



Implementing Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) to Enhance Education in Burundi

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ABSTRACT

Despite significant strides in improving educational access in Burundi, challenges such as poverty, violence, and displacement continue to impede student success. Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) has emerged as a critical tool for addressing these challenges by equipping students with skills to manage emotions, establish positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. This paper examines the implementation of SEL in Burundi's educational system, highlighting its importance, current landscape, and the impact of cultural adaptation. The International Rescue Committee's Better Outcomes Project, funded by the NoVo Foundation, serves as a case study to illustrate SEL's potential to foster inclusive and supportive learning environments. Recommendations for best practices in implementing SEL programs in Burundi are also discussed.

Keywords: Social-Emotional Learning, Burundi Education, Poverty, Violence and Displacement

INTRODUCTION

Despite the progress made in improving the quality of education in Burundi, high levels of poverty, violence, and displacement are undermining these efforts [1]. Classes are often taught in overcrowded spaces where addressing the social-emotional needs of students is a luxury for most teachers [2]. To improve these conditions, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and their partners are implementing the Better Outcomes Project, funded by the NoVo Foundation [3]. This project is designed to increase the capacity of students, parents, teachers, and communities to mitigate the negative social and emotional effects of poverty and violence, and to foster a more inclusive process of improving learning environments [4-6]. According to an official study conducted by the Child Development Center at Tufts University in the USA on 'critical dispositions', social-emotional skills are significantly more important than factors such as family, income, or cost of services to predict important life outcomes. SEL skills are influential in key outcomes related to school success [5, 6]. Well-groomed students of these skills make better use of education, obtain better grades, and form stronger relationships with classmates and teachers [3]. They grow up to be healthier, maintain their jobs, avoid crime, and become more successful citizens in society. Social-emotional learning (SEL), as scientifically demonstrated by a broad base of evidence, is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, feel and show empathy for others, establish and make healthy relationships, set and achieve positive goals, and make responsible decisions [7-10]. The five key SEL skills are: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, responsible decision-making, and relationship skills. SEL is vital to building the foundation for a healthy life, whether it be physical or emotional, and for academic success [11].

Significance of SEL in Education

The Burundi National Decentralization Policy underscores the critical importance of social and emotional learning as well [12]. It emphasizes the significance of promoting a seamless interface between existing and newly formed local government structures in promoting the holistic development of children [13]. To this end, the importance of social, economic and physical security, guidance, growing up in a healthy environment, meaningful participation and empowerment in society, and nurturing young people's talents in various life areas is underlined [14-17]. These provisions match the work of the 4 key developmental assets in all children and youth to support resilience development and academic performance through skills fostering necessary for sustained and deep understanding, learning, application, and assignment [18-21]. The four key developmental assets include 1. Creating caring and supportive environments; 2. Building constructive relationships through positive interactions and connectedness; 3. Conveying high expectations; and 4. Cultivating experiences that are both challenging and engaging for obtaining deeper understanding and realizing higher academic performance - all vital qualities evident in school settings [8]. The achievements of Burundi's Vision 2025, the National Development Plan, the Education Sector Plan, and the

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National Decentralization Policy all depend on ensuring that children and youth are prepared to become healthy adults who are able to contribute positively to the country's future [22]. Excelling in social and emotional learning will be fundamental for Burundian young people to attain good health, foster skillful connectivity, develop productive relationships, and take responsible actions, leadership, and ownership through understanding, and tolerating differences, valuing education, cultivating interpersonal and intrapersonal capabilities [23]. Schooling is the ideal place for providing and supporting the conditions to success in social and emotional learning [24]. The adults who work with children and youth in schools have immense responsibility to ensure students have ample opportunities to engage in social and emotional learning [25].

Current Educational Landscape in Burundi

A new trend is emerging in the Burundi education system, particularly in public primary education [26]. The Minister of Education defended the idea that local educational frameworks and stakeholders were responsible for couples of students and helped them to succeed [27-32]. These guidelines of the Ministry of Education provide more autonomy to schools, decentralization of the provision of complementary courses, and a greater involvement of the national and local community in the running, maintenance of schools, and the monitoring of school performance [27]. This financing model called "2nd shift" is part of the implementation of the national education policy. The National Policy of the Ministry of Education recommends taking charge of the poorest households in the country by providing them with free school support and meals [28]. It also offers generous support for the poorest students [29]. The government of Burundi has made significant progress in improving access to the most disadvantaged groups [30]. The review of access rates shows a significant increase in the small, medium, and larger corrective efforts made in the education sector. The universal access to basic education in 2015 indicates remarkable progress in terms of the massification of the education system [31-34]. Despite this improvement in the education system, the economic and social costs of education in Burundi remain too high for the most disadvantaged children. The total cost of education is about 46.9%, the library 16.9%, apprenticeship at 16.2%, and uniform at 11.3%. The recurring direct costs of education perceived by households as a real barrier to access to education for their children are in order. They are the fees 20,432, purchase of books 15,711, and uniforms 10,518 [36].

Overview of the Education System

Although the Burundi government is legally responsible for funding the country's education system, it is not able to [20]. The primary education budget constitutes less than a quarter of all allocated funds for the government's investment fund [24]. Despite the government's efforts to reduce the fiscal burden on education, the proportion of total official development assistance (ODA) remains high, largely from multilateral donors [25]. Some of the Priority Action Programs (PAPs) also in place can go unfulfilled [26]. Additional funding and expertise are needed to ensure an effective plan for positive social change. Burundi is not subject to the expectations articulated by the African Convention on the Right and Welfare of Children (1999), which requires a country to spend at least 20% of its annual budget on education [27-31]. In December 2011, the government adopted two significant decrees: The aim was to ensure that all children attended either an official "orientation school" or retake entrance exams before entering a "confirmation school" and that all school-age children have access to schooling through a complementary education [32]. While primary school is not compulsory in Burundi, the government has set a target of achieving universal primary education by 2020 [32]. The Ministry of Basic Education and Literacy (MEB) is responsible for the administration of primary school and is the recipient of significant donor funding for primary schools [33]. In 2016, the MEB announced a funding gap in its free primary school policy [25]. The policy, which was started in 2010, covers only teachers who work in a government school and parents who informally contribute to public schools but pay regular salaries and sometimes provide additional rights to school staff who have graduated from a private school [34-37].

Challenges Faced by Students and Educators

At the same time, education stakeholders we interviewed described several challenges that young people face and that negatively affect their school and classroom experience [38-41]. They talked about youth hanging out in the neighborhoods rather than being at school, losing motivation for short-term and long-term success, being influenced by friends who are of poor performance, and not learning because they are working in the market supporting family [32]. These findings suggest that the current context and recent experiences of students come into play when thinking about their social, emotional, and educational challenges and their experience in school [35]. In response to open-ended survey questions about the general challenges youth face today, however, parents and caretakers were far more likely to use words and phrases like bad behavior, mistaken behavior, and sometimes bullies and thieves than other community-wide challenges [31]. While the education stakeholders we interviewed generally had a positive view of students and their role in the classroom, they also identified critical challenges [24]. Compared with parents and caretakers we surveyed, education stakeholders uniformly described the youth in Burundi with adjectives and phrases that painted a positive image of young people [42]. Common references to students included brilliant, talented, our children, capable, energetic, motivated, and willing to succeed. They were also referred to as the future of Burundi [43].

Understanding Social-Emotional Learning in the Burundian Context

There are many models to conceptualize social-emotional learning, but the core components are fairly consistent. A widely accepted model of SEL, described by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), is comprised of five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making [44-48]. These competencies align closely with the Burundian government's social-emotional learning framework, but may be described differently using different terms [49]. For example, one multi-case analysis of SEL in Sub-Saharan Africa found that Burundian educators and students from different ethnic groups have an understanding of SEL, which includes awareness of others, awareness of self, self-control, and managing relationships [50]. Since the Burundi context requires an understanding of the social and emotional skills of its population to promote social cohesion among different groups, the Burundian government defined these two, distinguishing eleven qualities of SEL. In this report, we discuss all eleven components [51]. Social-emotional learning (SEL) is an approach that teaches children to recognize and manage their emotions in order to make responsible decisions, interact effectively with others, and motivate themselves. These skills are crucial for the well-being and academic success of children [52]. Research suggests that SEL has a positive impact on academic achievement, improves behavior and mental health of students, and helps to reduce socio-economic inequalities. Several researchers argue that addressing the social and emotional dimension may also contribute to the quality of the teaching and learning environment and the quality of curriculum content and therefore is crucial for the quality of education outcomes [53-57].

Key Components of SEL

Supportive classroom environments allow children and teachers to take risks, learn from mistakes, and establish positive relationships with one another [58]. More generally, a full college and career readiness continuum comprises not only the academic competencies and technical skills necessary to succeed in the workforce and postsecondary education but also those intra- and interpersonal abilities that make them effective students, productive workers, and responsible citizens. SEL is the process that enables young people to learn the competencies and skills to come to school ready to learn, be engaged in their learning experiences, and successfully complete their education [59]. SEL is an essential ingredient in the development of the whole child and an integral part of making sure that every child becomes college and career ready [60]. Social and emotional learning (SEL) takes place within the context of relationships, with a range of experiences within which individuals encounter emotions and learn. School represents such a social environment [61-65]. Within a school, a community of educators, students, and families interact with one another. Effective teachers know how to maintain a classroom environment conducive to learning [66]. Through the quality of their relationships with and among students, they optimize children's opportunities to develop and practice SEL skills. A positive classroom environment that facilitates the development of social and emotional skills is warm and responsive [67]. The teacher and the students demonstrate care and respect for each other, and students identify their classmates as people with whom they can easily form bonds [68].

Cultural Relevance and Adaptation

Prior research suggests that some SEL skills and interventions that have been effective in higher income countries can be successful with people from quite different cultures [69-71]. Bandura and McClelland have documented the "almost universal positive association between social cognitive competence and academic, psychological and social adjustment in children." Skills taught in SEL programs build social cognitive competence, but adapting these programs to be culturally relevant is not straightforward [72]. A first step may be documenting similarities and differences in social emotional learning constructs across cultures and refining instruments to measure these concepts [73]. Another step may be identifying cultural adaptations made by others and seeing which seem to be beneficial—and why. Additional research across contexts can help identify the importance of various skills and guide cultural adaptation of SEL instructional materials [74]. Cameron and colleagues write that "interventions that are culturally relevant are more likely to be perceived by the target population as helpful, credible, and satisfactory." To be perceived as culturally relevant, interventions "must be congruent with the community's beliefs, values, norms, and social structure." There is little research discussing how to adapt universal SEL interventions for specific cultural groups in less economically developed countries. In Burundi, it is not evident there are any SEL programs in widespread use [55]. Over 64% of the population in Burundi lives below the poverty line, so existing SEL programs developed for Western Europe and the US are likely to need some adaptation to meet the needs of students in Burundi [75-78].

Research and Case Studies on SEL in Burundi

From a review of literature available and several visits to Burundi, it is clear that the implementation of social-emotional learning is influenced by political will, knowledge of the link between social-emotional skills and other competencies, and by experience with the implementation of curricula related to social-emotional skills [79-81]. The evolution of thinking regarding education in Burundi informed the creation of the curriculum and related teaching resources to support social-emotional skill building [76]. Organizations and documents including the Ministry of National Education and Instruction are specific priorities for educational reform. The Ministry of

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National Education and Instruction (MEN) recognizes that teachers face new challenges related to the reform of education [56]. We have noted new expectations based on the fact that the MEN includes art and physical, sports, and health education (ANEPS) in the design of education and the triple vision anticipated by decree n041 / 77 of 08 July 2004 with regards to teachers' competences [82]. The importance of social-emotional learning is gaining increasing recognition and priority worldwide. Efforts to promote social-emotional learning as a part of the school curriculum can be found in educational policy and advocacy work across regions [83]. As demonstrated in the evolution of the initiatives of organizations, there is a growing body of literature regarding the impact of social-emotional learning on student well-being, success, social capital, social development, and life skills [69]. This literature provides some evidence to demonstrate the positive influence of social-emotional learning (and the negative influence of the lack thereof) on learning, health, relationships, and, longer-term, on social and emotional behavior, life goals, employability, and productivity [84].

Recommendations and Best Practices for Implementing SEL Programs

To prepare the environment in which the SEL programs will be implemented in Burundi, the Ministry of Education should use a school-wide SEL approach, which uses strategies that promote the development of competent, caring adults, and achieves systemic change over time. Green et al. (2003) highlight the importance of program fidelity, which involves making sure that each ingredient of the program is implemented in the exact way that it is supposed to. The level of adoption is also a key factor in the systematic implementation process of an SEL program. Adoption is a guided, yet flexible, process through which districts and schools choose a well-matched program and plan for implementation (embodied in the Adoption step), culminating in securing and dedicating the resources and support needed for effective, sustained implementation (Building implementation capacity) and ongoing program effectiveness and sustainability, as well as enactment (Depedagogiesing on the vision and commitment integral to the institutionalization of the SEL program and its underlying ethos) to ensure its continuity (Embodies et al., 2015). Al. (2008) and a comprehensive review of the literature by Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, and Schellinger (2011). To provide the desired exposure and familiarity with SEL activities and information, attention should be paid to the time over which subject-area teachers are exposed to the SEL content. Implementation of a cross-subject SEL program was found to take at least 25 to 50 hours (Payton, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Perry, and Weist, 2008).

CONCLUSION

Implementing Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) in Burundi presents a significant opportunity to address the deep-seated challenges faced by the educational system. By fostering emotional resilience, positive relationships, and responsible decision-making, SEL can enhance academic performance and overall well-being of students. The success of the Better Outcomes Project demonstrates the potential of culturally adapted SEL programs to create more supportive and effective learning environments. For sustained impact, a school-wide approach involving community engagement, teacher training, and systemic support is essential. By prioritizing SEL, Burundi can not only improve educational outcomes but also contribute to the holistic development of its youth, paving the way for a more prosperous future.

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