

# CULTURALLY SUSTAINING **SOCIO-EMOTIONAL LEARNING**

*Lessons from Haiti*



*Dr. TJ D'Agostino  
Dr. Anasthasie Liberiste Osirus  
Kate Schuenke Lucien*



## ABOUT US

*The University of Notre Dame's ACE Haiti program promotes the flourishing of vulnerable children in Haiti through a transformative engagement with Catholic schools, families, churches, and communities.*

We promote a holistic approach to child development and learning and are committed to finding scalable interventions capable of transforming life outcomes for children at risk. Our goal is to recognize, support, and strengthen institutional assets vital to children's healthy development, especially through school improvement, community engagement, and family supports.

We work throughout the country with various civil society partners, donors, and the Haitian government. We have a special relationship and long-term partnership with the national office for Catholic schools in Haiti, the Episcopal Commission for Catholic Education (CEEC), and Catholic Relief Services (CRS).

### OUR WORK FOCUSES ON FOUR KEY AREAS:

- ***Early childhood development:*** promoting healthy development for children ages 0-5 by supporting parents and families and strengthening pre-school access and quality.
- ***Early-grade reading:*** improving students' reading outcomes as a foundation for academic and life success.
- ***Socio-emotional learning:*** fostering positive and nurturing relationships in and out of school so that children gain skills that promote academic success and healthy behaviors.
- ***L3 learning lab (Lakay, Legliz, Lekòl – Home, Church, School):*** focusing on three central institutions in Haitian children's lives, the L3 lab uses a system strengthening and learning approach to find solutions that cultivate resilient children, households, and schools.



*“Schools play an essential role in preparing our children to become knowledgeable, responsible, caring adults” (Elias, et al., 1997).*

Socio-emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which we learn to recognize and manage emotions, care about others, make good decisions, behave ethically and responsibly, develop positive relationships, and avoid negative behaviors (Elias et al., 1997).

*Imagine a setting...* in Haiti where young students learn in rigid, authoritarian classroom environments that too often include corporal punishment, fear, and shaming, and where teachers lack the skills and training to use alternatives for managing student behavior. Haiti faces widespread extreme poverty and many of the challenges and fragility that are associated with high poverty: malnourishment, undernourishment, stunting, and a relative lack of developmental assets to foster thriving children. For example, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that two of every three children in Haiti are victims of physical violence, most often originating in the home but also quite often in schools (Flynn-O’Brien, 2016). Nonetheless, it is important to recognize the importance of education in Haitian culture and the sacrifices families make for their children to attend school.

Research on learning outcomes in low-income countries has revealed a learning crisis. More children are now enrolled in primary school but too often are not learning well (Gove & Cvelich, 2010; Pritchett, 2013; Hanushek & Woessmann, 2008). For example, in Haiti, progress has been made to improve basic literacy and numeracy skills in many settings (Kim, Boyle, Zuilkowski & Nakamura, 2016; Snilstveit et al., 2016). However, strategies for improving learning in low-income countries have tended to focus narrowly on basic academic skills and have not adequately considered the school environment, relationships, and supportive communities that students require to engage, persist, and thrive in schools (Murphy & Torres, 2014). A holistic view of education is about much more than academic outcomes. It entails the full formation of the child towards human flourishing.

Increasingly, evidence points to socio-emotional skills, values, and dispositions that are vital to children's success in school and in life (Durlak et al., 2011). But such skills and values are rooted in particular cultural contexts. How can the fundamental insights of socio-emotional learning be thoughtfully adapted to and integrated within diverse cultural contexts?

As a means of attempting to develop an authentic and culturally appropriate Haitian understanding of SEL, leaders from the University of Notre Dame's ACE Haiti Program convened a year-long SEL Task Force that assembled a group of Haitian and international academics and educational leaders to participate in the development of an SEL Framework and pilot program for the Haitian context. The Task Force engaged 15 individuals, including Haitian and international scholars and educational leaders. The group met four times over the course of 12 months, including various smaller sub-committee meetings and working groups throughout the year. What was most unique about the SEL Task Force was its commitment to a local, culturally sustaining, and asset-based orientation in the effort to develop an authentically Haitian approach to socio-emotional learning.

This brief will seek to answer the questions *"Why is SEL important for improving student outcomes in low-income contexts, and what are lessons from the Haitian SEL program?"* It provides a summary of evidence on SEL, shares findings and key lessons from the SEL Task Force and pilot program, and points to future directions for this work.



## SOCIO-EMOTIONAL LEARNING AT A GLANCE

**SEL IMPROVES**

*academic outcomes by 11% according to a meta-analysis of 213 studies involving 270,000 students*

**SEL IMPROVES**

*classroom behavior, students' mental health, and attitudes about themselves, others, and school*

**11 1 RETURN**

*on investment of SEL programs (Columbia University Study, 2015)*

**REDUCES**

*criminal activity, substance abuse, school dropout, and teen pregnancy*

**IMPROVES**

*education outcomes, employment, mental health, and classroom behavior*

## MEANS OF DELIVERING SEL IN SCHOOLS

1. *Supplemental SEL curriculum:* Explicit SEL skill instruction through an SEL curriculum, often delivered through morning meetings or a similar structure in schools.
2. *SEL integration into the curriculum:* Incorporation of SEL themes and concepts into the existing curriculum, such as the use of SEL aligned texts and discussion of SEL values and practices.
3. *SEL-aligned instructional practices:* Teacher practices that support SEL skills and dispositions, including those that foster collaboration, conflict resolution, problem solving, and critical thinking.
4. *Nurturing school culture and climate:* A school culture defined by norms of care, support, safety, and belonging and rooted in nurturing relationships and SEL-aligned values.



## TASK FORCE ON SEL IN HAITI

Four SEL Task Force meetings were convened between August 2017 and March 2018, along with regular coordination and sub-committee meetings throughout the process. These meetings advanced the work of the Task Force in a participatory manner in which all participants were engaged through break out groups and plenary sessions. The Task Force was viewed by participants as a unique experience where Haitian leaders' voices and perspectives were at the foreground of a thoughtful process for enhancing Haiti's education system.

## SEL FRAMEWORK

During the first six months and over two full meetings of the Task Force, the group developed a Haitian framework for socio-emotional learning. Time was spent articulating a vision for education and for the group's aspirations for children in Haiti. The Task Force also reviewed sample frameworks from inside and outside of Haiti and reflected as a group about the particular strengths, needs, and concerns of the Haitian historical, social, and cultural milieu that should be reflected in the Haitian SEL Framework.

The result was a Framework that is similar to existing SEL models, but also distinct in the emphasis placed on certain ideas and themes, its use of language, and how it frames or orients concepts and values.

For example, key themes deemed to be important in the Haitian context were given more emphasis. This included the importance of Haitian history to Haitian identity and sense of self, as the only slave colony to fight for and gain independence to become a free republic. It also emphasized leadership and local community engagement, particular needs in a context where urbanization and "brain drain" are key challenges. In terms of language, a careful process of writing and translating between Haitian Kreyol and English allowed the framework to include key terms that encapsulate important ideas from Haitian culture. An example is the use of the term 'konbit' to capture the idea and value of collaboration. A 'konbit' is a Haitian agrarian activity where the community comes together to help each other prepare their fields in solidarity. A final example framed issues of corporal punishment and shaming in schools as legacies of the violent history of slavery and colonialism, and contrasted these with Haitian communal values embodied in norms like the 'lakou,' a space of community and intergenerational learning in Haitian villages.



## SEL PROGRAM DESIGN

The second half of the Task Force focused on developing an SEL intervention. Working in sub-committees, the Task Force developed three programmatic ideas to be integrated with an early-grade literacy curriculum and piloted in a project led by the University of Notre Dame and its partners.

1. ***School culture and climate:*** A school culture intervention trained school leaders and first–third grade teachers to foster SEL in the school community through school-wide and classroom norms. The trainings focused on developing school-wide vision and values, implementing positive discipline, and strengthening classroom management practices without the use of corporal punishment or shaming.
2. ***Morning meetings:*** A morning meeting structure and SEL curriculum was developed with a partially scripted teacher guide and consistent, fun, and interactive format. It was designed to take 15 minutes each morning in classrooms and focus on a different core area of the Haitian SEL framework each month.
3. ***SEL-aligned texts and lessons:*** A final component included the curation, creation, and use of SEL-aligned texts. This involved the writing, design, and publishing of eight new children’s books, and finding eight additional titles from Haitian publishers, which focused on values aligned with the Haitian SEL framework. A teacher guide with sample lessons was developed to facilitate teachers’ engaging students in discussion of the SEL themes.

# PILOT IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION

Working with InnovEd at the University Quesqueya and Anseye Pou Ayiti, the University of Notre Dame and partners in Catholic education implemented the new program in a pilot in 8 rural Catholic schools.

## EVALUATION DESIGN

The program was evaluated using mixed methods. Qualitative methods included focus groups with parents and teachers and classroom observations to get an understanding of the successes and challenges with implementing the program and how it was perceived by stakeholders. Quantitative methods used were surveys of students and teachers to measure student gains in socio-emotional skills and the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA), to measure possible gains in academic performance.

The instruments used to measure students' socio-emotional skills were the DESA mini and the ISELA. Both tools were translated and retranslated by a team of bilingual colleagues, and cognitive interviews were used to adapt the instruments to the Haitian context.

The DESSA-mini<sup>1</sup> is a short, teacher-facing survey that asks teachers to describe their perception of students' behaviors and the development of their socio-emotional skills. It uses a pre/post-test design to measure students' progress over time. It is quick and easy to implement. While it measures teachers' perception of student SEL development, it is regarded as a valid and reliable source of information on changes in students' SEL skills and particularly well suited for work with young children.

The ISELA<sup>2</sup> is a slightly longer, student-facing assessment that seeks to measure various student SEL skills and dispositions. It has the advantage of seeking to directly measure students' skills, values, and dispositions and was developed for international adaptation in low-income country contexts.

## KEY QUALITATIVE FINDINGS:

- Efforts to tailor SEL to the Haitian context were well-received by stakeholders and seemed to foster engagement and interest in the program.
- The morning meetings captured the interest and excitement of students, teachers, and parents.
- Morning meetings had tangential benefits of improving attendance and reducing tardiness, as students did not want to miss the morning meeting, and increasing parental engagement, as parents wanted to come to watch and participate.
- School culture training was important, though contingent upon the quality of and degree of engagement and support from the school leader.
- SEL-aligned texts were well received, but the pedagogical lessons were regarded as too complex to be implemented in large-classrooms with teachers unfamiliar with student-centered methods.

---

1 <https://apertureed.com/dessa-overview/the-dessa-mini/>

2 [https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/sites/default/files/documents/203.\\_sc\\_isela\\_administration\\_guide\\_june\\_2016.pdf](https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/sites/default/files/documents/203._sc_isela_administration_guide_june_2016.pdf)

## QUOTATIONS FROM PARENT FOCUS GROUPS

*Parent A: I had to come to the school to physically see what was happening. My child was changing, not just in behavior but also in confidence. I don't get bad reports every day [now] because he is identifying his emotions, he is not combative.*

*Parent B: I see that the morning meetings make my child excited to go to school. School is fun, the music, chants, concepts all make learning fun. I don't have to fight for him to go to school.*

*Parent C: I see that the kids are learning. When I go to the meetings, I see that the teachers speak more with the kids. I have taken that lesson and applied it...I too speak more with my children.*

## KEY QUANTITATIVE RESULTS:

Quantitative results from the pilot study suggest positive growth in students' socio-emotional learning over the six-month period on both the DESSA-Mini and the ISELA instruments. Students demonstrated statistically significant gains in self-management, self-awareness, relationships, and social awareness. The only sub-skills that did not show statistically significant gains were regarding anti-social behavior and empathy. It is not clear whether this was a result of the small sample size or limited impact of the program. These results should be interpreted with caution and as only preliminary, because students mature over time and some of these gains may be explained by their growth over six months and not the effects of the SEL program. Future evaluations should increase the number of schools in the program and include a control group to provide clearer understanding of the impact of the program.



A person wearing a blue and white checkered shirt is reading a book titled "Victo ak Léo". The book cover features an illustration of a woman hugging a child. The text on the cover includes "Tèks: Mael Fouchard" and "Dessèn: Karl-Heins Desroches". The title "Victo ak Léo" is written in large, stylized letters. Below the title, there is a small text block: "Di sa? youn gran ak youn ti pitit. De zanm pou sa." The background is a light blue gradient.

## THE WAY FORWARD

### REFINE PROGRAMS FOR SCALE-UP AND RIGOROUS MEASUREMENT

Given positive preliminary results, both on the qualitative and quantitative measures of the pilot, we intend to refine and scale up the program to be implemented along with the early-grade reading intervention in hundreds of schools throughout Haiti. To do so effectively, lessons from the pilot will be incorporated into a refined implementation strategy (e.g., refining plans for the use of SEL-aligned texts, etc.). Additionally, a more rigorous evaluation design should be used to understand the full impact of the program. This might include the random selection of a larger number of treatment and control schools, allowing us to measure the causal impact of the SEL program on students' SEL skills and learning outcomes over time in the Haitian context.

### CHILDREN'S BOOKS AND PEDAGOGY

One aspect of the program that has been identified as in need of refinement is the pedagogical plans for the use of SEL-aligned texts. Efforts in Haiti to enhance teachers' use of children's books and child-centered pedagogies have been a challenge. Given large class sizes, low levels of training, and the prevalence of teacher-centered and rote pedagogy, teachers find active-learning strategies and child-centered pedagogies (e.g., readers theatre, where children act out the stories) to be intimidating or too difficult to implement. Difficulties implementing this component of the work will be considered in a refined approach to the use of SEL-aligned texts that are still pedagogically effective and foster student engagement and enjoyment of learning.

### OTHER MEANS OF FOSTERING RESILIENCE AND SEL DEVELOPMENT

Fostering resilience and positive holistic outcomes in children is about more than schooling. "Evidence suggests that there are important roles for families, schools and communities to play in enhancing children's social and emotional skills, and that coherence across multiple learning contexts needs be ensured" (Ikesako & Miyamoto, 2015). To begin to explore this in our program development, we will launch the L3 Learning Lab. L3 stands for 'Lakay, Legliz, Lekòl' (Home, Church, and School in Haitian Kreyol). The Learning Lab will seek to pilot and iteratively study a range of strategies for supporting children's healthy development and learning in the Haitian context using a more "ecological approach," that considers the key institutions in Haitian children's lives and communities that can foster their well-being and flourishing. Successful strategies will then be replicated and scaled in the Haitian context and beyond.

# REFERENCES

CASEL (2019). What Is SEL? Retrieved from <https://casel.org/what-is-sel/>

Belfield, C., Bowden, A. B., Klapp, A., Levin, H., Shand, R., & Zander, S. (2015). The economic value of social and emotional learning. *Journal of Benefit-Cost Analysis*, 6(3), 508-544.

Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child development*, 82(1), 405-432.

Elias, M. J., Zins, J. E., & Weissberg, R. P. (1997). *Promoting social and emotional learning: Guidelines for educators*. Ascd.

Flynn-O'Brien KT, Rivara FP, Weiss NS, Lea VA, Marcelin LH, Vertefeuille J, Mercy JA. (2016). Prevalence of physical violence against children in Haiti: A national population-based cross-sectional survey. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 51: 154-162.

Ikesako, H., Miyamoto, K. (2015) *Fostering social and emotional skills through families, schools and communities: Summary of international evidence and implication for Japan's educational practices and research*. OECD Education Working Paper no. 121. OECD.

Zins, J. E. (Ed.). (2004). *Building academic success on social and emotional learning: What does the research say?*. Teachers College Press.



---

*ace.nd.edu*

*Instagram: ACEatND*

*Twitter: @ACEatND*

*Facebook: @AllianceforCatholicEducation*