Learning is fundamentally emotional and, therefore, social

Learning is fundamentally emotional.[1] Because learning is emotional, the social characteristics of schools and classrooms can catalyze or seriously impede learning. In fact, some scholars, such as John Schindler and his colleagues from California State University, suggest that the characteristics of school life—the school and classroom culture and climate—may be the single most predictive factor in any school's capacity to promote student achievement. [2]

> **"… school climate may be the single most predictive factor in any school's capacity to promote student achievement…"**
>
> — *Schindler et al., 2016*

School culture has to do with the underpinning values and norms—either spoken or unspoken—that drive the way school personnel, managers, and students approach their responsibilities and the way in which they interact with each other.

School climate is how the behaviors and relationships of individuals in the school translate into the "feel" of being in the school or the characterization of life at school.   —*Kane, et al., 2016*

Where there is a positive school and classroom climate learners feel cared about and encouraged and have a sense of connection to their school. They are happy to come to school every day without fear of bullying or humiliation in the classroom. Teachers may not have all the materials and resources they need, but they are committed to teaching and feel responsible for their students' learning and wellbeing. When the culture of a school focuses on wellbeing and social and emotional learning (SEL), as well as academic learning, school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) is not likely to survive or thrive.

Research has shown that in Uganda, the learning environment is not always positive, and children of all ages experience violence. Findings from USAID/Uganda Literacy Achievement and Retention Activity (LARA or "the project") in 2016 and 2018 indicated that from one-third

to one-half of Primary 2, Primary 3, and Primary 5 pupils feel that not all pupils in their schools are treated equally by their fellow pupils or teachers and that some children, such as those with disabilities or in minority groups, are treated unkindly. Pupils, they say, worry and miss school because they might be bullied by fellow classmates or beaten by teachers.

Furthermore, findings from 2016 showed that children with disabilities had significantly lower perceptions of the school climate than students who did not have a disability.

Children with disabilities were more likely to agree with the following than children without disabilities
(item comparisons, p<0.005):

- Boys and girls are not very nice to each other
- Pupils treat pupils with disabilities unkindly
- Teachers are unkind to children who have a disability
- Pupils are punished too much for little things
- Pupils are sometimes afraid to go to school for fear of punishment
- Violence is a problem
- Pupils often worry that other pupils might be mean to them
- Pupils often threaten and call other pupils names
- School officials do not do anything when pupils hurt other pupils

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[1] Immordino-Yang, M.H. (2018). *Emotions, learning, and the brain: Exploring the educational implications of affective neuroscience.* W.W. Norton & Company.

[2] Schindler, J., Jones, A., Williams, A.D., Taylor, C., & Cardenas, H. (2016, Summer). The school climate--Achievement connection: If we want achievement gains, we need to begin by improving the climate. *Journal of School Administration Research and Development, 1*(1), 9-16.

Findings from LARA's 2016 and 2018 baselines indicated that over 95% of pupils in Primary 2, 3, and 5 experienced bullying one or more times in a school term, 88% experienced some form of harsh punishment, and 45% or more of boys and girls experienced sexual violence. Most children have reported experiencing these adverse events multiple times in a school term, not just once. Orphans and children with disabilities are at higher risk of experiencing some forms of SRGBV. Children with disabilities reported significantly higher levels of sexual violence than children who do not have a disability (p<0.05). Orphans experienced higher levels of bullying and corporal punishment than non-orphans (p<0.01). Violence in schools negatively impacts a students' social and emotional development and impedes learning. Therefore, it is likely that many of Uganda's learners are not reaching their potential because of the violence they experience in or around their schools, especially vulnerable children such as those who are orphaned or who have a disability.

Response

If life at school is characterized by a positive and supportive school climate, a violence free environment, and effective instruction, then students enjoy learning and participate in class without fear of humiliation or punishment, remain in school throughout the primary cycle, and succeed in their schoolwork..

LARA's Theory of Change places school climate in a central role for improved reading and retention.

With aims to promote, a positive learning environment, eliminate violence in schools, and increase retention, the Journeys intervention is based on an awareness-based system change model. It engages teaching and non-teaching school staff, community members, and pupils in a variety of activities that promote reflection and discussion about the intersection between a caring and supportive learning environment, positive social and emotional growth and development, and learning outcomes.

In 2018, the project embarked on a mixed methods study to evaluate the tenability of this hypothesis and the impact of Journeys in establishing positive and violence-free schools and improving retention and early grade reading (EGR) outcomes. In this study, project schools participated in both Journeys (see above) and also LARA's EGR intervention.

Journeys Impact
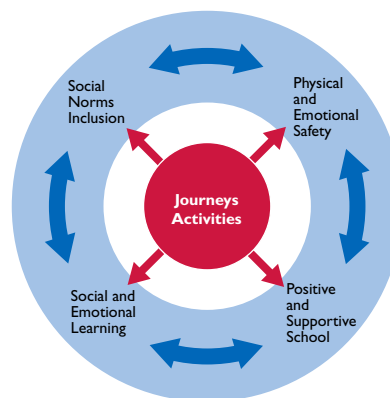
STUDY DESIGN

The study sought to develop an understanding of improvements in reading, retention, and violence experience (i.e., bullying, corporal punishment, and sexual violence) in relation to school climate, attitudes about gender norms, and social and emotional learning. Our original design—a first of its kind—involved tracking these measures across three years of a learner's primary school cycle, from Primary 2 to Primary 5; however, the study was cut short due to the COVID-19 school closings. The findings presented in this brief are, therefore, based on repeated measures collected from the same learners in Primary 2 (P2) and, again, in Primary 3 (P3).

First of its kind

Never before in a low to middle income country has there been longitudinal data that allows the investigation of age-related growth of violence experience and reading outcomes in primary schools and the influence of known mediating factors of these outcomes – school climate, gender discriminating attitudes and student social and emotional.

FINDINGS

Early Grade Reading and Retention

The gains in oral reading fluency (ORF) from P2 to P3 were significantly higher for pupils in project versus the control schools, 10.6 words per minute vs. 6.39 [WPM], p>.001, reflecting a medium effect size for the difference in gains (0.385). The greatest advantage for pupils in the project over control schools were those who were low readers by the end of P2. A significantly higher percentage of pupils in the project schools versus control schools demonstrated shifts from low reading proficiency at the end of P2 to emergent or fluent reading proficiency at the end of P3 (63% versus 48%). Pupils in both project and control schools who could not read one word at the end of P2 were less likely to progress to higher levels of reading proficiency than if they could at read at least 1—10 words.

Oral Reading Fluency

This underscores the critical importance of helping children achieve, minimally, the ability to read some words by the end of P2.

School Climate

Based on a school climate survey, children exposed to one year of Journeys showed, on average, a slightly larger positive shift in their perceptions of certain general attributes of school climate, such as friendliness, equal and fair treatment of pupils, and safety, than the controls. The effect size was very small (0.137), however, and the difference in differences test was not statistically significant.
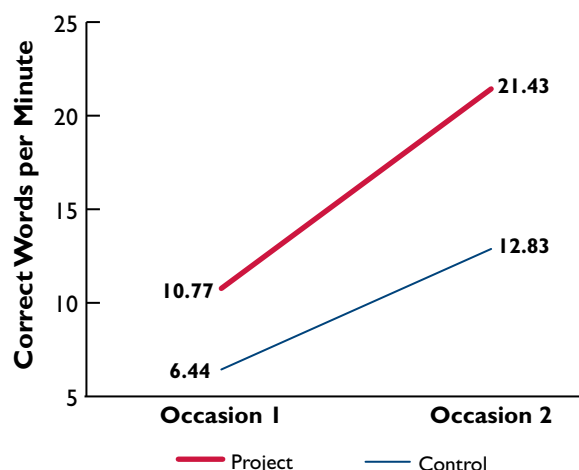
Qualitative data from focus group discussions (FGD) with pupils and teachers suggested that there had been improvements in certain attributes of the school climate since Journeys was initiated. Pupils had become kinder to each other and teachers friendlier, pupils said. Teachers reported that they listened more to pupils and that their increased understanding of pupils led to less frequent use of corporal punishment.

Pupil Shifts in Reading Proficiency Levels from P2 to P3
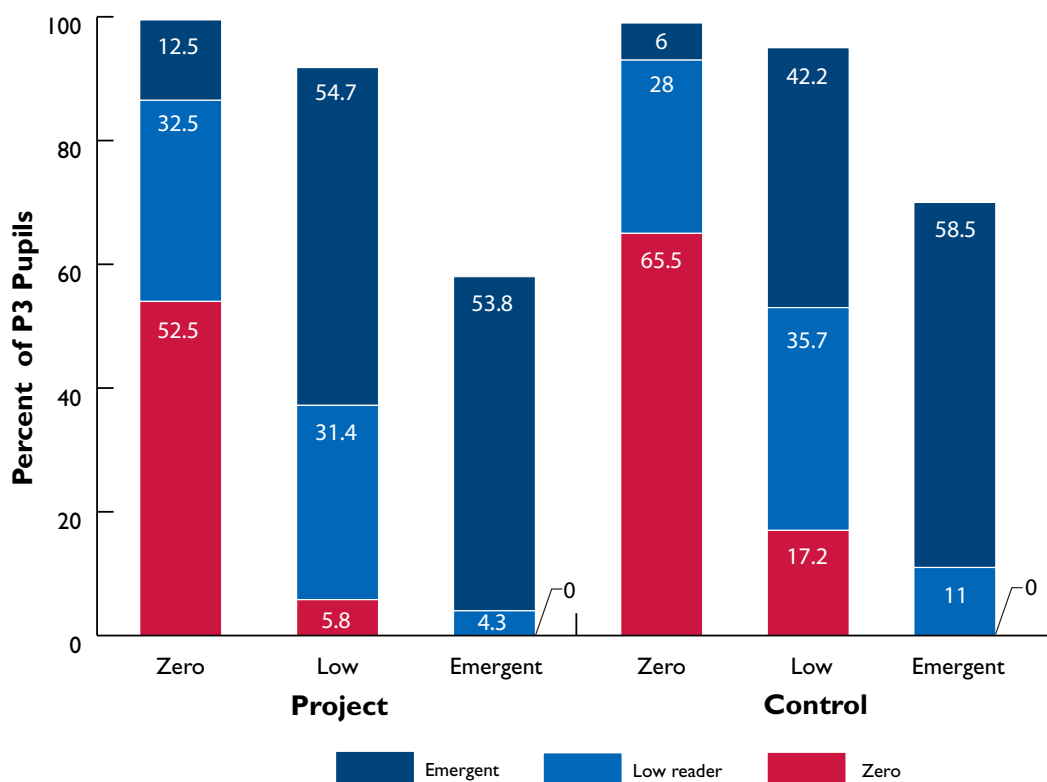
Even though pupils and teachers alike reported that schools were friendlier and safer as a result of Journeys, pupils still viewed their schools as places to be feared due to bullying and corporal punishment. On average, about half of pupil responses on the School Climate Survey suggested that children were afraid of being bullied by their peers, that caning was common in their school, and that children stayed home for fear of harsh punishment. Staff were less inclined to agree that fear of bullying and harsh punishment were a problem. On average, only about 25% of teacher responses reflected beliefs that students were fearful of violence and caning, compared to 48% of pupil responses. These fears or direct experience of violence impede student's sense of belonging, safety, and ability to focus on school tasks. When children do not feel safe at school, their achievement is negatively impacted.[1,2]

Experience of SRGBV

As mentioned earlier in this brief, all forms of SRGBV are experienced at disturbingly high rates by children in Uganda's primary schools. Almost all pupils in the study (over 90%) reported experiencing bullying and corporal punishment at least once in a term and the majority (over 50%) experience these forms of violence multiple times. Both boys and girls as young as P2 experience a variety of acts of sexual violence, including being spied on; clothing pulled to display nudity; being forced to look at nude pictures; being touched on the breast, buttocks, or genitals or forced to touch others' sensitive areas;, or a forced unwanted kiss. From 45%–55% of pupils in P2, P3, and P5 report experiencing at least one act of sexual violence in a school term and from 16%–29% report multiple incidents of sexual violence in a term. Even with this information, a recent study using alternative methods of data collection suggested that sexual violence experience among these young children is often under reported. Maitri Punjabi and her colleagues at RTI International (2021)[3] showed that when the full anonymity of respondents was guaranteed using audio-computer assisted self-interviews (ACASI), levels of reporting different acts of sexual violence double, if not triple, which suggests that alarming levels of sexual violence occur among boys and girls in the early primary grades in Uganda.

Pupil and Staff Perception of Fearfulness of Violence and Punishment


Occasion 2
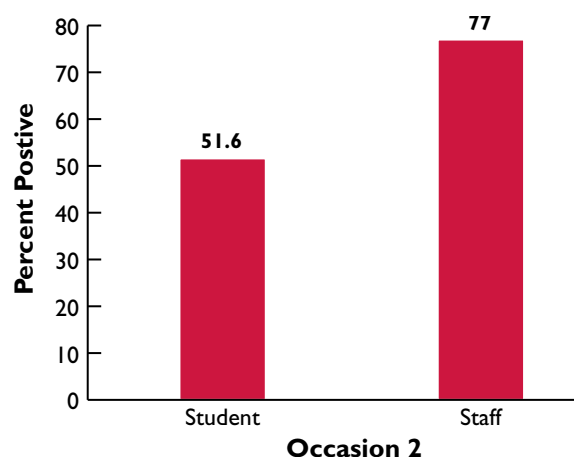
Findings from this study and the LARA 2016 SRGBV baseline study indicated that reported experience of corporal punishment, bullying, and sexual violence decreases from P2 to P5. For P5 only, the extent of sexual violence that was higher was in P5, but not P2 or P3.

Did the Journeys intervention serve to reduce the prevalence of SRGBV in Uganda's primary schools?

Corporal punishment. SRGBV index scores measure the extent to which pupils experience different forms of SRGBV. A difference-in-differences analysis showed a slightly larger drop in corporal punishment for pupils in project versus controls schools, but the effect size was very small at 0.16 and statistical significance was achieved only at the .10 level (p=0.059). School-level prevalence data, however, suggests that Journeys is serving to reduce corporal punishment, with more project than control schools showing a drop in corporal punishment prevalence (48% versus 26%; p>0.012).

Schools with Decreased Corporal Punishment
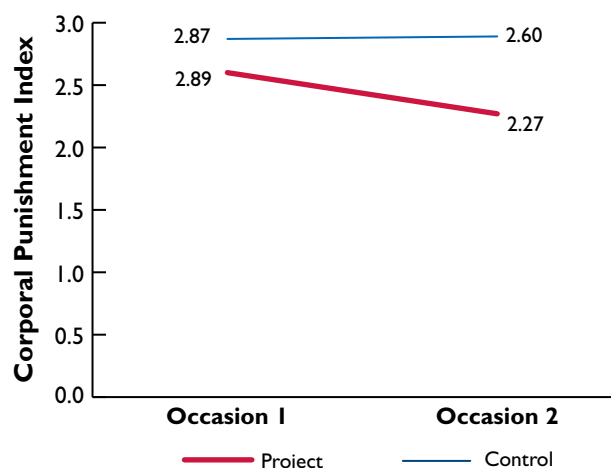
[1] Kibriya, S., Tkach, B., Ahn, J., Valdez Gonzalez, N., Xu, Z., & Zhang, Y. (2016). *The effects of school-related gender-based violence on academic performance. Evidence from Botswana, Ghana, and South Africa.* USAID.

[2] Kabriya, S., Zhou, S., Zhang, Y., & Fatema, N. (2018). *The effects of school safety on academic achievement: Evidence from Rwanda, Tanzania, and Zambia.* USAID

[3] Punjabi, M., Norman, J., Edwards, L., & Muyingo, P. (In press). Audio Computer-Assisted Self-Interview (ACASI): *Surveys of a sensitive nature require a sensitive method of data collection: A study from Uganda.* RTI Press.
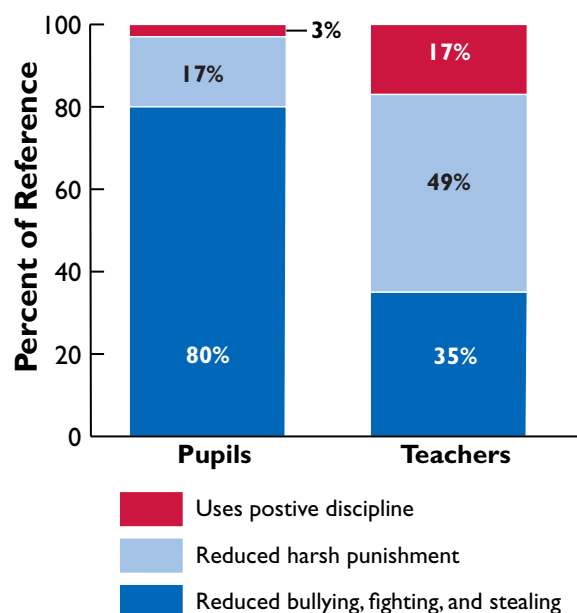
When teachers and pupils discussed changes in violence since Journeys was introduced during FGDs, 66% of the teachers' comments and 20% of the pupils comments noted reduced use of caning and other forms of harsh punishment. Students reported that they were no longer afraid of teachers and teachers discussed how they take pride in listening to their pupils and talking through issues together. Overall, the quantitative findings, combined with the qualitative, suggest that the Journeys intervention reduces the degree to which corporal punishment is used in the classroom.
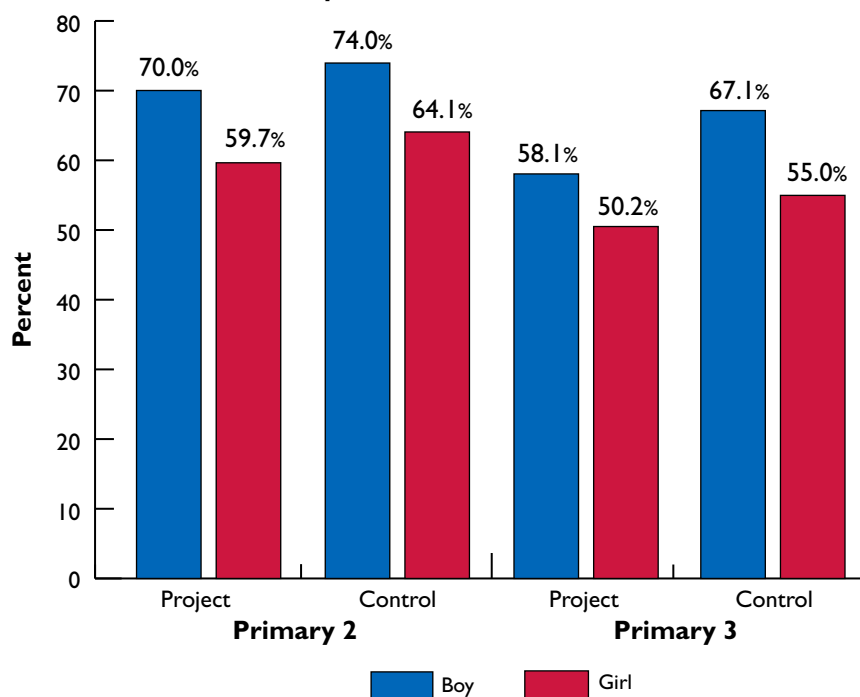
How is corporal punishment experienced differently for boys and girls and does the Journeys intervention have a differential impact on girls and boys?

More boys than girls experienced repetitive incidents of corporal punishment. This was true for pupils in P2 and P3 and in project and control schools. However, only in the project schools was there a statistically significant decrease in the proportion of boys and girls who experienced corporal punishment multiple times: from P2 to P3. These findings reinforce the findings above that Journeys does influence a reduction in the use of corporal punishment in school.

Findings on Changes in SRGBV Attributed to Journeys: FGD references made to different forms.

Legend:
- Uses postive discipline
- Reduced harsh punishment
- Reduced bullying, fighting, and stealing

Percent of Pupils who Experienced Corporal Punishment Multiple Times in a Term

Legend: Boy | Girl

Harsh Punishment

" I always used to walk with a cane, bark [at], and threaten children which was causing a lot of fear among the learners. But now with Journeys, I counsel and guide them and now am looked at [like a] father and they are now open to tell me their problems, which we solve together" —Teacher

Bullying

Bullying experience dropped from P2 to P3 as an effect of age, but the difference-in-difference analysis results failed to show a significant advantage for project schools. During the FGDs, teachers and pupils all mentioned that in the past year since Journeys began, incidents of bullying, fighting, and stealing had declined. Out of comments about school changes in violence, 80% of the pupils' and 35% of the teachers' comments referenced a reduction in bullying. Pupils fought less and were kinder to their fellow classmates, they said, and refrained from name-calling and using abusive language with each other. Pupils pointed out that these changes were especially noticeable among older and younger pupils.

How is bullying experienced differently for boys and girls and does the Journeys intervention have a differential impact on boys and girls?

In the project schools only, the proportion of boys (not girls) who experienced bullying multiple times in a term significantly dropped after one year of Journeys (93% in Grade 2 to 84% in Grade 3, $p < 0.008$). This decrease in prevalence was more than twice as much as that observed among boys in the control schools.

Percent of Boys who Report Experiencing Bullying Multiple Times in a Term: Project and Control Schools
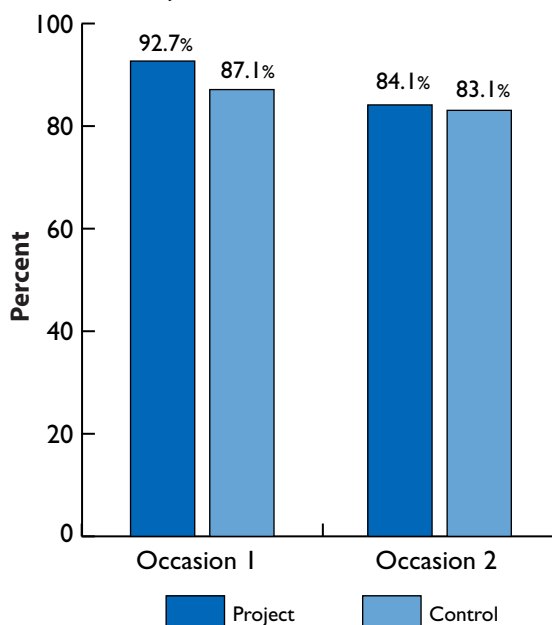
Sexual violence

Consistent with other forms of violence, pupils in both project and control schools demonstrated a drop in reported experience of sexual violence from P2 to P3. The difference-in-differences analysis did not show any significant differences in the changes from P2 to P3 between the project and control schools, suggesting an age effect for sexual violence experience.

Bullying

"Before the introduction of Journeys program learners at this school used to fight regularly, in a term the school would receive more than 20 cases of children fighting amongst themselves but after the implementation of journeys these cases of children fighting have greatly decreased. In this term alone they have received about only 3 cases of children fighting."
—Teacher

"A boy was disturbing me, and I didn't want to come to school. He was bullying me, kick [kicked] my bag when UKU started. Now this boy stopped bothering me because the people were talking about their fears and I think this is because of the UKU." —Grade 5 Pupil

The challenge in measuring impact of violence-prevention programs

One of the goals of any violence-prevention intervention is to increase reporting. Violence can only be prevented if individuals are able talk about and feel safe in reporting. Increased reporting–though desirable–makes it difficult to gauge and compare shifts in actual violence experience. Assuming that all children would be more likely to report their violence experience truthfully using the ACASI method because of anonymity, adopting this method may be one way to mitigate this challenge in violence prevention efficacy studies.

RTI International investigated the validity of using an alternative method of data collection, the ACASI method. Findings showed that this approach yielded substantially higher reporting of sexual harassment and assault experience among Grade 3 with 34% more pupils reporting sexual violence under the condition of autonomy given by the ACASI method. *Punjabi, M., et al., 2021*

Attitudes about Gender Norms

On average, pupils' responses at P3 were more favorable toward gender equality than at P2. This was considered an age affect rather than attributable to the Journeys program because both pupils in project and control schools demonstrated this trend. Improvement is needed to build a better understanding about gender discriminating norms and the implications these have on the lives of children. The majority of children still uphold many of the gender stereotypes that present a barrier to education.

Over 50% of P3 pupils agreed with the following statements:

- Only men should work for pay outside the home.
- It is better for a girl to be quiet and shy.
- It is more important for boys than girls to do well in school.

And disagreed with the following statements

- Girls should continue in school if they get married.
- It is acceptable for boys to cry.
- It is acceptable for a woman to disagree with her husband.

Approachable

“ *Not all of us were able to talk to our children and consider that they also have problems. But today, any child can go to any teacher they feel comfortable with. I myself am a case in point because I was a harsh person, for every issue I would be tough but am now a convert.* ” —Deputy Head Teacher

“ *Teachers are more approachable and friendly with pupils.* ” —Pupil

Social and emotional learning

The SEL Index, a composite score derived from pupil responses on the Social and Emotional Learning and Agency survey showed that, on average, SEL improved from P2 to P3 for both pupils in project and control schools. This is to be expected considering that SEL naturally progresses in development. The positive shifts were noted to be slightly greater for pupils in project schools, but the effect size was very small (0.11) and the difference was not statistically significant. Survey item analyses suggest three social and emotional competencies that most need further strengthening: (1) communicating opinions and feelings; (2) awareness of the feelings of others; and (3) avoiding and reporting danger and/or violence experiences.

According to discussions during the qualitative study, improvements in inter-personal relationships were observed as a consequence of Journeys, for both teachers and pupils. At least a quarter of all teacher FGD comments were reflections on improved teacher social skills, especially relationships with pupils, but also improved relationships with fellow teachers and stronger teamwork.
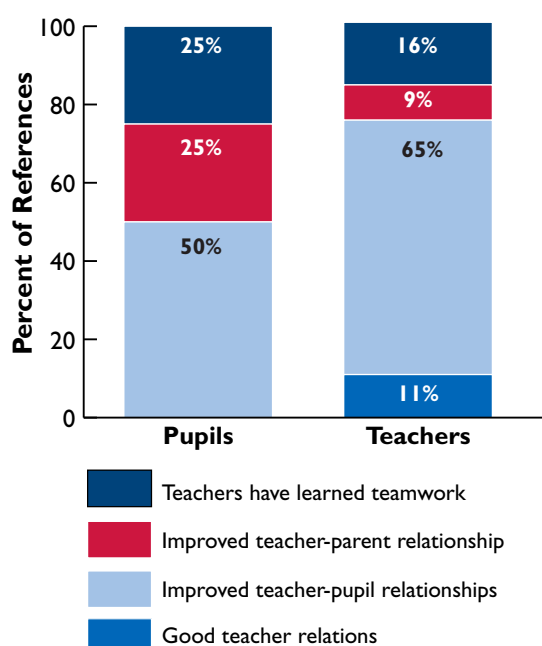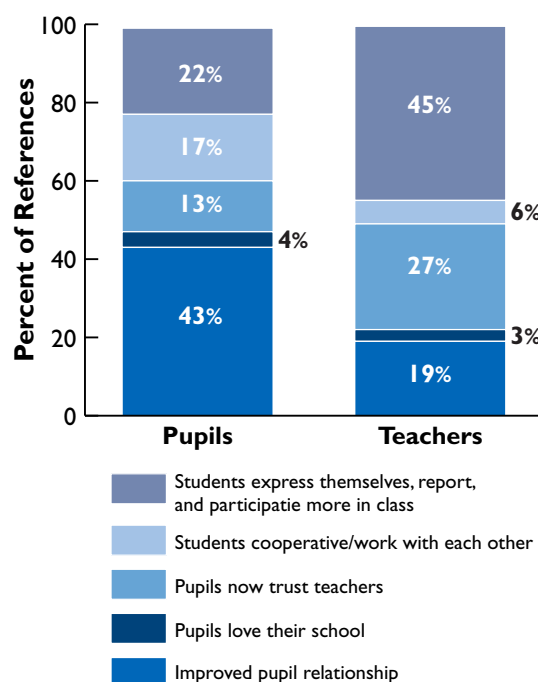
Teacher and pupil comments during FGDs revealed that pupils' social and emotional skills improved, with observations of more kindness and collaboration among pupils, trust of teachers, and increased participation in class and ability to express ideas.

Qualitative and quantitative findings combined suggest that there may be an emerging trend that Journeys supports SEL in both teachers and pupils, especially improved inter-personal relationships, although the statistical evidence is not conclusive at this stage.

Qualitative Findings on SEL: FGD references to improved teacher SEL competencies

Pupils: 50% (Improved teacher-pupil relationships), 25% (Improved teacher-parent relationship), 25% (Teachers have learned teamwork)

Teachers: 11% (Good teacher relations), 65% (Improved teacher-pupil relationships), 9% (Improved teacher-parent relationship), 16% (Teachers have learned teamwork)

Legend:
- Teachers have learned teamwork
- Improved teacher-parent relationship
- Improved teacher-pupil relationships
- Good teacher relations

Qualitative Findings on SEL: FGD references to improved pupil SEL competencies

Pupils: 43% (Improved pupil relationship), 4% (Pupils love their school), 13% (Pupils now trust teachers), 17% (Students cooperative/work with each other), 22% (Students express themselves, report, and participatie more in class)

Teachers: 19% (Improved pupil relationship), 3% (Pupils love their school), 27% (Pupils now trust teachers), 6% (Students cooperative/work with each other), 45% (Students express themselves, report, and participatie more in class)

Legend:
- Students express themselves, report, and participatie more in class
- Students cooperative/work with each other
- Pupils now trust teachers
- Pupils love their school
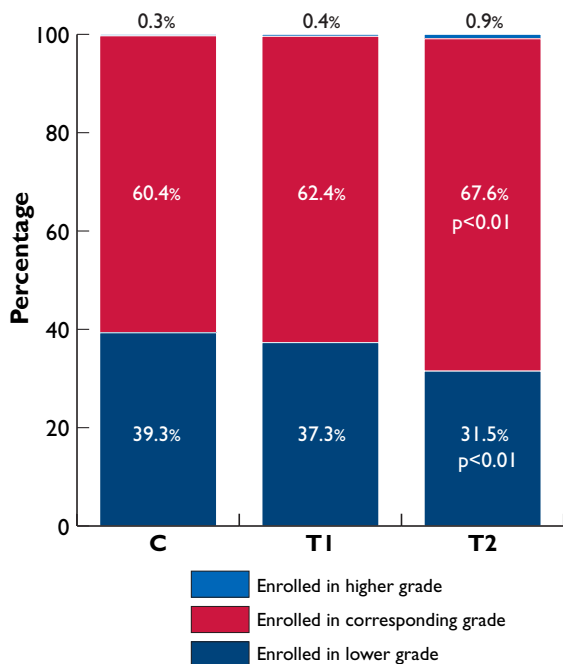- Improved pupil relationship

Retention

According to mid-term evaluation findings from NORC, pupils who had participated in both Journeys and the EGR support (see T2 in graph below) were significantly (p<0.01) more likely to be promoted to the next grade rather than repeating a grade when compared to pupils who participated in only the EGR support (see T1 in graph below) or were in control schools.

Promotion and Repetion: Group Comparison

Legend:
- Enrolled in higher grade
- Enrolled in corresponding grade
- Enrolled in lower grade

Data in chart:
- C: 0.3% (higher grade), 60.4% (corresponding grade), 39.3% (lower grade)
- T1: 0.4% (higher grade), 62.4% (corresponding grade), 37.3% (lower grade)
- T2: 0.9% (higher grade), 67.6% p<0.01 (corresponding grade), 31.5% p<0.01 (lower grade)

Recommendations

Reading

Ensure all learners achieve at least a minimum level of reading proficiency by the end of P2 to be able to read some words independently—even if it involves investing in remedial reading programs for non-readers during P2

School and Classroom Climate

The characteristics of school climate matter. Use pupil data about fears of violence and harsh punishment to enlighten teachers about the way these fears impede learning. Focus on building positive inter-personal relationships between and among teachers and students to build a sense of belonging and confidence, trust, and more open expression.

Pupil Relationships

"....teachers at school started to notice that learners of the early grade class started to make friends with learners in the higher classes which was rather very rare until journeys was introduced." —Teacher

"Before UKU, learners did not support each other because if you were a smart learner you didn't want others to be as smart as you, but now they help others." —Pupil

Trust and Freedom to Speak Openly

"Before Journeys pupils in the school used to fear their teachers. If they had an issue, they would keep it to themselves. Even in class few children participated actively but after Journeys children gained confidence and are more free with their teachers. Participation in class has increased." —Teacher

Gender Attitudes

Provide safe places for sharing ideas and build on the Journeys activities to provide more opportunities for staff, pupils, and community members to reflect and discuss gender discriminating norms and how these can lead to violence and unequal opportunities for boys and girls.

Social and Emotional Learning

SEL and school climate are interdependent. Integrating SEL into all aspects of teaching and learning supports pupils positive social and emotional growth and development and also reinforces a positive school climate.

Preventing SRGBV

SRGBV cannot survive or thrive in a school that is positive, caring, and supportive. Thus, the collective will and agency of all individuals in the school to build a positive, supportive, and violence-free learning environment is the first step toward eliminating SRGBV. Reflection and dialogue about SRGBV, school projects to improve the school climate and prevent SRGBV, and school and community partnering to identify and respond to children who experience violence should be built into a school culture that places wellbeing front and center.

The Republic of Uganda
MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND SPORTS