term in its recently updated SEL framework (CASEL, 2020).
SEL FOR EQUITY AND INCLUSION

Key Finding #6: Equity and inclusion can be advanced through SEL interventions by building learners’ agency and fostering an inclusive school climate.

ALE/Honduras and LARA/Uganda used SEL interventions to promote an equitable and inclusive school and community environment. ALE/Honduras focused on advancing inclusion through teaching skills such as tolerance, acceptance, social awareness, and empathy. The activity team used the SEL modules to raise awareness about and foster an inclusive school environment for students from diverse backgrounds, including the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersex (LGBTI) community, segregated Afro-Caribbean and Miskito ethnic minority communities, youth from gang-associated families and high-crime communities, as well as youth with disabilities. LARA/Uganda focused on uplifting student voice and agency to challenge schools’ and communities’ existing inequities and violence, such as corporal punishment, sexual harassment, bullying, gender stereotypes, and gender norms.

“So, one of the reasons we have an intervention for early warning signs is to look out for signs that a learner could be under distress to help make sure that teachers emphasize inclusiveness and that all children achieve the same goal of learning. Girls, boys, physically handicapped, sight impairment, hearing impairment, whatever the difference is, they’re all children. And they must feel comfortable and safe when they are at school or in classroom or in the community. So, that was our approach to equity. It goes beyond gender. It goes beyond the visible aspects to even the invisible ones.”

— Activity Staff, LARA, Uganda
Key Finding #7: Integrating SEL using multiple approaches and beyond the classroom context is effective in achieving positive outcomes.

Activities that integrate SEL using multiple approaches through various entry points⁸ were considered more effective. Key informants perceived explicit SEL skills instruction⁹ as more effective than those that only improved teacher instructional practices and provided SEL-themed reading materials. While still early in the implementation phase, QITABI 2/Lebanon demonstrates an effective approach, using multiple entry points within the Lebanese education system to integrate SEL. Building on the success of using the school climate as an entry point, explicit SEL skills instruction will be introduced during morning meetings and reinforced throughout the day, allowing further practice in Arabic, English, French, and math lessons. Teachers and principals will be trained and Parent Learning Circles (PLCs) will be expanded. The core SEL framework is expected to be endorsed nationally and the Lebanese education authorities will further develop it into national SEL teacher training modules, curriculum, and measurement tools.

“...The approach we’ve used is an ecosystem approach, all informed by the national SEL framework we are currently finalizing. Our approach is to integrate social and emotional learning across the subjects, so that teachers are trained on how to integrate SEL. Our team also mapped the curriculum by subject, by objective, by grade level. Then, we are developing some basic activities as a resource for teachers, so that teachers can use if a certain circumstance arise. Parallel to that, we are working with the principals so that principals can measure how SEL friendly their schools are, and to support them in how to devise plans to improve the environment. We are also working with parents on the Parent Learning Circles to ensure that we empower parents to support their kids’ learning in social and emotional skills.” – Activity Staff, QITABI 2, Lebanon

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**SEL IMPLEMENTATION**

The report categorizes the following six approaches in promoting and integrating SEL into activities:

1) Explicit SEL skills instruction
2) Integration with school curriculum areas
3) Educator instructional practices
4) School climate and culture strategy
5) Partnership across family-school-community contexts
6) Policy adoption by national institutions

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⁸For additional information on SEL entry points, please refer to Section 6.5 of USAID’s How to Integrate SEL in USAID Basic Education Programs.

⁹“Explicit SEL skills instruction” is defined as having clear and specific learning objectives and specifically targeted skills over general ones (Durlak et al., 2011). Typically, an activity using this approach provides learners with structured and sequential lesson plans or training modules that include explicit instruction in social and emotional skills or soft skills. Sometimes teachers provide explicit SEL skills instruction through comprehensive and stand-alone SEL lessons as a part of the regular school day. Another approach of explicit SEL skills instructions includes a “Kernels approach,” through which teachers promote brief, targeted SEL strategies for specific behaviors throughout the day.
Key Finding #8: Ensuring partnership with stakeholders across all levels of the education and related system, as well as local communities, is critical in strengthening sustainability of SEL interventions.

To ensure the sustainability of SEL interventions, it is important to build partnerships with stakeholders across all levels of the education and related systems, including local community levels. MYDev/Philippines developed a strong sustainability plan across all levels of the education and related system which proved to be effective. The activity established strong relationships with local Filipino NGOs and small-scale vocational training organizations as implementing partners throughout the course of the activity, which enabled these local organizations to build their capacity and implement other similar interventions. MYDev also successfully built youth-led networks, such as Youth Development Alliances, to sustain improved civic engagement skills and aspirations among youth. Finally, based on its positive impact through the first year, MYDev’s life skills training module was adopted by two crucial national education entities (the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority and the Department of Education’s Alternative Learning System) which resulted in national-level institutionalization of the curriculum.

“One element that MYDev really put forward that we are using in other countries now is that we recognize that the existing youth voice groups were not representative of the marginalized out-of-school youth population. So, we worked with the local authorities, the communities, and the youth themselves to create youth development alliances where youth were elected and sat with different stakeholders including the private sector and municipality representatives in really trouble-shooting and understanding the situation of out-of-school youth and how we can continue improving the different elements of the MYDev components. This was facilitated by youth development coordinators coming from the communities themselves.”

– Activity Staff, MYDev, Philippines
KEY STAKEHOLDERS, CHAMPIONS AND CRITICS

Key Finding #9: Obtaining support from local education authorities and school leadership, and providing continuous professional development opportunities, can strengthen educators’ championing of new SEL approaches.

Key informants stressed the importance of fostering awareness and support from multiple local, interdependent stakeholders to facilitate effective SEL implementation. Since SEL is a relatively new concept, many activities encountered some initial resistance from stakeholders (government officials, religious teachers, and parents) who perceived the SEL approach as a deviation from traditional instructional methods, learner-educator relationships, and child-adult relationships. Over time, key informants witnessed critics turn into strong advocates through continuous awareness-raising on new SEL approaches, and sustained engagement throughout implementation. Educators were one of the most crucial stakeholders in implementing new SEL approaches. They were more likely to be champions of new SEL approaches if they received support in the form of training and mentorship from school administrative staff and local government authorities. LARA/Uganda trained teachers, students, and school administration staff to identify, avoid, and report acts of school-related gender-based violence. However, activity staff encountered initial resistance from teachers who had deep-seated cultural beliefs and gender stereotypes that were in conflict with the new SEL-focused teaching instruction.

“The whole issue about SEL is challenging authority of adults, culture, and leaders. So, at the start of it, you’ll find that people are not as comfortable because you are now telling the adult to talk with a child rather than beating the child. But overall, there is a goodwill from that because people obey authority. So, if it comes from, like, the District Education Officer or if the headmaster supports it, then teachers will implement. When parents see the head teachers or the teachers talking to them about the positivity of it, they will also implement. So, 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.”
– Activity Staff, LARA, Uganda

SEL MEASUREMENT

Key Finding #10: When possible, measuring social and emotional skills and associated outcomes with tools that are developed or adapted to the specific context and activity design helps assess the impact of SEL interventions.

Overall, key informants described the adequate measurements of social and emotional skills and associated outcomes as an important but challenging task—especially when time and resources were limited. Key informants across the activities described the need to use measurement tools specifically developed or adapted to the context and the activity design to understand the impact of targeted SEL interventions.

While the majority of activities provided explicit social and emotional skills instruction, only three of them (MYDev/Philippines, LARA/Uganda, and ECR/Nigeria) explicitly measured changes of target skills. Of the three activities, MYDev/Philippines and LARA/Uganda developed or adapted measurement tools specific to the targeted SEL activities. MYDev/Philippines developed the Youth Perceptions Survey and adapted the Youth Employment Survey specifically to the local context. To measure the skills that were promoted specific to MYDev, the activity team added a new section on youth’s life skills, work readiness, and leadership skills. Youth participants completed the two self-reported survey tools before and after they completed life skills training modules and subsequent technical trainings. To further triangulate the self-reported evidence, an evaluation team collected qualitative data with youth, training facilitators, employers, parents, and community leaders. The respondents perceived the MYDev youth as having a stronger work habits, interpersonal skills, problem-solving, peaceful conflict resolution, and communication skills than other youth employees.

LARA/Uganda used a 25-item learner self-reported survey to assess the yearly gains of individual social and emotional skills’ progression, corresponding to what was being fostered through the Journeys intervention in schools. The items focus on social and emotional skills in the competence areas of self-confidence, social awareness, and agency. Given time constraints, ECR/Nigeria
used the already-translated and adapted Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) tool comprising pre-determined items that did not consider the social and emotional skills fostered through the ECR's SEL activities. Evidence gathered using the SDQ tool indicated that minimal change occurred, or sometimes, even regression happened. All respondents from ECR strongly voiced the importance of using SEL measurement tools developed or adapted to specific social and emotional skills targeted by an activity to assess whether a targeted SEL activity worked.

Key informants from other activities (Sisimpur/Bangladesh, ALE/Honduras, EF/Honduras) also expressed interest in measuring individual social and emotional skills to better understand the impact of SEL interventions if time and resource permits. For example, Sisimpur/Bangladesh's formative assessment and measurement approaches did not take into consideration SEL-specific outcomes because of funding constraints. ALE/Honduras only measured the impact of SEL interventions on associated outcomes at the activity-level (e.g., teacher-student relationships, perceived school safety, school drop-out rate). EF/Honduras used survey items to measure some SEL-related skills (e.g., problem-solving skills, communication skills) without baseline data and key informants expressed interest in undertaking a more rigorous measurement approach. QITABI/Lebanon and PRP/Pakistan did not intend to measure individual-level skills improvement, and QITABI2/Lebanon was too early in its measurement design.

**Key Finding #11:** Measuring improved teaching practices with structured classroom observation tools can document positive impacts of SEL interventions.

The use of structured, classroom observation tools to measure change in teachers' instructional practices was effective in documenting improved teaching practices fostering learners' SEL. Three activities (PRP/Pakistan, ECR/Nigeria, and QITABI/Lebanon) measured change in teachers’ instructional practices as a consequence of being trained on teaching methodologies supporting learner’s social and emotional skills development and child-friendly classroom environment. PRP/Pakistan used a structured Teacher Classroom Observation tool, which measured teachers’ instructional practices that build a safe and child-friendly classroom environment, which is crucial for fostering learners’ social and emotional skills. The observation tool was designed to rate the different instructions and classroom management practices observed by teachers, using a matrix of items on a five-point Likert scale. Educators’ competency in supporting learners’ participation and their overall well-being had a strong influence on learners’ oral reading fluency. Similarly, ECR/Nigeria trained learning facilitators to improve their teaching practices. Out of the six assessed domains of learning facilitator practices, “Teaching methodology” and “SEL” had the highest levels of improvement from baseline to endline.

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE USAID SUPPORT**

**Key Finding #12:** In-country implementing partners and USAID mission staff suggest more resources and flexibility in designing, implementing, and measuring future SEL activities.

Across the activities, key informants expressed a desire for more resources to support SEL design, implementation, and measurement. Key informants were eager to learn and share good practices with in-country stakeholders, as well as with global SEL practitioners. They also proposed some additional flexibility in timeline across the activity's program cycle, especially at the design phase, to ensure the necessary contextualization of SEL competence areas and skills, teaching and learning content, and measurement tools can take place.

“For us, what's really challenging in Lebanon is that SEL has never been... a part of the educational—it has never been a part of the curriculum or anything like that. There isn't this mindset that SEL is important. So, you're working on the ground on something that's very, very challenging. So, the expectations in terms of anything that's being done SEL-related needs to just account for time.”

— Activity Staff, QITABI 2, Lebanon