

Research Report
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“CATCH UP HAS OPENED THEM UP – THEY ARE FREE TO EXPRESS THEMSELVES”

***Exploring the influence of the Catch Up
programme on social-emotional learning
(SEL) in Zambian primary schools***

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This research was undertaken by benedex for VVOB



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LIST OF ACRONYMS

CASEL	Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning
CDC	Curriculum Development Centre
DEBS	District Education Board Secretary
ECE	early childhood education
GSHS	Global School-Based Student Health Survey
ICC	intraclass correlation
ISELA	International Social and Emotional learning Assessment
LtP	Learning through Play
MICS	Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey
MoE	Ministry of Education
PEO	Provincial Education Office
SD	standard deviation
SE	socio-emotional
SEL	social-emotional learning
TaRL	Teaching at the Right Level
VVOB	<i>Vereniging voor Ontwikkelingssamenwerking en Technische Bijstand</i>
WHO	World Health Organization

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH PROJECT

The government of Zambia has invested heavily in early literacy and numeracy as the basis for learners' long-term educational success. Central to this effort is the Catch Up programme, Zambia's adaptation of the [Teaching at the Right Level \(TaRL\)](#) approach – an accelerated learning intervention that groups children by learning level rather than grade, and uses playful, targeted instruction in their local language to improve foundational literacy and numeracy in primary school Grades 3-5. While Catch Up was initially designed to address persistent gaps in literacy and numeracy, emerging evidence suggests its influence may extend beyond academic outcomes. The programme's emphasis on learner-centred pedagogy and 'Learning through Play' (LtP) raises important questions about its potential contributions to social-emotional learning (SEL).

A study conducted by VVOB in 2023 (Cabus et al., 2023) sought to investigate these potential contributions and found that Catch Up appeared to support the strengthening of certain SEL skills, raising questions about which aspects of the programme are most impactful and how they drive that impact. Building on this work, the present research explores **perceptions** of the relationship between Catch Up and SEL, and aims to generate nuanced, contextually grounded insights about the **impacts** of Catch Up on SEL through teacher **practices** and about the key **drivers** that support SEL. Based on these insights, this research proposes future directions for policy, programming, and research.

RESEARCH DESIGN

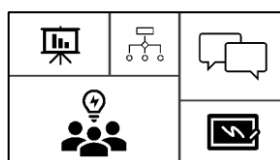
This study adopted a qualitatively driven mixed methods design, in which qualitative school-based methods and sensemaking activities guided by principles of play, critical reflection took precedence to support the co-construction of meaning *with* research participants, and reciprocal learning, and quantitative data were integrated at a later stage to enrich and validate qualitative findings.

MINI SCHOOL CASE STUDIES



Across six schools with varied Catch Up implementation timelines, we conducted semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and school tours 'through the eyes of learners' to explore potential causal pathways and to allow for shared reflection and interpretation.

SENSE-MAKING ACTIVITIES



Sense-making workshops with trainers, teachers & parents created opportunities for participants to interrogate, reflect on & refine emerging patterns, comparing & contrasting lived experiences with initial findings at both individual and school level.

REVISITING PRIOR RESEARCH



Prior data were interrogated from angles suggested by qualitative analysis to understand the statistical basis of earlier findings, explore alternative interpretations & clarify limitations or uncertainties in the results.

KEY TAKEAWAYS



PERCEPTIONS

What is SEL according to teachers & caregivers and what role, if any, should school play in supporting it?

How SEL is understood

- SEL is understood intuitively and relationally rather than as a discrete technical construct
- SEL is seen as closely linked to moral education and religious values, with kindness and empathy emerging as central concepts
- Broadly speaking, teachers distinguish between emotional compliance and emotional wellbeing

Perceived role of schools and teachers

- SEL is seen as foundational to learning, not an optional add-on, and teachers see themselves as central actors in learners' social and emotional development
- Teachers recognise the impact of learner backgrounds and try to compensate for difficult home environments, but there are limits to the support they can provide



IMPACTS

What, if any, are the impacts of the Catch Up programme on SEL?

Observed and perceived impacts

- Catch Up appears to lead to positive changes in empathy and peer interaction
- Catch Up strengthens learners' sense of belonging and attachment to school
- Learners demonstrate increased confidence, willingness to participate, and perseverance

Limits and caveats

- Positive impacts often manifest as emotional relief rather than skill acquisition
- Negative or mixed SEL impacts are also present, principally around placement in the beginner group, especially for older learners
- Differences in findings between the quantitative and qualitative studies may reflect measurement challenges rather than a given impact (or lack thereof) on learner SEL



PRACTICES

How, if at all, do teachers' knowledge, attitudes & practices of Catch Up relate to learners' SEL?

Teacher practices that support SEL

- Teachers' abilities to facilitate learning through play in Catch Up currently matters more for learners' SEL than the teaching of explicit SEL content
- Teachers integrate SEL into classes using prior experience

CATCH UP AND SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Constraints on effective practice

- SEL is typically not explicitly integrated into Catch Up training activities or planning processes
- Teachers feel under-supported and demotivated, undermining effective support for learners' SEL
- Ambiguous language policies constrain self-expression and participation



DRIVERS

Which components of Catch Up, if any, are responsible for driving social and emotional skills development?

Key enabling components

- Small class sizes and the pedagogical approaches they enable are one of the most consistently cited drivers of SEL
- Moving from the whole class to group work to individual support is also seen as an important driver for SEL
- Play-based learning is another powerful SEL driver
- Positive discipline and emotional safety distinguish Catch Up from regular classes

Contextual and conditional drivers and drivers with mixed effects

- The ability grouping associated with TaRL can both support and undermine SEL
- For many teachers, learners appeared to build more SEL skills in Catch Up numeracy than in Catch Up literacy
- Mentorship and school-level leadership shape implementation quality while structural factors outside Catch Up also influence outcomes

RECOMMENDATIONS

POLICY	✓ Strengthen integration of SEL into national curricula & teacher education ✓ Revisit language-of-instruction policies in multilingual contexts ✓ Improve teacher working conditions & support
PRACTICE	✓ Integrate SEL explicitly into Catch Up training & implementation ✓ Retain & strengthen pedagogical SEL drivers already embedded in Catch Up ✓ Support teachers as key agents of SEL & wellbeing
RESEARCH	✓ Review, refine & co-create tools for measurement/assessment of SEL ✓ Investigate differential SEL impacts between schools, subjects & levels ✓ Explore similarities & differences in SEL between Catch Up & regular classes ✓ Examine SEL impacts of ability grouping more deeply ✓ Design studies to assess short- & long-term SEL attributable to Catch Up

I: INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

Over the past decade, Zambia has invested heavily in strengthening foundational learning as a national priority, recognising that early literacy and numeracy form the basis for learners' long-term educational success. Central to this effort is the Catch Up programme, a government-led initiative implemented by the Ministry of Education in partnership with a range of technical and donor organisations starting in 2015. Catch Up has been designed around the principles of Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) and Learning through Play (LtP), two complementary approaches that help teachers assess learners' actual skill levels, group them accordingly, and use simple, structured, play-based activities to strengthen skills in literacy and numeracy.

While Catch Up was initially designed to address persistent gaps in literacy and numeracy, emerging evidence suggests that its influence may extend beyond academic outcomes. The programme's emphasis on learner-centred pedagogy and playful learning environments raises important questions about its potential contributions to social-emotional learning (SEL). Broadly understood as the development of key social and emotional skills such as emotional regulation, self-awareness, and empathy, SEL is increasingly recognised as essential for children's holistic development and long-term wellbeing. Yet, despite growing global interest, empirical evidence on how foundational learning interventions such as the Catch Up programme may shape learners' social and emotional development, particularly in low-resource settings.

A core feature of Catch Up is its commitment to continuous learning and adaptation, supported not only by regular monitoring and evaluation, but also through the undertaking of rigorous research studies. These studies help the Ministry of Education and its partners understand what elements of the programme are most effective and where there is room for improvement. The current study builds on this tradition to support evidence-informed improvement. By examining the relationship between Catch Up and SEL, this study seeks to generate nuanced, contextually grounded insights that can inform policy, programming, and future research.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The overall purpose of this exploratory research is to investigate the impact of the Zambian government's Catch Up programme on the social-emotional learning (SEL) outcomes of primary learners at the Grade 3-5 level. The research builds on the findings from a study conducted by VVOB in 2023.¹

¹ The research study, which was undertaken by VVOB in 2023, involved the administration of an adapted version of the International Social & Emotional Learning Assessment (ISELA) to 2606 learners from 95 schools (treatment schools in Lusaka province, control schools in Central province) and is presented in the following publications:

- Phiri, M.L., Cabus, S., Mathenge, J., Mooya, H., Ressler, D., Morell, A. & Vardoy-Mutale, A-T. (2023). An empirical investigation of social emotional learning among children in primary education: The case of Catch Up in Zambia. *Doing more with language teaching. NISSEM Briefs*, pp. 126-147.
- Cabus, S., Schroen, S., Phiri, M., Haatembo, M., Vandewalle, S. & Vromant, N. (2023). *On the contributions of remedial teaching to socio-emotional learning of children in the primary education system of Zambia*. Leuven: KU Leuven.

The research aims to explore the following research questions:

1. What is social emotional learning according to teachers and caregivers in Zambian schools and what role, if any, should schools/teachers play in supporting learners' social and emotional development? (*PERCEPTIONS*)
2. What, if any, are the impacts of the Catch Up programme on social emotional learning? (*IMPACTS*)
3. How, if at all, do teachers' knowledge, attitudes, and practices of Catch Up relate to learners' social and emotional development? (*PRACTICES*)
4. Which components of Catch Up, if any, are responsible for driving social and emotional skills development? (*DRIVERS*)

CONTEXT

While aspects of social and emotional development have been at the centre of the Zambia education system for over two decades, less attention has been paid to social-emotional learning (SEL) as a distinct concept until more recently. Teacher training in the Zambian curriculum aims to foster social competences through deliberate actions and emphasises the development of SEL competencies in learners by promoting their holistic development to function as individuals in different social contexts and better understand their role in society (CDC, 2000; CDC, 2013). This framework equips learners, particularly at the primary level, with knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes aligned with SEL (Mulenga & Kabombwe, 2019).

The Zambia Education Curriculum highlights a number of key aspects related to SEL, including learning to learn, communication and collaboration, and leadership and personal development, which are embedded across primary school subjects (CDC, 2013). Zambia has further affirmed its commitment to SEL development by realignment its education priorities to international bodies and agreements, including through alignment with the Sustainable Development Goal on quality education and Vision 2030, by emphasising self-reliance, knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes. The focus on values and attitudes in the curriculum aims to integrate SEL principles, thereby promoting the development of well-rounded individuals. Effort in present and previous curriculum frameworks places strong emphasis on methodologies such as active learning, role-play, debates, and group work particularly in Grades 1 to 4 to strengthen learners' social and emotional skills (CDC, 2013). This learner-centred approach emphasises meaningful engagement with real-life contexts, enabling learners not only to acquire knowledge but also to develop essential social-emotional competencies. Through practical and experiential learning, learners build skills such as critical thinking, self-awareness, responsible decision-making, collaboration, and the ability to reflect on and apply knowledge in everyday situations.

Recently, teacher education in Zambia has aimed to prepare teachers to support SEL outcomes in learners. For instance, Ministry of Education syllabi for Early Childhood Education (ECE) and special needs emphasize the importance of social and emotional development alongside cognitive growth, reflecting strong policy intent. This innovation remains key in shaping the SEL outlook on the Zambian Education landscape. Teachers and teacher-educators deliberately set high expectations for all learners in ways that intentionally foster social-emotional learning skills. By establishing challenging yet supportive standards, educators help learners develop self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision-making. Further, teachers learn that experiencing success can strengthen learners' self-efficacy and confidence, while also nurturing resilience, perseverance, and a growth mindset.

Teachers are encouraged to help ensure that they help to create a conducive learning environment, which encourages learners to take initiative, regulate their emotions when facing difficulties, and

confidently engage in further learning challenges (CDC, 2013). Through this curriculum, learners develop not only knowledge and academic skills but also social-emotional competencies, positive values, and constructive attitudes that enable them to function effectively in different social environments. The curriculum is therefore intentionally designed to respond to both individual and societal needs by promoting self-awareness, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and ethical engagement within the community (CDC, 2023; Ministry of Education, 2024).

Another way in which the Zambian teacher education sector promotes SEL is through ‘reflective education’, which recognises that learning is not only about the transmission of knowledge and skills but also about nurturing values, cultural identity, and social responsibility across generations. Traditionally, this learning occurred informally through interactions with adults and peers within the community. With the advent of formal education, schools now share this responsibility with families and local communities, ensuring that learners develop self-awareness, respect for diversity, empathy, and a sense of belonging. In this way, education supports learners in critically reflecting on cultural heritage and applying meaningful values and social-emotional competencies that are relevant and beneficial in contemporary society.

The revised curriculum framework for 2023 further puts emphasis on SEL under life skills and health Education by promoting positive behaviour and enable learners to deal more effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life. Life skills are conceptualised as both vocational and psychosocial skills. Vocational skills promote occupational skills whilst psychosocial skills include self-awareness, decision making, problem solving, critical thinking, creative thinking, effective communication, empathy, interpersonal relationships, coping with emotions, and stress management (CDC, 2023). These are deliberately reinforced during teacher training and curriculum implementation in Zambian schools.

OVERVIEW

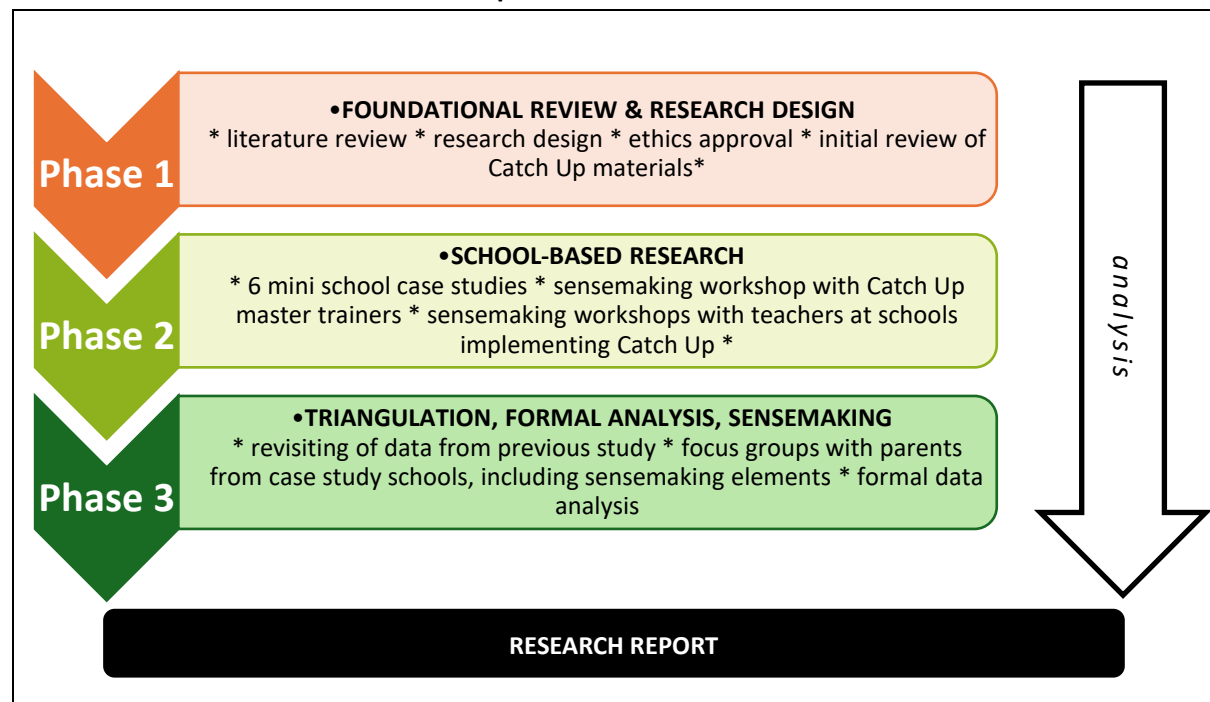
This report is organised in five sections. Following this [introduction](#), the report outlines the [research design](#) for the current study, including the conceptual framework, the research methods adopted, key sampling and methodological considerations that were made, research ethics, and the approach to data analysis. The [findings](#) section is organised into three complementary sub-sections: a summary of our re-examination of earlier quantitative and descriptive evidence from the previous study, detailed school vignettes illustrating how Catch Up is experienced in diverse learning environments, and the results of collaborative sense-making activities with trainers, teachers, and parents. The report concludes with [key takeaways](#) in response to our research questions, and a set of policy, programme, and research [recommendations](#) aimed at strengthening the integration of SEL within Catch Up and the wider Zambian education system.

II: RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employed a qualitatively driven mixed methods design, in which qualitative methods take precedence, and quantitative data were integrated at a later stage to enrich and validate qualitative findings:

1. **Phase 1** involved an initial review of existing literature, including previous research on Catch Up and SEL in Zambia, the drafting of the initial research design and inception report, and a review of key Catch Up materials and the ISELA tool utilised in the previous study.
2. **Phase 2** was undertaken in Zambia and involved mini case studies at select schools implementing the Catch Up programme and sense-making workshops with Catch Up trainers and teachers from schools implementing Catch Up.
3. **Phase 3** served as a synthesis and triangulation stage and involved revisiting data from the previous VVOB study to critically compare its findings with the data collected during Phases 1 and 2. This re-engagement with earlier research allowed for a contextualised interpretation of new insights. Additionally, focus group discussions with parents from case study schools were conducted to include community-level perspectives and further triangulate emerging findings.

FIGURE 1: Overview of the research process



CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework for this study first explored how SEL was defined in the previous VVOB study, which used a modified version of an International Social and Emotional learning Assessment (ISELA) questionnaire developed by D'Sa and Krupar (2019), consisting of five domains, as follows:

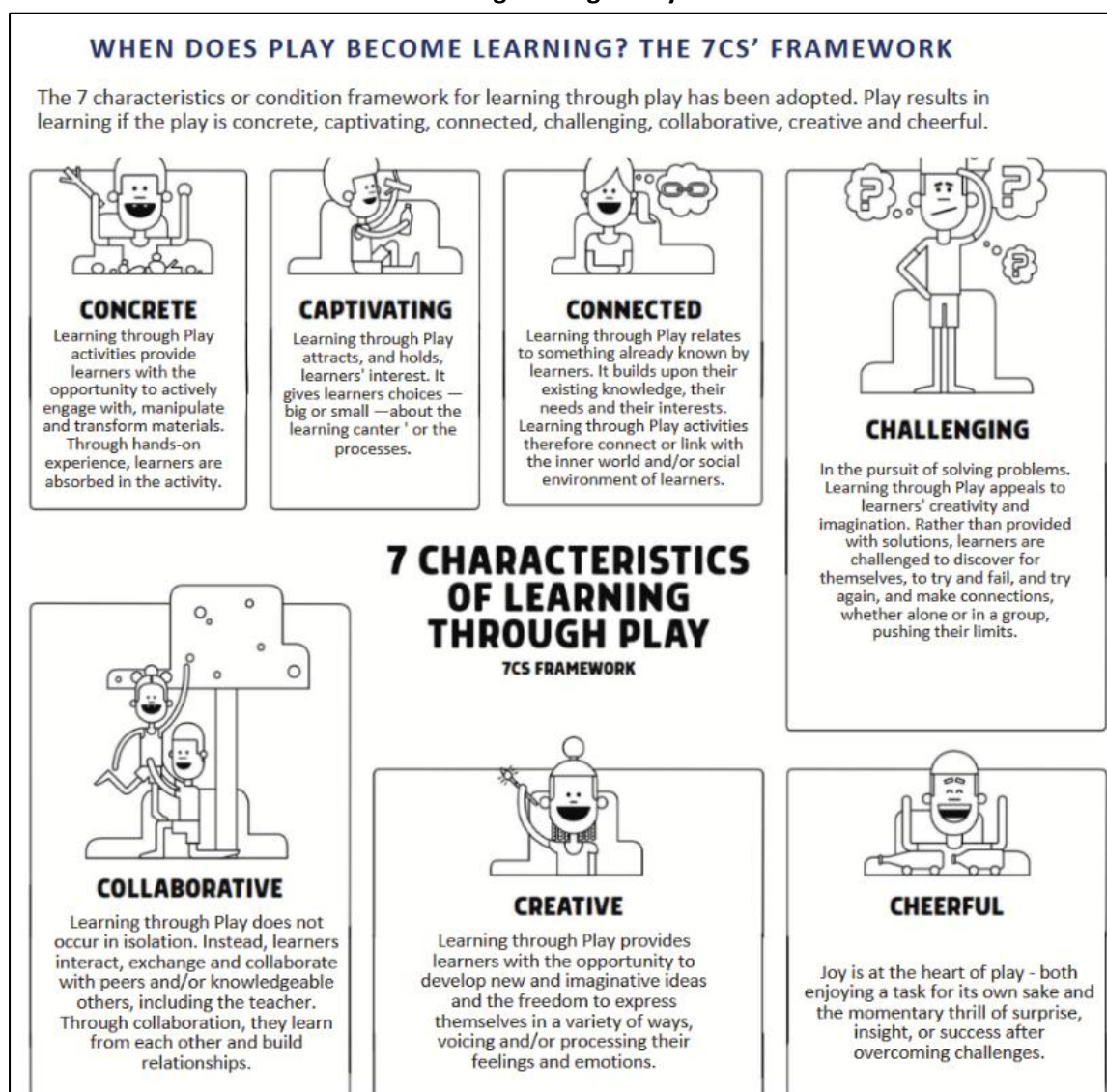
- *Self-Concept*: learners' ability to express their own preferences, feelings, and identity.
- *Empathy*: the ability to understand and respond to the emotions and expectations of others.
- *Perseverance*: staying engaged with tasks, even when they are difficult or success is delayed.
- *Conflict Resolution*: resolving disagreements and seeking help to manage social challenges.
- *Stress Management*: using personal strategies to cope with emotional and academic stress.

CATCH UP AND SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

The previous study used these domains to explore how SEL manifests in classrooms and whether, and in what ways, it is shaped by participation in the Catch Up programme. It also considered the importance of safe and inclusive learning environments and the social support systems that learners can access – both peer- and teacher-based – as key influences on SEL development.

As noted previously, the Catch Up programme is Zambia’s adaptation of the Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) approach – an accelerated learning intervention that groups children by learning level rather than grade, and uses playful, targeted instruction to improve foundational literacy and numeracy in Grades 3-5. As part of Catch Up training, teachers are introduced to the 7Cs – Concrete, Captivating, Connected, Challenging, Collaborative, Creative, and Cheerful – as principles for making teaching more engaging and learner-centred. The 7Cs are defined in the figure below, which is taken from the Ministry of Education’s resources on supporting ‘learning through play’ (LtP) in Zambia.

FIGURE 2: 7 Characteristics of Learning through Play



Source: Ministry of Education (2020, p. 3)

The previous VVOB study indicates that some Cs are more consistently taken up in practice than others, raising questions about which aspects of the approach are most impactful in fostering SEL.

CATCH UP AND SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

In addition to reinforcing the use of the 7Cs in the classroom, the training materials for both literacy and numeracy make reference to the impact of a Learning through Play approach on overall learner development in a handout towards the back of the manual, as shown in Figure 3.

TABLE 1: “Impact of Learning Through Play on Fields of Development” handout

Impact of Learning Through Play on Fields of Development			
Connection to benefits identified by the LEGO Foundation	Domain	Sub-domain	Specific Benefits
Cognitive Skills	Cognitive Development	- Logical and Analytical Thinking - Cognitive Processes Numeracy - Language & Literacy	- Reasoning - Abstract thinking
Social Skills	Social-emotional Development	- Emotional development - Social development - Moral development	- Self-concept - Self-regulation - Self-awareness and expression - Socio-emotional wellbeing - Interpersonal skills - Social competence - Values
Emotional Skills			
Physical Skills	Physical Development	- Motor development - Visual-motor integration skills	- Physical wellbeing - Gross motor development - Fine motor development - Eye-hand coordination
Creative Skills	Learning to learn	- Inquiry - Observation - Exploration	- Exploration and experimentation - Curiosity and interest - Persistence - Imitation and emulation - Creativity

Note: The extension of these quotes is from the proponents of the following authorities.

1. According to Zambia's Early Learning Development Standards (ELDS), numeracy is a sub-domain of meta-learning.
2. According to the ELDS, language and literacy is a separate domain instead of a sub-domain of cognitive development.
3. In the ELDS, values are part of the domain's "moral and spiritual development."

Source: Catch Up Manual

The handout articulates three sub-domains of what is referred to as “Social-emotional Development” (as opposed to SEL), namely, emotional development, social development, and moral development and includes a specific set of “benefits” (rather than skills). Interestingly, while both social skills and emotional skills are listed, it is not clear whether the term “benefits” is intended to be synonymous with “skills”. It is also worth noting that there is a set of creative skills/benefits that also seem directly relevant to SEL, especially as they include “persistence” and “exploration and experimentation.”

In addressing Research Question 1, this study also explicitly examined how SEL is conceptualised by Zambian education stakeholders. As noted by Phiri et al. (2023), there may be a disconnect between Western-derived definitions of SEL and Zambian cultural understandings. Therefore, this study prioritised building an understanding of local interpretations of SEL. In doing so, it aimed to avoid what Dalrymple (2023) describes as “a kind of cultural imperialism, denigrating Africa’s rich cultural heritage,” and instead sought to surface both the strengths and limitations of different conceptual frameworks, valuing Zambian perspectives in their own right.

Central to the study’s conceptual framing was a commitment to positioning research participants as collaborators in knowledge production rather than as passive sources of data. This orientation shaped our relationship with teachers, trainers, mentors, learners, and caregivers throughout the research process.

Guided by principles of play, critical reflection, and reciprocal learning, we approached data collection as a shared educational practice in which meaning was co-constructed *with* research participants rather than extracted *from* them. Teachers and school-level actors were treated as professional colleagues whose interpretive insights actively informed the direction of inquiry, while schools themselves functioned as sites of ongoing, collective sense-making.

RESEARCH METHODS

As noted previously, this study was implemented in three distinct but interconnected phases, using a qualitatively driven mixed methods approach that aimed to deepen understanding of whether, how, and why Zambia’s Catch Up programme may be contributing to learners’ social-emotional development. Methods selected for each phase are described below.

Phase 1: Foundational review

Building on a rapid review of general SEL literature and SEL in African and Zambian contexts as well as of the previous study report, we undertook basic content analysis of both the Catch Up manuals and the ISELA questionnaire and guidance utilised for the previous study. The aim was to explore how SEL is currently integrated in the manuals, how it was measured in the previous study, and how Catch Up elements align with different SEL domains.

This process helped us clarify how SEL is currently defined and delivered in Zambian schools, inside and outside the Catch Up programme and also helped identify gaps or misalignments between how SEL is conceptualised, measured, and supported in practice.

Phase 2: School-based case studies and sense-making

This phase involved conducting mini case studies in selected schools and sense-making workshops to explore specific SEL-related phenomena, including those observed in the earlier study.

CATCH UP AND SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

TABLE 2: Phase 2 research methods

Method	Participants	Description
Semi-structured interviews with Catch Up teachers	1 Catch Up teacher per school	Interviews explored potential links between Catch Up and SEL. Duration: 60-90 minutes.
Semi-structured interviews/mini focus groups with Catch Up trainers and mentors	Catch Up trainers, Catch Up mentors (note that these were sometimes the same individuals)	Discussions explored potential links between Catch Up and SEL, with a particular focus on training and support of teachers. The structure and number of discussions depended on the availability of the individuals at the school. Duration: 60-90 minutes.
Teacher focus groups	4-6 teachers per school	The focus groups with teachers explored how SEL is supported across the curriculum and school culture. Activities included prompts, rating exercises, and discussions. Note that in a couple of cases, there were only 2-3 teachers involved in the focus group. Duration: ~90 minutes.
Learner focus groups undertaken as a school tour	6 Catch Up learners per school	Building on the principles of learning through play, facilitators worked with learners to co-design a tour route of meaningful school spaces (e.g., classrooms, Catch Up areas, playgrounds), using smiley face rating cards at each stop to help learners express how they feel about different locations and their experiences there. Tours were conducted in learners' preferred local language (Nyanja or Bemba), and researchers sought both child assent and prior parental and school consent. These activities lasted 60-90 minutes.
Sense-making workshop with trainers	10-12 Catch Up trainers	A 2.5-3-hour interactive session exploring how SEL is understood, taught, and supported in Zambian schools. Participants reflected on early findings and generated insights from their own practice. They were also asked to design and deliver mini Catch Up lessons in literacy and numeracy that would support SEL, engaging all participants to learn through play.
Sense-making workshop with teachers 1	10-12 teachers from non-case study schools who have been implementing Catch Up for about the same amount of time as the case study schools	A 2.5-3 hour interactive session exploring preliminary results from the case studies and Phase 1 analysis through collaborative reflection to compare and contrast lived experiences with initial findings at both the individual and school level. As with the workshop with trainers, participants were also asked to design and deliver mini Catch Up lessons in literacy and numeracy that would support SEL, engaging all attendees to learn through play.
Sense-making workshop with teachers 2	10-12 teachers from non-case study schools with more recent Catch Up implementation	A second 2.5-3-hour results workshop to compare interpretations of findings with teachers from schools where Catch Up has been introduced more recently. This contrast helped assess consistency and variation in SEL experiences across different stages of programme implementation. As with the workshop with trainers, participants were also asked to design and deliver mini Catch Up lessons in literacy and numeracy that would support SEL, engaging all attendees to learn through play.

RATIONALE

This phase was designed to generate transferable, in-depth insights through collaborative inquiry rather than to produce generalisable claims. Semi-structured interviews, focus groups, school tours, and sense-making workshops were designed to help us explore potential causal pathways and to allow for shared reflection and interpretation. Consistent with our conceptual framing, these methods positioned teachers, mentors, and trainers as professional colleagues whose insights actively shaped the direction of analysis. The sense-making workshops, in particular, created structured opportunities for participants to interrogate, refine, and validate emerging patterns, enabling analysis to unfold in dialogue rather than at a distance. By engaging educators from schools with varied Catch Up implementation timelines, the workshops allowed us to explore whether insights from case study sites resonated more widely. This broader, participatory engagement deepened our understanding of how SEL is conceptualised and enacted across diverse Zambian school settings and strengthened the interpretive rigour of the study.

While both our approach and more standard observational tools such as [CASEL's Indicators of Schoolwide SEL Walkthrough Protocol](#) involve moving through different spaces within the school to build a picture of the learning environment, our study adapted this idea in a way that placed greater emphasis on the perspectives of school community members themselves. Whereas the CASEL walkthrough typically relies on external observers completing structured checklists in consultation with school staff, our approach sought to understand the school environment by centring the lived experiences of those within it.

The school tour with learners was particularly important in this regard: rather than assessing SEL conditions from an external vantage point, the tour allowed us to explore the school 'through the eyes of learners,' foregrounding what they notice, value, and experience in their daily interactions. This shift from checklist-based observation to participatory exploration aligns with our broader methodological stance of treating schools as sites of collaborative sense-making.

IMAGES 1-2: Exploring schools from learners' perspectives through a play-based tour



Phase 3: Reanalysis, triangulation, and community engagement

The final phase returned to the previous VVOB study's dataset to conduct further analysis and also engaged parents and caregivers in interpreting emerging findings.

TABLE 3: Phase 3 research methods

Method	Data Source / Participants	Description
Secondary data analysis	Quantitative data from previous study	Researchers revisited prior datasets to understand the statistical basis of earlier findings, explore alternative interpretations, and clarify limitations or uncertainties in the results.
Focus groups with parents of Catch Up learners with sensemaking aspects	6-8 parents/carers who have children in the Catch Up programme from each of the six case study schools	Structured, participatory group discussions (120 minutes) with sensemaking elements validated findings through local perspectives. Participants were asked about their hopes and expectations about their children, their experiences with schooling and the Catch Up programme, and their understanding of social and emotional learning and development. Modified Catch Up activities were used with participants, designed to anchor the discussion in an experiential, hands-on approach, allowing participants to engage in play-based learning and reflect on their experience.

RATIONALE

This phase supported both triangulation and contextualisation of findings. The reanalysis ensured rigour and transparency, while parent focus groups bring in critical community voices to test resonance and identify blind spots in the school-based analysis.

OVERALL METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study design was intentionally iterative, participatory, and sensitive to context. Several key strategies underpin the methodology:

- **Conceptual clarity and cultural relevance:** Tools and coding frameworks were refined based on input from Zambian educators and stakeholders. Particular attention was paid to how SEL is understood locally, addressing concerns raised in Phiri et al. (2023) about applying Western SEL frameworks without adaptation.
- **Participatory reflection:** Sense-making was embedded throughout the process, positioning teachers and parents not just as respondents but as co-interpreters of findings. This strategy also included regular analytical discussions among members of the research team.
- **Exploratory depth over generalisability:** The case study approach allowed for meaningful exploration of different SEL outcomes and conditions across diverse school settings.
- **Check-in with experts:** During final analysis and write-up, we interviewed two experts to support validation of our analysis – one of the researchers from the previous study and an SEL expert who has worked in many African countries.

SAMPLING

Given the study's mixed-methods design, different sampling strategies were selected across the various phases, tailored to the purpose and structure of each data collection activity. Participants and schools were selected from Zambia's Central Province.

Sampling for case studies and sense-making

SCHOOL CASE STUDY SELECTION

We applied a combination of purposive and theoretical sampling to identify six schools for in-depth case studies. This approach allowed us to select cases based on their relevance to emerging themes from the previous study – particularly schools where specific SEL domains appear to have been influenced by Catch Up. With the support of VVOB, two schools from each of three districts in Central Province (i.e., Chibombo, Chisamba, and Shibuyunji) were selected where there appears to be evidence of effective implementation of Catch Up. Each district includes one school that has been implementing the Catch Up programme for a long time and one that has more recently started implementation.

SENSE-MAKING WORKSHOP PARTICIPANT SELECTION

We used purposive sampling to select 10-12 participants for each of three sense-making workshops:

- **Trainer workshop:** Participants included Catch Up trainers from each of the three districts from which case study schools were identified (i.e., Chibombo, Chisamba, and Shibuyunji), including the Catch Up trainers interviewed in Phase 1. This session was held in Lusaka and supported reflection on local understandings of SEL and its role within school programming.
- **Teacher workshop 1:** Participants included teachers from schools in Chibombo and Kabwe where Catch Up has been implemented for a longer period but that were not part of the case study sample. These teachers helped contextualise and validate emerging findings based on their broader classroom experience. This workshop was held in Chibombo.
- **Teacher workshop 2:** Participants included teachers from schools in Mkushi and Kapiri Mposhi where Catch Up has been implemented. Schools were a mix of early and later implementers of Catch Up. This group provided diverse perspectives on both early and late implementation. This workshop was held in Mkushi.

Sampling for reanalysis and parent/caregiver engagement

SECONDARY DATA ANALYSIS

We received ethical approval to revisit and conduct further analysis of the quantitative data collected during the previous VVOB study. Subject to important caveats (such as no access to processing code previously used, and other limitations elaborated below), this allowed us to explore alternative interpretations, assess robustness of findings, and identify any additional patterns or anomalies relevant to SEL development.

PARENT FOCUS GROUPS

We conducted focus group discussions with 6-8 parents/primary caregivers at each of the six case study schools whose children were participating in Catch Up. Participants were identified in collaboration with school administrators and reflected a mix of caregivers (mothers, fathers, or guardians). These discussions helped to triangulate findings by exploring caregivers' perspectives on children's emotional wellbeing, school climate, and experiences with Catch Up.

ETHICS

Working closely with the client, and in accordance with the client's [Integrity Policy](#), ethical standards were maintained and appropriate safeguarding measures in place throughout the research. This is

particularly important given that this research involved school settings with learners under the age of 18. We developed protocols to ensure all research participants provided informed consent, that is: they *understood* the research and their participation, they *agreed explicitly and voluntarily* to participate, and they knew that their consent is *renegotiable* (that they could withdraw at any stage of the research process (Graham et al., 2013). For research participants under the age of 18, steps were taken to ensure that they had parental permission or the permission of their guardian(s) to participate in the research. For the school visits, refreshments were made available for all participants and research activities were arranged not to interfere with key teaching and learning activities.

To obtain the necessary ethical clearance for the research, an application was submitted to the [Ethics Committee at the University of Zambia](#), consisting of an application form, the research proposal, ethical protocols (including consent forms), statement information sheet, research tools, supporting institution letters and approvals, and a clearance fee. Approval for the research was received on September 15, 2025.

All individual data were de-identified and kept in secure locations to maintain confidentiality. Best practice was followed regarding the storage, encryption, and backup of sensitive data. We will provide the client with all data collected throughout the research, ensuring that the appropriate ethical guidelines are followed and understand that the data (with full anonymity preserved) will remain the property of the client at the conclusion of the assignment.

DATA ANALYSIS

The study adopted an iterative, analytical approach, in which the research team acted as analysts already at the data collection stage rather than training enumerators to gather data for later analysis. This strategy helped us to leverage the expertise of a strong team of international and local researchers and positioned schools both as sites of data collection and sites of analysis. Embedding analysis in the field allowed the team to move from initial insights to more formal analysis in real time, ensuring that emerging patterns could inform subsequent research activities and the revisiting of the data from the previous study.

Data analysis combined multiple complementary methods. Qualitative data was captured through analytical notetaking, with timestamped annotations during school-based activities and workshops instead of relying on transcripts. Notes were handwritten in the field, typed up, and synthesised into activity summaries, which then informed the development of school vignettes and workshop summaries. Insights were generated iteratively through the processes captured in Figures 4 and 5.

FIGURE 3: Analysis process during research activities

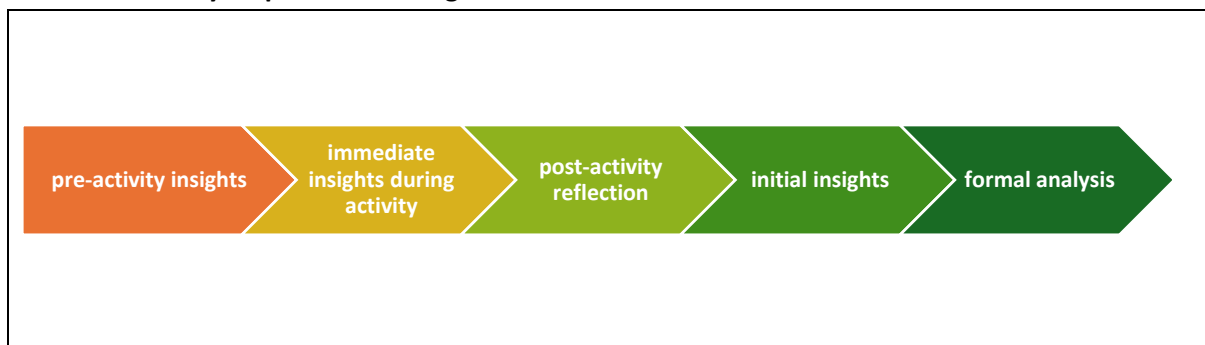
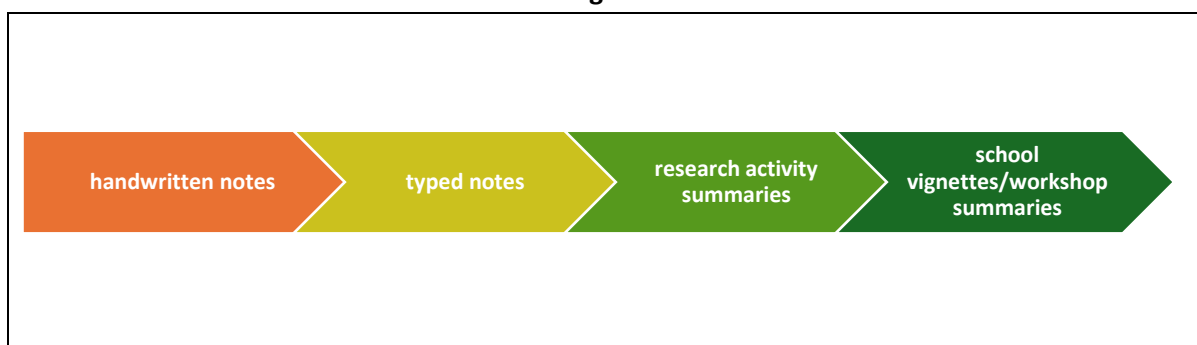


FIGURE 4: Research site-based data handling

Coding of qualitative data combined *a priori* codes (developed from the rapid literature review and initial conceptual framework) with inductive coding to capture unanticipated themes. Sensemaking workshops with Catch Up master trainers and ongoing discussions between members of the research team and external experts helped to refine the analytical framework and validate findings.

Quantitative analysis involved revisiting secondary data from the earlier Catch Up evaluation, using Stata for replication and R for exploratory statistical modelling and data visualisation. An important caveat is that only input data were received (but no codebooks or processing code), and only data for the ISELA assessment, not for the implementation fidelity component of the previous study. Moreover, it could not be confirmed whether the data received was the latest and final used in the previous study. The file received still contained apparent data errors (such as ages given as 2 or 3 years, or a median value of 24 household members), inconsistent data formatting (such as between the baseline and endline date of assessment), and a total number of observations that differs from that reported previously, which suggests that additional cleaning and pre-processing took place as part of the previous study that was not yet reflected in the data we had access to.

Exact replication of previous results would be beyond the scope of interest of the present study, which squarely focuses on an in-depth understanding of potential mechanisms behind any effects of Catch Up on SEL. In any case, exact replication is not feasible for both unavoidable and incidental reasons. The irreducible barriers to perfect replication include the fact that some of the statistical techniques employed as part of the analysis, even when defined deterministically in theory, in practice make use of stochastic approximation algorithms to compute their results. This means that minor differences in different versions of statistical packages, distinct statistical packages, random-number generation, and even hardware can result in non-deterministic variation between estimates. Such differences should be small but cannot be expected to be zero even in principle. More consequentially, the available documentation of the preceding analysis, while perfectly in line with results-focused reporting standards, does not provide the level of detail on process required for it to be fully replicable. For instance, the documentation of the previous analysis mentions that an asset index was constructed to measure household wealth/living standards, as well as which variables were included, but not whether the index represented a simple percentage of relevant assets owned (as suggested by the ISELA administration guide, in line with the scores for the SEL domains), or was constructed using a more complex method, such as principal components analysis (as typically used as part of Demographic Health Surveys or Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys) (Filmer & Scott, 2008).

Throughout the study, sense-making workshops actively involved participants in the analytic process. These workshops allowed trainers and teachers to reflect on and interpret preliminary findings, offer alternative explanations, and help test the plausibility of emerging hypotheses. At the final stage, findings from all data sources were synthesised thematically and iteratively, to generate evidence to strengthen policy, improve programme delivery, and advance SEL assessment in Zambia.

III: FINDINGS

INTRODUCTION

The findings presented in this section bring together evidence generated across the different phases of the study, weaving insights from the previous Catch Up SEL study with new school-level insights and collaborative sense-making activities. Taken together, these strands of analysis illuminate how learners, teachers, trainers, and caregivers understand social-emotional learning, the potential impacts of Catch Up on learners' SEL and the possible drivers of social and emotional skills development embedded in the programme.

The first subsection revisits the dataset from the earlier study, examining patterns in learners' SEL outcomes according to a number of factors, such as school-level differences, home-learning environments, and changes across age and grade. This re-engagement with prior evidence provides a quantitative and descriptive foundation for the current inquiry. The second subsection presents a series of school vignettes developed through mini case studies, offering a grounded view of how Catch Up is enacted in practice. The final subsection synthesises insights from sense-making workshops and focus groups with trainers, teachers, and parents, foregrounding the interpretive perspectives of those involved in Catch Up implementation.

The report recognises the central role of teachers in successful Catch Up implementation and aims to highlight their voices throughout.

Teachers and the Catch Up programme

- The teacher is viewed as central to the success of Catch Up, and, according to the manual, is assumed to be: *“a professional teacher who is imaginative, creative and well-motivated to help [your] learners learn through a variety of creative activities.”*
- They deliver daily one-hour Catch Up sessions outside regular teaching time, focusing on helping learners grasp foundational literacy and numeracy “at the right level.”
- Teachers receive two manuals (one for Literacy and one for Numeracy), which outline learning levels, sample activities, and guidance for structuring lessons and are intended to support their training and future planning activities.
- Catch Up training is short and intensive, led by master trainers (experienced teachers). Training covers:
 - assessing learners one-on-one
 - grouping learners by level
 - planning and facilitating play-based activities
 - creating low-cost teaching and learning resources
 - monitoring learner progress
 - using the formal language of play
- At school level, teachers are ideally supported by Catch Up mentors, with additional oversight from district and provincial officials.
- While refresher trainings are offered, not all teachers can attend, so selected teachers often cascade new learning to colleagues.

IMAGE 3: Teacher-made resources for the Catch Up programme



REVISITING THE PREVIOUS STUDY

The following section presents a summary of analyses based on revisiting selected quantitative data from the previous study on Catch Up and SEL, in order to interrogate those data from additional angles suggested by the qualitative analysis at the heart of approach (Note that the full analysis is included in the [Annex](#)). The wording 'revisit' is deliberate and emphasises that the present purpose is not to replicate the original results 1-to-1, even as a baseline, and is limited to ISELA questionnaire data (other data from the previous study, such as classroom observations or implementation fidelity observations could not be accessed). A brief description of the ISELA questionnaire and how it was utilised in the previous study is presented in the box below, in order to support the reader's understanding of the analysis to follow:

Summary of the ISELA Child Questionnaire Used in the Previous Study

The child-level questionnaire used in the earlier Catch Up study collected essential background information on each learner, including demographic details, household composition, socio-economic conditions, and basic schooling experiences. These sections provided contextual data needed to interpret children's social and emotional learning (SEL) outcomes. It then assessed domains through child-friendly tasks, vignettes, and simple performance activities:

- **Relationships:** Identifies the size and use of children's support networks at home, with friends, and with adults in school or the community and captures whether children seek help when sad, facing conflict, or working on something difficult.
- **Stress management:** Explores strategies children use to calm down when angry or upset and responses are coded as appropriate or inappropriate coping behaviours.
- **Empathy:** Uses picture-based scenarios to assess recognition of emotions such as sadness and anger and includes short stories about ambiguous provocations and asks how children would respond or help others.
- **Perseverance:** Involves drawing using the non-dominant hand to observe persistence with a challenging activity that indicates willingness to continue despite difficulty or frustration.
- **Conflict resolution:** Presents vignettes about sharing and peer conflict where children describe how they would respond and if they can generate multiple constructive strategies.
- **Learning Environment Safety:** Captures children's experiences of fear, bullying, exclusion, or violence at school in the past week.
- **Self-Concept:** Uses a drawing-based activity to explore children's future hopes and their ability to imagine themselves in that future.

Note: In several sections, items were intentionally cross-referenced across domains. Selected questions from the Relationships module (e.g., seeking help when sad, facing conflict, etc.) also contributed to the composite scores for Stress Management, Perseverance, Empathy, and Conflict Resolution, reflecting the interconnected nature of children's social support networks and their broader SEL competencies.

The key previous findings were summarised by the report authors as follows:

"Across the three models [with different controls] we find strong robust evidence that the Catch-Up program positively influenced the empathy domain. We estimate an effect of 0.15 SD significant at 1%-level. We also find a positive impact on the sub-scale 'story' of the conflict resolution domain. The main effect is equal to 0.11 SD significant at 5%-level. At the same time, we find a negative impact of -0.08 SD significant at 5%-level on the sub-scale 'network' of the conflict resolution domain... We find that the Catch-Up program had the largest effects on children in community schools. SEL-domains empathy and story regarding the group of male children, and children with a wealth status above the median, were also more impacted. The negative impact on network appears again among girls and children with a wealth status below the median."

In other words, the previous study found:

- a small but significant increase in *empathy* among Catch-Up participants,
- a small but significant increase in *conflict resolution* among Catch-Up participants,
- a small but significant decrease in Catch Up learner scores on the *network* domain, and
- the absence of significant impacts of Catch-Up on *self-concept*, *stress management*, and *perseverance*.

While an exact replication of the previous results as a baseline for further exploration was not possible, as we only had access to selected input data (as explained in the [Methodology Section](#)), we were able to achieve equivalent descriptive results. The previous study report notes that the main

results remained robust to considerable variations in model specification, including changes to the sample and matching approach. We therefore consider the closeness of baseline results achievable with the available data and documentation to be ‘good enough’ to proceed with additional quantitative analyses that can be interpreted in continuity with the previous results. Nevertheless, some ambiguities could only be dealt with through assumptions, so the results remain tentative and do not drive our overall conclusions and recommendations.

We should also note that the data collection for the previous study took place in 2023, as the Catch Up programme was starting to be rolled out to Central Province. Our study took place in 2025, when Catch Up had reached all schools in the province. For this reason, it is possible that discrepancies between the original study and the current study is partly due to discrepancies between pilot implementation and scale up.

Overall magnitude of SEL effects

The previous study found only modest SEL effects associated with Catch Up, with the largest impact, a statistically significant gain in empathy, moderate when considered in absolute terms and when interpreted against the wider SEL literature. Our analysis expresses this as roughly one additional appropriate response for every third learner, which is meaningful but not transformative. As will be demonstrated in our [School Vignettes](#), our qualitative analysis also suggests gains in empathy among learners participating in Catch Up, but also why they may be relatively modest. In particular, a smaller than expected effect size may be due to the fact that SEL is currently not directly planned for during Catch Up activities, but emerges indirectly through features such as group work, individualised support, smaller class sizes, and opportunities for visible progress. Further, many learners’ socio-emotional challenges (such as abuse at home, or food insecurity) cannot be addressed by Catch Up, and there is the potential for offsetting negative SEL impacts, such as the teasing by more advanced level learners of learners whose status as beginners is formalised and made visible by Catch Up.

Understanding counterintuitive patterns

Although teachers, mentors, and trainers in our qualitative study widely associated Catch Up with strengthening learners’ perseverance, highlighting its achievable milestones and “keep trying until you succeed” approach, the previous evaluation did not detect measurable gains on ISELA’s perseverance measure, which seems counterintuitive. However, our re-analysis suggests that this discrepancy between qualitative and quantitative findings is unsurprising given how perseverance is operationalised in ISELA. The construct is based on two types of items: an overly easy geometric drawing task that produced little variation, and help-seeking questions whose conceptual link to perseverance is ambiguous and not aligned with how teachers understand the skill. The psychometric validation found that only the help-seeking items contributed meaningfully to the factor structure, raising questions about whether the instrument captures the form of perseverance most relevant to Catch Up, which unfolds over months rather than minutes. Also of note is that ISELA explicitly does not cover the extent to which children display or develop a ‘growth mindset’ (D’sa and Krupar, 2021, p. 24). In other words, the decline in help-seeking among some groups may reflect growing confidence or independence rather than a loss of SEL skill. As perseverance was not subject to construct-validity testing in ISELA, future work will need to examine whether the tool meaningfully reflects how stakeholders in Zambia interpret and observe perseverance in practice.

Methodological challenges and practice effects

Our revisiting of previous study data and new qualitative research points to other methodological issues that may have influenced the original results. A gain in empathy among learners in Catch Up schools relative to the control in the original study (and more appropriate responses to conflict scenarios) aligns well with our qualitative findings that identified group work, including with children outside of learners' circle of friends, as one of the main opportunities for Catch Up to positively affect SEL. At the same time, that empathy scores also increased in the control group, albeit less, raises critical methodological questions. One is around the possibility of practice effects, particularly because the same story vignettes were used at baseline and endline. In addition, the ISELA relationship items (used to test perseverance, etc.) require learners to report that they *do* seek help, rather than whether they *could* if needed, which may penalise older learners who may become more independent naturally as they mature. While age was included in the previous study in comparisons between participants who suffered attrition and those who did not, exact age and increase in developmental age between baseline and endline was not used in the main analysis at the time.

Structural and contextual influences

Differences between schools: The previous study found that SEL scores show low intraclass correlation (ICC) within schools. Our quantitative analysis provides additional evidence that the ISELA learning-environment measures largely capture individual perceptions rather than consistent, school-level conditions. What our school vignettes show is that at this time, there is substantial structural variation in how Catch Up is implemented across schools, including differences in instructor training and group sizes, that are not reflected in the ISELA dataset and that may exceed implementation differences during the initial piloting and roll out of Catch Up. Incidentally, our re-analysis of the learning-environment items from the previous study shows that across most schools, a majority of learners report witnessing abusive behaviour by adults on a weekly basis, a pattern that underscores the need to complement individual SEL skill-building with whole-school approaches to promoting safe learning environments.

Learning and home environment: To better understand and contextualise the relationship between SEL and relationships with adults assumed by ISELA, we performed additional analyses of the existing quantitative data to examine whether learners are less likely to report seeking help from adults when encountering various challenges (ISELA measure of SEL) if they regularly witness adults with abusive behaviour towards learners at school. Notably, we found no such relationship. This may reflect the coexistence of both trusted and feared adults in children's lives, or the normalisation of practices such as shouting or continued practicing of corporal punishment, despite its being banned in Zambia since 2011. While corporal punishment did not emerge as a major theme of our qualitative research, it is interesting that at [School 2AO](#) where corporal punishment was brought up by learners and parents, they appeared to associate Catch Up with positive reinforcement and as diverging from the corporal punishment experienced in regular classes. More research is therefore needed, and future investigations into SEL in Zambia would greatly benefit from incorporating items on school climate, bullying, and violence from the Global School-Based Student Health Survey (GSHS) (WHO, 2018; Bishops et al., 2023) or the MICS child discipline module (UNICEF, 2025; based on Straus et al., 1998), a point reinforced by additional recent evidence that corporal punishment continues to be witnessed or experienced by a significant minority of children (de Barros and Lubozha, 2026).

In sum, complementary quantitative analyses together with the qualitative research of the present study led to additional insights that help us make sense of some results of the previous ISELA assessment, and more generally, why the impact on SEL skills as measured by ISELA are modest, despite a near universal recognition among learners, teachers, families, and administrators alike of Catch Up as a highly successful programme.

SCHOOL VIGNETTES

Introduction

This section presents findings from six school vignettes that offer a grounded, comparative account of how Catch Up is experienced and understood in relation to social and emotional learning (SEL). Drawing on perspectives from teachers, learners, mentors and trainers (where available), and parents, the vignettes illuminate how Catch Up is enacted within everyday school contexts and how its academic and social-emotional dimensions are interpreted by different stakeholders. Note that the schools designated with the letter “O” are all schools where Catch Up was introduced in 2023, and those with the letter “N” where Catch Up was introduced during 2025.

Across all six schools, insights from teachers and learners form the core of each vignette, capturing classroom practices, school culture, and learners’ experiences of Catch Up. Engagement with mentors and trainers varied by school and is included where it added depth to understanding training, support, and implementation. Focus groups with parents were conducted after initial analysis and sensemaking workshops with teachers and trainers, and are used here to complement and extend the school-based findings. Rather than introducing new strands of analysis, parents’ reflections helped clarify how social and emotional dimensions of learning are understood beyond the classroom and how families interpret the changes they observe in children’s behaviour, confidence, and relationships.

Each vignette begins with a brief overview of the school and its Catch Up implementation, followed by three analytic sections:

1. Experiences of Catch Up, including perceived value, language of instruction, training and support, etc.;
2. Key SEL-related themes emerging from the data, illustrated with selected examples and quotes; and
3. Enabling and constraining factors shaping social and emotional learning within the programme and the wider school environment.

Together, the six vignettes highlight both shared patterns and important contextual differences, providing insight into how Catch Up may support social and emotional development in diverse school settings.

School 1AO

OVERVIEW OF SCHOOL AND CATCH UP IMPLEMENTATION

Description of school

The school is in a rural district and is about one kilometre away from the DEBS. The school buildings are typical for government primary schools in the area. The school environment is generally clean. Open space around the school provides room for play and outdoor activities. A few hedges are planted in front of the school buildings, and several trees are found in the school grounds. The school has a feeding programme.

During the learners’ tour, participants seemed to be happy with the learning environment (except for the school toilets, which they described as “dirty and smelly” and were reluctant to take us to visit, though the girls did giggle on the way to the stop, holding their noses and explaining that the boys’ toilets were very bad). The learners enjoyed the school grounds, for the opportunity to buy food (especially popcorn!), play with their friends, participate in and watch sports, garden, and even learn in the “fresh air” for Catch Up. In

CATCH UP AND SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

addition to having fun at the school, learners reported feeling safe both at school, and in the presence of their teacher. They noted recent improvements to the school, including the painting of the staff room and new desks in the classrooms, which they attributed to Catch Up, suggesting that these improvements happened around the same time (i.e., 2023).

However, the school has a very high learner population and regular classes are overcrowded, which can be challenging for teachers and learners alike. Teachers and learners speak multiple languages, including Bemba, Nyanja, Lozi, and Luvale, among others, and not all are fluent in Tonga, which is the mandated language of instruction in the district.

School population

Number of learners:	1625
Number of teachers:	50
Regular class sizes:	60-65

Catch Up implementation

Catch Up introduction date:	2023
# of teachers trained in Catch Up:	12
# of teachers teaching Catch Up:	9
Catch Up class sizes:	20-25
Catch Up scheduling:	Daily: - Grade 3 session before regular classes - Grade 4 and 5 after regular classes
Catch Up levels:	Literacy: Beginner + 1 letter; Word + simple paragraph, Story Numeracy: Beginner + 1 digit, 2 digit + 3 digits, 4 digits
Additional Catch Up information:	- Given its proximity to DEBS and status as treatment school, the school benefits from presence of several Catch Up master trainers - Currently they only have one mentor (supposed to have three) - The mentor was the Grade 7 teacher so was able to share interesting insights as her current learners were in the original Catch Up class first taught in 2023 - Note that rather than mixing Grades 3-5, this school separates Grade 3 from Grades 4-5 due to scheduling challenges

FINDINGS

Catch Up experience

Training experience

- ➔ Catch Up training closed knowledge gaps for some teachers teaching literacy and numeracy, with some spillover of Catch Up methods into regular classes.
- ➔ However, Catch Up training is perceived to be intensive, covering too much content in just 4-5 days, making it hard for teachers to fully benefit.
- ➔ The Catch Up trainers felt refresher training is inadequate – typically, it only caters for one teacher per school, who is then expected to share with peers.
- ➔ The Catch Up trainers suggested holding multi-day group refreshers for all teachers at a school.

Value of Catch Up

- ➔ According to the Catch Up trainers, the programme has led to improvements in both literacy and numeracy, but learners tend to be more positive, excited, and confident about numeracy than literacy, which they think is because numeracy lends itself more easily to “hands-on” creativity and is not as affected by the language of instruction/play as literacy.

Teacher workload

- ➔ While all teachers recognise the value of Catch Up, they expressed frustration that it involves extra uncompensated work with limited incentives and support. In the words of the mentor who we interviewed:
“For me as a mentor, it doesn’t matter so much: I get additional responsibility, but I already have an allowance as a senior teacher. But for teachers, it’s devastating. They need to be motivated.”

Language of instruction

- ➔ Research participants explained that they are expected to teach Catch Up in Tonga.
- ➔ They explained this can be restrictive in a multilingual context where not everyone is fluent in Tonga, and where English becomes increasingly important as a language of instruction in higher grades.
- ➔ In the parent focus group of 8 participants, there was only one Tonga speaker, with the majority being either Nyanja or Bemba speakers, who all wished that language of instruction was either their mother tongue or English.

Parent perspectives

- ➔ Parents are aware of Catch Up and see the programme as improving children’s reading and numeracy skills while strengthening discipline, respect, good behaviour, creativity, problem solving, interpersonal skills, responsibility and commercial competencies. As one mother explained:
“I have heard about Catch Up from the school when they invite us for meetings. I have also learned from my child about what they learn at school. [. . .] Before Catch Up was introduced, his handwriting was bad but now he is able to write properly. My child seems happy when going to school now. He is more confident and speaks about what happens at school freely.”
- ➔ Another mother described how her child was looking to the future:
“As for me, my observation is that my child pays attention more at school due to CU. He tells me that they play when they are learning and he is even looking forward to go to school. He also does his homework on time. My child also enjoys learning and competing at school and he wants to become a nurse so that he can be helping people.”

Emerging SEL themes

THEME 1

Certain aspects of Catch Up delivery lend themselves to SEL development, and are broadly viewed as positive by teachers, trainers, learners, and parents.

- According to the mentor, Catch Up builds perseverance, and helps learners express themselves by strengthening learner-teacher relationships through the Catch Up engagement approach:
“The way Catch Up teaching is done – individual, group, teacher demonstration – this helps learners keep trying until they find the answer.” (mentor interview)
“Learners learn to say, ‘Teacher, today my feelings were hurt.’” (mentor interview)
- She has seen a big difference between her current Grade 7 class (who participated in Catch Up when it was first introduced) and previous Grade 7 classes, which she thought was likely due to Catch Up:
“The learners always want to be there. They want to express themselves.” (mentor interview)
- During the focus group, teachers said they had noticed improvements in confidence, fear reduction, peer interaction, self-expression, willingness to participate since the introduction of Catch Up. They

explained that SEL does not just emerge from one activity but from how teaching in Catch Up classes is done: through sit-downs at the beginning of class (with check-ins), use of local languages, learner participation, and attention to care. Additionally:

“Sessions are structured so that everyone is involved.” (trainer focus group participant)

“Catch Up activities involve interaction, especially during games. Even learners who don’t mingle get to interact in Catch Up classes.” (mentor interview)

- When it comes to conflict reduction, however, teachers attributed this in part to an increase in activities rather than a specific approach or type of activity:
“There’s more activities, so less fighting.” (teacher focus group)
- During the learners’ tour, participants explained that they feel safe in Catch Up class and engaged in the learning process and free to ask questions. There is fresh air and the teacher helps them to learn to read and write.
- One mother in the parent focus group highlighted the importance of learning through play and the enjoyment of competition:
“My observations are that my child pays attention more at school due to Catch Up. He tells me that they play when they are learning and he is ever looking forward to go to school. He also does his homework on time. My child also enjoys learning and competing at school and he wants to become a nurse so that he can be helping people.”

THEME 2

On the other hand, some aspects of the Catch Up programme can have a negative impact on the social emotional wellbeing and learning of learners.

- Just as Catch Up requires extra work for teachers, it also requires extra work for learners as it is not part of the formal curriculum. As a result, the extra activities for Catch Up can lead to increased stress for them according to trainers.
- Indeed, teachers explain they feel overwhelmed and feel demotivated, and it is difficult to support learners when they are feeling this way:
“I am stressed as it’s a double class.”
“Praise us, respect us, take us to workshops.”
- The trainer interviewee recognised that Catch Up grouping had social and emotional implications, including negative ones (loss of confidence, stigmatisation and teasing of beginner learners, etc.) but explained that only literacy and numeracy assessment were taken into account to determine these groupings, which is the standard practice.
- The language of instruction challenge is more of a problem for literacy than numeracy, with learners more likely to give up in literacy than in numeracy, as one trainer explained:
“If they are stuck with literacy, they will just look at you. Their confidence is low. With numeracy, they are excited. With literacy, no.”

THEME 3

SEL and the 7Cs are not explicitly included in Catch Up training or delivery so it can be difficult to incorporate these aspects into lesson planning and to measure their outcomes.

- The teacher interviewee felt that SEL should be explicitly included in Catch Up training, a point that was backed up by the trainers in the focus group who felt that it could be incorporated in multi-day refresher trainings for groups of teachers:
“More emphasis must be given on SEL during the training because it is one of the important domains that learners have to develop.” (teacher interview)
- The teachers report seeing changes in learners’ SEL but currently have to rely on own experience to interpret learner behaviour:

CATCH UP AND SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

<i>“There is a difference between listening and being quiet because you are scared.”</i> (teacher focus group) - They recognised the value of Catch Up in building SEL but noted that as Catch Up was not designed to address SEL intentionally, there is a limit to the depth of observed outcomes. It is also difficult to know how to build these skills and to do it in a way that does not put the literacy and numeracy goals of the programme at risk. <i>“When Catch Up came in, we were told it was remedial and it didn’t seem to have much to do with SEL. If it’s not there explicitly, you might leave it out. A learner might be stressed, and you don’t know what to do about it.”</i> (mentor interview) - The teacher interviewee did not really connect with the 7Cs, and the trainer focus group participants were not able to recall all seven and noted that while they are part of the Catch Up training... <i>“They are there... but in the background.”</i>
THEME 4 Teachers typically rely on their own experiences and backgrounds, including family and religious paradigms, to support their learners’ social emotional development and wellbeing. - During the tour, learners linked feelings of safety to the presence of their teacher. - One teacher who said her learners would describe her as “smart, loving, prayerful” noted the important role teachers have to play in learners’ moral and social and emotional development, which she described as a natural quality, inspired by religion: <i>“We teach them morals. We teach kindness. This is part of the role of a teacher.”</i> (teacher focus group participant) - Teachers recognised that they have an important role to play beyond educating on academics: <i>“A teacher is supposed to be a counsellor. A teacher is supposed to be a friend.”</i> (mentor interview) <i>“When they feel good, they can learn.”</i> (teacher interviewee) <i>“A teacher can counsel like her own children.”</i> (teacher interviewee) <i>“most of the activities I do in class that help in promoting SEL is learned through experiences I have gained in over a decade of teaching experience. [. . .] It’s in me.”</i> (teacher interviewee)

SEL constraints and enablers	
SEL constraints	SEL enablers
✗ SEL not explicit part of Catch Up training or delivery ✗ Insufficient time for Catch Up training and refreshers ✗ Catch Up is extra work and a source of stress for teachers and learners, especially for teachers who feel demotivated and unsupported ✗ Tonga as only language of instruction in Catch Up literacy classes in a multilingual context leads to frustration for non-Tonga speakers ✗ Lack of understanding of learner backgrounds ✗ Confusion about the 7 Cs ✗ No measures for SEL ✗ Grouping by literacy and numeracy assessment only but no consideration of SE skills or impacts	✓ Smaller class sizes for Catch Up ✓ Whole class-group-individual approach ✓ Enabling of healthy competition through Catch Up activities ✓ Interactivity of Catch Up activities ✓ Safe, positive learning environment ✓ Teachers viewing themselves as counsellors and/or caregivers ✓ Teachers drawing from religion and family relationships ✓ Multilingualism (if treated as an asset) ✓ Handovers between teachers when learners move between Catch Up levels ✓ Mentors and trainers providing guidance

School 1AN

OVERVIEW OF SCHOOL AND CATCH UP IMPLEMENTATION

<i>Description of school</i>	
The school is in a rural district and is about 40 kilometres away from the DEBS. The school infrastructure is reasonable for a government school in rural area. The surroundings are generally clean, with a number of big trees that are used as shelter from the sun during Catch Up classes. The school has a garden, a greenhouse and a space that supports outdoor activities and play. A feeding programme is in operation at the school. As was the case at many of the other schools visited, the toilets were unclean. During the learners' tour, we discovered that learners feel happy and comfortable at school, and feel close to their teachers, appreciating the hard work that they do and empathising with their need for rest. However, when visiting the playground, one learner described how its proximity to the class was a positive factor but that there was too much sun, and another noted: <i>"We feel safe, but there are roads through the bushes where people catch children."</i> In general, the teachers have a love for teaching, but overcrowding, limited teaching materials, high workloads, and fatigue make their work challenging. Teachers and learners speak multiple languages, including Nyanja, Bemba, Lenje, and Namwanga, among others, and not all are fluent in Tonga, which is the provincially mandated language of instruction.	
<i>School population</i>	
Number of learners:	2001 (902 boys, 1088 girls)
Number of teachers:	22
Regular class sizes:	64-96
<i>Catch Up implementation</i>	
Catch Up introduction date:	2025, term 2.
# of teachers trained in Catch Up:	4 trained by VVOB; others have been trained by their peers.
# of teachers teaching Catch Up:	15 teachers
Catch Up class sizes:	20-25 learners per class (8 Catch Up classes total)
Catch Up scheduling:	Daily: - Grade 3 learners after regular classes - Grade 4 and 5 before regular classes
Catch Up levels:	Literacy: Beginner + 1 letter; Word + simple paragraph, Story Numeracy: Beginner + 1 digit, 2 digit + 3 digits, 4 digits
Additional Catch Up Information:	- Grade 6 learners who are behind and interested also join Catch Up - Note that rather than mixing Grades 3-5, this school separates Grade 3 from Grades 4-5 due to scheduling challenges

FINDINGS

<i>Catch Up experience</i>
Training experience ➔ The Grade 3-5 teachers participated in a formal Catch Up training in December 2024, while the mentor received training in 2023 from VVOB, alongside the treatment group.

CATCH UP AND SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

- ➔ Teachers showed us the resources they had made for Catch Up, which is one of the hallmarks of the programme that they learned about during the training, and showed us how they can be used.
- ➔ Following their training, the Grade 3-5 teachers ran a 2-day orientation for the other teachers, so that all teachers would be able to teach Catch Up.

Language of instruction

- ➔ As at other schools, teachers and learners have diverse language backgrounds and teachers explained that code-switching is allowed:
“a teacher is allowed to use multiple languages in Catch Up”
- ➔ However, teachers still found the requirement for Tonga as the main language of instruction in Catch Up to be a challenge, as many learners and teachers are not fluent.
- ➔ In the parent focus group of 7 participants, there was only one Tonga speaker; the others were Nyanja, Bemba or Lenje speakers, who all wished that language of instruction was either their mother tongue or English.

Value of Catch Up

- ➔ Despite only having started Catch Up recently, teachers all recognised the value of the programme, emphasising its “hands-on” and “mentally stimulating” approach and the strength of group work, and noting that Catch Up is more conducive to creativity than regular classes.
- ➔ Learners also seem to enjoy and value Catch Up.
- ➔ The school has many learners and large regular class sizes but has managed to maximise the benefits of the Catch Up approach through reducing class sizes for Catch Up to 20-25 by ensuring that all 20 teachers are teaching Catch Up (not just the Grade 3-5 teachers).

Teacher workload

- ➔ During the focus group, teachers told us that they were not compensated for the 2-day Catch Up orientation they ran for the other teachers.
- ➔ While they felt privileged to be in the position of mentoring and supporting their colleagues, they were very vocal about how difficult it was to stay motivated in the face of limited support.
“During assessment, we even had to provide our own lunch, and we were not compensated for workshop delivery.”
“This programme needs teacher motivation to succeed.”
“Most teachers feel demotivated.”
“We need to improve motivation to help Catch Up teachers teach with passion!”
- ➔ In fact, during the learners’ tour, the participants demonstrated empathy towards their teachers, recognising how hard their teachers work and the importance of teacher wellbeing. Upon visiting the staff room, learners all held up their smiling plates to indicate that they liked the place, and when asked why, they explained:
“Teachers get tired when on duty. They need rest, just like us!”
- ➔ Teachers note that there is learning across schools about Catch Up and that some schools in their learning community have been able to adopt Catch Up methods in their regular classes but that this is just not feasible at their school due to large regular class sizes:
“We try to learn from and share with other schools. In other schools we see they are using regular classes for Catch Up but they have fewer learners.”

Context

- ➔ One teacher during the focus group explained that one factor that seems to be having a positive impact on both regular classes and Catch Up classes is the newly introduced feeding programme:

“We have a challenge of learners staying out of school for a long time. We think that the feeding programme is improving things.”

Parent perspectives

- ➔ Focus group participants were all positive about the impact of Catch Up. In the words of one father:
“We have learned about how Catch Up improves literacy outcomes. We view it as helpful even in other areas of academics.”
- ➔ This sentiment was echoed by a mother, who explained:
“Catch Up helps our children to read and write and even when you give work for the child to do, they act very responsible.”
- ➔ Parents all also noticed positive impacts on their children’s behaviour and attitudes towards school, and their sense of belonging.

Emerging SEL themes

THEME 1

Catch Up has had a positive impact on learners’ sense of belonging and their engagement and capacity to express themselves, despite only having been in place for a short amount of time.

- In the teachers’ focus group, all teachers agreed about the value of Catch Up and the positive impact on learners, explaining that the approach:
“helps ensure that all learners feel included.”
- Indeed, one mother explained how her daughter’s attendance has improved since the Catch Up programme started:
“My child has improved in how she attends school because of this programme. She is often willing to come to school to learn with them.”
- Further, the teacher interviewee (who was also the mentor) explained that the Catch Up programme helps to build social competence and values, as can be seen in improvements in greeting teachers, respect for elders, and relationships with peers. Describing empathy as *“to carry someone’s problem like it’s your own”*, she told us how, before Catch Up, learners who were not managing well would get negative comments from their peers and be seen as failures, but that with Catch Up, peers give encouragement and want to lift up their fellow learners, saying:
“You can try! You are almost there!”
- Parents affirmed that children were displaying increased empathy at home, as explained by one mother:
“More children can freely read now and even help their peers home on how to read.”
- A father referred to empathy as “fellow feeling” and described the positive impact of Catch Up:
“When it comes to my child, I have noticed that he has developed an attitude of fellow-feeling. For example, when he is playing, he is no longer as aggressive as he was previously but now able to stay away from trouble and advise his friends not to do bad things.”
- When asked to describe strategies to promote conflict resolution, the teacher interviewee explained she would encourage learners to solve problems by talking, describing that “Understanding your friend” was a topic emphasised during Catch Up training, though it is interesting to note that no other teachers mentioned this content across the schools but instead emphasised the limited SEL content.
- Despite the recent introduction of the Catch Up programme, parents were very positive about its impact on their children’s relationship to learning. In the words of one mother:
“I think this programme has opened up the brain of our children such that they even follow instruction at home and want to always show me their performance at school from their books.”
- Indeed, the teacher interviewee (who was also mentor) explained how learners are now more open:
“Before Catch Up, most learners would just be present. Catch Up has opened them up. They are free to express themselves.”

CATCH UP AND SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

- This was corroborated during the learners' tour, when one of the participants explained:
"Before, we were shy. Now we ask questions. The teacher tells us not to feel shy to ask questions."

THEME 2

However, some social and emotional benefits are more indirect and do not necessarily indicate that social and emotional skills are being built.

- When asked about conflict resolution, before describing strategies for actually resolving conflict, the teacher interviewee explained that there is less potential for conflict in Catch Up versus regular classes because (1) there is nothing to fight over with respect to materials (as opposed to over textbooks), and (2) Catch Up keeps learners busy:
"What causes conflict in class is when they are idle."
- Similarly, when it came to stress management (which the teacher interviewee defined as the ability to control oneself when one has a problem somewhere), she explained that:
"Catch Up helps by being entertaining, so learners forget about their stress or troubles at home for a bit."
- Avoiding or distracting from stress and conflict (as opposed to managing and resolving) was a theme seen at other schools as well, and while these are clearly social and emotional benefits of Catch Up, they cannot be defined as social and emotional skills.

THEME 3

The smaller class sizes and overall approach to Catch Up allows teachers to support the SEL and wellbeing of learners.

- According to the teacher interviewee, the Catch Up set-up and approach allows for a more meaningful relationship with learners:
"We sit as if we are friends with them."
- In the teachers' focus group, one participant explained:
"One of the good things about Catch Up is that it allows for one-on-one, which is not possible in regular classes. This helps ensure that all learners feel included."

THEME 4

SEL is not emphasised in Catch Up training or delivery, and teachers instead mostly rely on their own experience in college and understandings of the role of the teacher in social and emotional development.

- It was clear from the teacher/mentor interview and teacher focus group that much of their knowledge about SEL is intuitive, or builds on their experience in college and/or understandings of a teacher's role in providing psychosocial support and opportunities for SEL.
- Not only did research participants hesitate a little when asked to provide definitions for different SEL concepts and provide examples from Catch Up, but teachers felt that certain terms may not be culturally appropriate and/or may be stigmatising. During the opening rating activity, when asked to rate their learners' stress management abilities, one of the teacher focus group participants noted:
"The question is difficult to answer because of cultural stigma and difference."
- Indeed, it was clear that the teachers saw themselves as mentors and caregivers in addition to educators – during the initial icebreaker for the focus group, teachers noted learners would describe them as *"mother"*, *"mentor"*, *"loving"*, *"creative"*, *"disciplined"*, all words suggesting a role in supporting SEL development. One of the teachers who was also the guidance counsellor explained that her greatest strength as a teacher was *"reading learners' emotions."*

CATCH UP AND SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

SEL constraints and enablers	
SEL constraints	SEL enablers
✗ Lack of resources ✗ Teachers demotivated and under-supported ✗ Tonga as the formal language of play does not reflect the multilingual reality ✗ Large class sizes in regular classes ✗ To reduce Catch Up class sizes, Catch Up trained teachers had to orient other teachers with the programme ✗ SEL not explicitly included in training or delivery of Catch Up ✗ Lack of culturally appropriate terminology ✗ Poor sanitary facilities and safety concerns	✓ Small class sizes for Catch Up (20-25) ✓ Hands-on nature of Catch Up ✓ Applying TaRL and LTP principles ✓ All teachers are capacitated to teach Catch Up ✓ Teacher encouragement, including to ask questions ✓ Code-switching ✓ Teacher experiences and teachers sitting with learners “as friends” ✓ School feeding programme ✓ Inclusive approach and emotional safety of Catch Up learning spaces

School 2AO

OVERVIEW OF SCHOOL AND CATCH UP IMPLEMENTATION

Description of school	
The school is in a rural environment and is located about 50 kilometres away from the DEBS, with challenging road access. It has basic infrastructure, but the school is very clean (with the exception of the toilets, according to the learners) and there is a lot of outdoor space, with some trees and carefully planted shrubs. The school has a feeding programme. When we arrived at the school, learners were engaged in sweeping and tidying, getting ready for the school day. During the school tour, the learners reported feeling happy at school, though (as mentioned above), the condition of the toilets was a source of discomfort for them. There were also thorn bushes on the way to the toilet, and they described how when learners get pricked by thorns, they will be taken to the headteacher’s office for help. Regular classes are overcrowded, and while most of the learners on the tour did not seem too bothered, one child said this made them unhappy because it was very noisy and difficult to be engaged. Interestingly, while the Catch Up programme was seriously impacted by a series of teacher transfers, regular classes were not. According to the mentor, the school has a number of different extracurricular activities, including clubs, which a lot of learners are engaged in. Teachers and learners speak multiple languages, including Nyanja and Bemba, among others, and not all are fluent in Tonga, which is the mandated language of instruction in this district.	
School population	
Number of learners:	544
Number of teachers:	11
Regular class sizes:	50-65
Catch Up implementation	
Catch Up introduction date:	Term 3, 2025 (they had only been implementing for 4 weeks at time of writing)
# of teachers trained in Catch Up:	2 teachers trained by VVOB; all other teachers oriented informally

CATCH UP AND SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

# of teachers teaching Catch Up:	5
Catch Up class sizes:	22-35 depending on level
Catch Up scheduling:	Daily after regular classes (12:40-13:40)
Catch Up levels:	• Literacy: Beginner +1 letter sound; Word + simple paragraph; Story • Numeracy: Beginner + 1 digit; 2 digit + 3 digit; 4 digit
Additional Catch Up information:	• The teacher interviewee had experience teaching multiple Catch Up levels, meaning she has valuable experience to share, not only with colleagues, but also for this study

FINDINGS

Catch Up experience

Training experience

- ➔ Despite being a treatment school, they were “limping along for a long time with Catch Up” because of the teachers trained in Catch Up, only two were left because of transfers [*Note: a problem also at School 2AN*], leading to problems with implementation fidelity, as they were not able to do ability grouping:

“We just taught our classes with the Catch Up methods, which was fine for Grade 3 and 4, which had Catch Up trained teachers, but left Grade 5 at a disadvantage.” (trainer/mentor interviewee)
- ➔ The trainer/mentor (who participated in the original DRCC and VVOB-led training in 2022) held a special Catch Up orientation during a HIM meeting to allow for more teachers to be able to teach Catch Up and now they are able to split according to ability level, with learners from different Grades in the same Catch Up group.

Language of instruction

- ➔ Research participants reported that the officially recognised local language (Tonga) is emphasised in training, during demonstrations (rather than multiple languages), and for Catch Up delivery, and expressed concern for non-fluent learners and a desire for resources and content in English and multiple languages, especially in light of the policy changes to curriculum that are in progress.

Value of Catch Up

- ➔ Catch Up has had a positive impact on both literacy and numeracy outcomes.
- ➔ Catch Up is valued for small class sizes that allow for more teacher engagement with all learners and the nature of activities that encourage interaction.
- ➔ To encourage interaction between all children, the teachers try to mix up learners from different Grades in their Catch Up seating arrangements.
- ➔ Respondents do note a positive difference in engagement of learners when it comes to Catch Up, with the trainer/mentor highlighting how much more engaged learners were in Catch Up than in the previous Step into English programme.
- ➔ Teachers report using some Catch Up strategies in regular classes through informal mainstreaming.

Parent perspectives

- ➔ Parents have seen improvements in both literacy and numeracy since Catch Up was introduced in the school:

“My child reads better than a Grade 7!”

“Children in Catch Up can count up to 1000.”

- ➔ They have also observed improvements in confidence, behaviour, social skills, and emotional wellbeing, with one parent noting that
- “children participate more [in Catch Up] and they develop critical thinking.”*

Emerging SEL themes

THEME 1

Catch Up is perceived to have a positive impact on SEL and learner wellbeing.

- The two teachers in the mini focus group had observed a number of positive changes since Catch Up was introduced, including an increase in engagement, confidence, and perseverance:
“Learners keep trying until they get it correct.”
- Indeed, according to the teacher interviewee, learners do not give up in Catch Up classes, even if they are not progressing, and according to the trainer/mentor, there is a learner with special educational needs who consistently participates in Catch Up classes:
“She’s always raising her hand, and I give her a platform.”
- The teacher interviewee also noted that learners look out for each other, explaining that learners share pens and alert the teacher if someone needs help or attention.
- During the learners’ tour, participants seemed to value Catch Up, especially as it encourages participation and peer support and how it relies on positive reinforcement rather than punishment:
“We are helped to read by friends in the Catch Up class.”
“We feel free in Catch Up class. If you fail to answer, you cannot be whipped. You will be helped by others to read.”
- The second response suggests that corporal punishment is still practised in regular classrooms, even though it is technically not allowed. Indeed, according to one mother from the parent focus group:
“Children talk about teachers, this teacher beats, this teacher encourages us to work hard. But we tell them follow what their teachers say.”
- As the parents appeared to accept teacher authority in choosing the best way to discipline children, it would be worth exploring if and how Catch Up is reinforcing positive discipline and potentially leading to a reduction in corporal punishment.

THEME 2

Small class sizes, group work, and playfulness are seen as the elements that make Catch Up successful, including in supporting social and emotional development.

- According to the two teachers from the mini focus group, smaller class sizes for Catch Up and the structure of classes allow for group work and more engagement, which in turn allow for more opportunities for all learners to speak, read, and participate.
- The teacher interviewee identified group work and games as the main vehicle for building SEL in Catch Up classes, as learners develop interpersonal skills relevant for socialisation and conflict resolution, especially when activities require interaction across friendship groups. She did note that she has been using group work and individualised attention even before Catch Up as she learned them in College.
- While not specific to Catch Up, the trainer/mentor described how activities that encourage interaction and playfulness can help learners’ social and emotional development through the example of a teacher who had gone to a Child Fund training on SEL and wanted to introduce clubs and games at the school. She described the benefits of such activities:
“So, learners are helped to find themselves. Otherwise, they don’t come out to interact with others. Some will just be quiet, even if they know. You help them come out of themselves.”
- Specifically concerning Catch Up, the trainer/mentor highlighted the importance of playfulness to improving learner engagement:
“The playfulness is there. We tell them that Catch Up is knocking off and they want to stay. They say: ‘No madam! We don’t want to go.’ There are games, songs, and competitions. They love

them, actually. The noise speaks for itself! In SITE [Step into English], there was nothing like that. In Catch Up, there is so much playfulness.”

- As with many participants across schools, this interviewee also saw competition in positive terms.
- Further, it is worth highlighting how teachers learn to interpret quiet and noise – in certain contexts, quiet may indicate active listening and engagement and noise distraction, while the opposite may be true in other contexts (as described by the interviewee in this case).

THEME 3

Ability grouping for Catch Up is largely perceived as positive, but there are problems with teasing, even within groups.

- While recognising the benefits of ability grouping as per TaRL approaches, participants expressed some concern about the persistence of teasing in regular classes relating to the groupings for Catch Up.
- According to the teacher interviewee, not only is there an academic performance gap within Catch Up levels, but mocking and teasing do happen within these groups as well.
- In the lowest level for Catch Up literacy, it does happen that when beginners try to read, they are mocked by peers who are able to sound out letters, and, as a result, end up feeling very discouraged.

THEME 4

Inability to speak a language fluently hinders self-expression in Catch Up classes.

- A common theme across schools in the study is that the district language mandate is causing challenges for the implementation of the Catch Up programme, especially in literacy. This issue was also raised by multiple research participants at this school.
- In addition, the trainer/mentor explained how the language of instruction issue was not just a challenge in terms of academic learning but for social and emotional development as well:

“Pupils draw back; they don’t participate because they can’t express themselves in a language they can’t speak. So, you find they keep quiet, in as much as you try to encourage them. What I’ve also noticed is when it comes to activities where they need to chat, they prefer telling a story in a language they speak, even though the Catch Up strategy says they should speak the local language of that area. So, it’s actually disadvantaging them because they can’t interact.”
- Further, the teacher interviewee explained that, from her experience teaching multiple levels of Catch Up, interaction, engagement, and enjoyment are greatest in the most advanced/story group.
- The transition from local language literacy to English was also seen by the two teachers in the mini focus group as the strongest barrier to learner confidence, comprehension, and expression.
- Further, parents value local languages but strongly preferred the use of English as the language of instruction because it was seen as a gateway to passing exams, finding jobs, communicating with foreigners and other opportunities:

“Examinations are conducted in English and so you need to know English for you to pass the examinations. Most people from other countries can speak English so you will be able to interact with others if you go to a foreign country.” (mother, from a Nyanja-speaking household)

“Schools use English to teach, things in the environment are written in English. We do not have one common local language so a child can communicate with others who do not speak their local language]in English, even foreigners.” (father, from a Tonga-speaking household)

“To have a better future, they need to be speaking English.” (father, from a Tonga-speaking household)

THEME 5

While teachers intuitively have a sense of the importance of SEL and how to support learners’ social and emotional development, there is a lack of clarity around what needs to be prioritised and limited training opportunities on this topic.

CATCH UP AND SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

- The teacher interviewee recognised the importance of understanding learner backgrounds because when they come from troubled homes, it affects them, so you have to:
“Look at where they come from.”
 If, for example, a learner loses a parent, then teachers and other learners can make an effort to support and encourage them when they return to school.
- Teachers take responsibility for social and emotional development, even though they have received limited formal training. When asked about the role of teachers in social and emotional development, one of the two teachers from the mini focus group emphasised safeguarding and protection aspects rather than a more holistic conceptualisation:
“Teach them that no one is allowed to touch you.” (teacher focus group participant)
 She had just participated in a training, and this stuck with her as the take-home message.

SEL constraints and enablers	
SEL constraints	SEL enablers
✗ Transfers of Catch Up trained teachers ✗ Lack of adequate training for new teachers ✗ Tonga as language of instruction is a challenge for teachers who are still learning Tonga ✗ Non-Tonga-speaking learners struggle with self-expression ✗ 7Cs not really resonating with teachers ✗ Combining beginners with letter has led to mocking within levels ✗ Ability grouping in general has led to teasing between levels ✗ Extra workload demotivating for teachers ✗ Overcrowding in regular classes ✗ Infrastructure challenges, including poor sanitary facilities	✓ Playfulness of Catch Up classes ✓ Group work and interaction ✓ Small class sizes ✓ Teachers making an effort to understand learner backgrounds ✓ Interactions across friendship groups ✓ Ability grouping encouraging peer learning ✓ More opportunities for all learners to participate ✓ Learner excitement ✓ Teacher engagement ✓ Positive rather than negative reinforcement ✓ Catch Up mentors ✓ Clubs

School 2AN

OVERVIEW OF SCHOOL AND CATCH UP IMPLEMENTATION

Description of school

The school is right next door to the DEBS and is well-maintained and clean. There are hedges and mango trees by the classrooms, which give the school a neat and welcoming appearance. The buildings are in fairly good condition. There is a feeding programme. During our visit, learners could be seen picking up their younger siblings from the pre-grades.

During the school tour, learners described the playground, garden and break area as their most liked places, while the toilets were the least liked places. Particularly for girls, who said they were scared to use the toilets because there is a rumour that a woman wearing heels who has a baby lives in the toilet.

The school experiences overcrowding in regular classes, with class sizes reaching up to 70 learners. This issue came up during the parent focus group, when one parent said:

“My son doesn’t like noise... he doesn’t manage to concentrate.”

CATCH UP AND SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Teachers and learners speak multiple languages, including Nyanja, Bemba, and Luvala, among others, and not all are fluent in Tonga, which is the mandated language of instruction in the district.

School population

Number of learners:	2868
Number of teachers:	27
Regular class sizes:	50-65

Catch Up implementation

Catch Up introduction date:	Term 2, 2025
# of teachers trained in Catch Up:	23
# of teachers teaching Catch Up:	19
Catch Up class sizes:	20-40, the number reduces as learners move to higher levels
Catch Up scheduling:	Daily: - Grade 3 and 4 mid-morning (10:30-11:30) - Grade 5 (12:30-13:30)
Catch Up levels:	Literacy: Beginner + 1 letter; Word + simple paragraph, Story Numeracy: Beginner + 1 digit, 2 digit + 3 digits, 4 digits
Additional Catch Up information:	Note that rather than mixing Grades 3-5, this school separates Grade 5 from Grades 3-4 due to scheduling challenges

FINDINGS

Catch Up experience

Training experience

- ➔ The Catch Up trainer was a big proponent of the Catch Up programme. She was trained at the same time as the treatment group (2023), but took the school's role as a control group very seriously, even though she felt tempted to use the Catch Up methodology at times:

"But I never used to implement because this school is part of the control group. It was tempting, but I was told strictly not to use it. Sometimes I would regret and say, 'Why can't I use this?' But I was warned to never share."
- ➔ The importance of the Catch Up mentor was highlighted by a Catch Up trainer who noted that despite her relative lack of teaching experience (3 years), she has a talent for teaching colleagues and has availability.
- ➔ Catch Up is vulnerable at the school-level because of transfers of Catch Up trained teachers. According to the teacher interviewee, the school had to make adjustments when Catch Up trained teachers were transferred [Note: this was also a problem at School 2AO]:

"Other Catch Up teachers who were trained got transferred and we had to realign the classes and assign new teachers." (teacher interviewee)

Language of instruction

- ➔ Teachers attributed the lower performance in Catch Up literacy compared with Catch Up numeracy to multilingual home environments and challenges with relying mainly on Tonga as the language of instruction.
- ➔ While many parents were keen for their children to learn English, one father emphasised the importance of a *multilingual* rather than monolingual approach, an approach that does not take a deficit view of local language:

<i>“Learning should be done in different languages, Chinese learn in their own language and there have developed. I don’t have a problem with local language. When you teach them in a local language they connect well in English. Some educated people fail to write a local language even when they are doctors. To be fully educated you need to learn both English and local language. Let us not throw away our mother tongue. A tree has roots and leaves, but roots are the foundation we have talked about the goodness of Catch Up. We have talked about Catch Up intervention as a solution.”</i>
Value of Catch Up ➔ While Catch Up was only introduced recently, teachers see its value and would like to see it integrated into the formal curriculum. ➔ Catch Up is seen as contributing to equity: <i>“Less privileged learners also benefit.”</i> (teacher interview) ➔ Ability grouping is practised and considered a hallmark of the Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) approach. ➔ Teachers value Catch Up for the smaller class sizes because it allows them to engage with individual learners better: <i>“In Catch Up, teachers can see what each learner is doing.”</i> (teacher focus group participant)
Teacher workload ➔ Despite seeing the value of Catch Up, teachers felt that the extra workload was too much and would like additional support.
Parent perspectives ➔ Parents understood Catch Up as a “bridge” to help learners close the gap academically and described how they had seen improvements since the programme was introduced: <i>“My child has improved since they started Catch Up. They read. They can read in Tonga and English.”</i> (father) <i>“From Grade 1 to 3 my child was not performing well at school but since Catch Up, the child can read. They read the story book, teach their young sister how to read.”</i> (mother) ➔ During the parent focus group, it was clear that parents saw themselves as partners in their children’s learning, with one participant explaining that they have become aware of how they can help their child at home and another envisioning a more concrete role for parents in implementing Catch Up: <i>“If Catch Up materials were given to us for use, it can really help us to help our children at home.”</i> (father)
Emerging SEL themes
THEME 1 Teachers and parents described positive observable changes in SEL and SE behaviour due to Catch Up, even though the school had only recently begun implementing Catch Up.
• According to teacher focus group participants, changes they had observed since the introduction of Catch Up included learners returning for marking, helping to correct each other’s work, and being motivated to move up levels. • During a discussion with the trainer and mentor, the trainer explained how learners now exhibited an eagerness to learn: <i>“They remind teachers it’s time for Catch Up!”</i> • The trainer also noted that Catch Up helps build relationships between teachers and learners.

- Interestingly, the learners who participated in the tour said that they had not noticed a difference in enjoyment between Catch Up and regular classes, but that could be because Catch Up was only recently introduced.
- Parents considered Catch Up activities to be motivating and inclusive and said that they had noticed how the programme increased participation and willingness to learn, even outside of school:
“My child wants to read whatever they see on the billboards; once we were on public bus and my child was reading everything they were seeing on the bill boards, people even started asking the age of my boy. He was reading things older children can fail to read.” (father)
- During the focus group, parents had the opportunity to participate in Catch Up learning activities, and, during a reflection discussion after the activities, they explained how learning through play was helpful in building social and emotional skills:
“We were playing in the game at the same time we were learning. For example, the basket game helps children to develop self-control, they wait for their turn.” (mother)
“Motivation is developed in children. If their friends manage to respond they also say they can manage.” (father)

THEME 2

Despite limited exposure to SEL training, research participants were able to come up with definitions of key terms and examples of how Catch Up can contribute to SEL and developing SE skills.

- The trainer and mentor defined social and emotional learning respectively as follows:
“What comes to mind is the ability to make learners enjoy the lesson, to help them belong. You are a parent in place of their parent. Learners feel ‘they understand me and can help me.’” (trainer)
“It also means engaging learners in the lesson. They collaborate, the experience social learning. They learn to socialise. For emotional, maybe we need to learn to build confidence in them. You need to praise and correct in a polite way so they don’t feel bad.” (mentor)
 The role of the teacher in these definitions is clear and resonates with understandings across schools of teachers filling a parental, caregiving role and communicating SEL through a family paradigm.
- They both emphasised the learning through play aspect of Catch Up as contributing to the social and emotional dimensions of learning:
“You learn through play. Learners enjoy and socialise and do mental maths. The praise makes them feel good.” (mentor)
“Catch Up activity is not stressful. They play. [. . .] If they don’t understand, they can get frustrated, so sometimes we will change the activity so they can do it in a different way.” (trainer)
- However, as was the case at other schools, there appears to be a blurring of lines between stress avoidance and stress management – reducing stress is not the same as teaching learners how to deal with stress.
- Similarly, the teacher interviewed for the study associated conflict resolution with conflict avoidance (in other words, encouraging learners not to fight) rather than actual resolution (for example, through mediation and negotiation), though she was able to provide a clear example of conflict resolution concerning two of her learners:
“A said B stole their coin. B claimed the coin was given to them by their mother. I resolved this by appealing to honesty. So B admitted to having found the coin, but I also encouraged A to give B the benefit of the doubt and accept that B found the coin on the ground and didn’t steal it.”
 The teacher interviewee also invoked God in her appeal for honesty, which is a common paradigm for framing SEL issues across schools.
- Indeed, a father in the parent focus group noted that schools play a role in teaching respect, through religious education.

THEME 3

Research participants were keen for training on SEL and felt that it could be included explicitly in Catch Up training

- When asked about the role of Catch Up in SEL during the discussion with the mentor and trainer, the trainer had the following to say:
"Maybe the 'soft skills' of SEL could be integrated into Catch Up but this would have to be done explicitly. On the part of the teacher, they don't always want to think outside the box, so you have to provide to them."
- Indeed, the teacher interviewee explained how they had not learned much SEL in the Catch Up training (which she described as *"difficult because it was overloaded until we started practising."*)
"In Catch Up, we did not learn conflict resolution. If I can have information about conflict resolution, I can teach."
- It could be helpful to consider what role parents could play in supporting the building of SEL through Catch Up because, as one parent reminded us:
"Schools do not make children, parents make children. A child doing well in something is because of a parent. Education begins at home; care of a child starts at home even before they are born preparing for a child at home."
- Given one parent's suggestion that Catch Up materials be shared with them, it may be worthwhile exploring some form of parental/caregiving training on Catch Up, in particular when it comes to SEL.

THEME 4

While ability grouping is a key part of TaRL approaches and seems to contribute to improvements in peer learning, new friendships, and motivation, it can also lead to problems between groups, including splitting of friendship groups and teasing/bullying

- The trainer explained that they had a challenge with the splitting of friendship groups at the beginning of Catch Up, but things had since improved, which was backed up by the mentor:
"We had to tell them: 'We are not separating you from your friends, we want to help you get to their level', which made progress exciting. Now, gradually, friendships are being formed within different groups." (trainer)
"They now have new friends. I teach Grade 5 classes but children from different Grades are now friends. Friendships have been built across Grades." (mentor)
 - The trainer also explained that they had a problem with teasing when Catch Up was first introduced but both the trainer and mentor noted that the situation had improved:
"When Catch Up began, they [the higher level] had the mentality they were better than the rest. But with time, their attitude is changing. They now want to help. It took time to help people understand that just because you can't read, you are not dull. There has been progress." (trainer)
"I handle that level [story]. They have a positive impact on others. Simple-para works hard to reach that level." (mentor)
 - However, according to teacher focus group participants, while they agreed that ability-based grouping supports learner confidence and perseverance within levels, teasing of beginner-level learners by higher-level learners persists in regular classes.
 - Even the assessment that led to the ability grouping had a negative impact on some learners who were worried they would have to repeat a grade:
"When they were doing the assessment, one child just cried for three days, so we had to work out how to be kind to that child and make them feel supported. When the learner understood it was not a pass/fail test, but a supportive test, they could finally be assessed." (trainer)
- It is important to note that the mentor played a key role in supporting teachers to support that child.

CATCH UP AND SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

SEL constraints and enablers	
SEL constraints	SEL enablers
✖ Extra workload for Catch Up is a hardship for teachers ✖ Transfers of Catch Up trained teachers ✖ Language of instruction challenges for non-Tonga-speaking teachers and learners ✖ Ability grouping has led to teasing of beginner-level learners in regular classes, and subsequent punishment of the perpetrators ✖ Time for learners to adjust to novel Catch Up approach ✖ No explicit SEL content in Catch Up training or delivery ✖ Catch Up assessment as a source of stress for some learners ✖ Already bulky Catch Up training content in a short space of time ✖ Avoidance of conflict rather than conflict resolution skills	✔ Teachers and mentors seeing themselves as parents, caregivers, providers of pastoral care ✔ Religious upbringing a source of SEL for teachers ✔ TaRL and LTP ✔ Ability-based grouping leading to motivation, peer learning, and new friendships ✔ Small class sizes supporting individualised learning ✔ Learners feel happy and safe at school ✔ Learners have strong empathy ✔ Catch Up approach of moving from simple to more abstract supports perseverance ✔ Catch Up mentors ✔ Parents as partners in children's learning, including for SEL ✔ Multilingual approaches, including local languages and English

School 3AO

OVERVIEW OF SCHOOL AND CATCH UP IMPLEMENTATION

Description of school	
The school is located about 30 kilometres away from the DEBS. There is a mine located about 10 km from the school, which has led to some issues with absenteeism, according to the mentor: <i>“When the mines started, they were not in the home. They follow their mothers.”</i> The school has basic facilities for learning, but is generally clean, with trees and hedges that make the environment pleasant. There is a feeding programme. The learners are generally happy with the school environment, noting: <i>“We feel safe and happy when we arrive here.”</i> However, as with other schools, they were also unhappy with the state of the toilets. The school faces problems with overcrowding and large class sizes and even Catch Up classes can reach up to 45 learners. Teachers and learners speak multiple languages, including Nyanja and Bemba, among others. However, not all members of the school community are fluent in Tonga, which is the mandated language of instruction in the district.	
School population	
Number of learners:	675 (304 boys, 371 girls)
Number of teachers:	8
Regular class sizes:	70-80

CATCH UP AND SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Catch Up implementation	
Catch Up introduction date:	2023
# of teachers trained in Catch Up:	4 teachers (excluding 1 who has since transferred)
# of teachers teaching Catch Up:	3 (with the trained mentor providing support)
Catch Up class sizes:	40-50
Catch Up scheduling:	Daily from 12:00-13:00
Catch Up levels:	• Literacy: Beginner + 1 letter; Word + simple paragraph, Story • Numeracy: Beginner + 1 digit, 2 digit + 3 digits, 4 digit
Additional Catch Up information:	• When they first introduced Catch Up, they taught Grade 5 in the morning and Grade 3-4 in the afternoon • Now, Grades 3-5 are all mixed together

FINDINGS

Catch Up experience
Training experience ➔ All but one of the teachers teaching Catch Up was trained. ➔ The one who was not trained was being supported by the Catch Up mentor, which was something we had seen at other schools. ➔ Teacher allocation appears to be in line with Catch Up guidance, as presented during training, with more experienced, stronger teachers assigned to the lower levels: “To allocate teachers, we look at the numbers after assessment, and for story level, for example, even if there are many, we give them one teacher only. This year, the numbers are not as they were. There has been progress.” (mentor/trainer)
Language of instruction ➔ As was the case at other schools, the multilingual context was seen more as a challenge than an asset – as Nyanja speakers, teachers noted how difficult it was to teach Catch Up in Tonga. One very experienced teacher (24 years of experience) described how they were constantly having to code-switch between two languages, as Catch Up planning is done in English: “I can’t express myself in Chitonga, so it’s a challenge.” ➔ Parents at this school also stressed the importance of multiple languages, including English: “They learn how to communicate in English which is good for them when they grow up and when they associate with other people that may not know Tonga since we often use it in this area.” (mother) ➔ The mentor noted that a policy change was coming and that teachers therefore want multilingual approaches in Catch Up: “The curriculum is changing. Up until now, teaching in lower grades has been in local language, but now English will be introduced. So, we want multilingual approaches.” (mentor/trainer)
Value of Catch Up ➔ Learners appear to be benefiting from Catch Up when it comes to both numeracy and literacy, including learners with special educational needs. However, according to teachers, learners appear to enjoy numeracy more than literacy. ➔ Teachers see the value of Catch Up, even the teacher who was interviewed, who was teaching the beginner Catch Up class where they experienced problems with large classes and no-shows.

CATCH UP AND SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

- ➔ According to the Catch Up mentor (who was also a trainer), the school faced difficulties implementing Catch Up faithfully when they first started due to challenges with over-enrolment and large class sizes, absenteeism, and language of instruction.
- ➔ Previously, they taught Grade 5s in the morning and Grades 3-4 in the afternoon, but now they have Catch Up for mixed Grade 3-5s from 12 to 1pm every day.
- ➔ The mentor/trainer raised one problem with Catch Up arising from its nature as a remedial programme and what happens to learners at the highest levels:

“One thing I’ve observed relates to learners who start at story level in Grade 3, then they stay in story level in Grade 4, and in Grade 5. They become bored. It’s the same activities, and for them, they cannot progress.” (mentor/trainer)
- ➔ Teachers described different Catch Up activities and how much children enjoyed them, including using bundles of money to learn numeracy skills.

Parent perspectives

- ➔ Parents learned about Catch Up during school meetings and were informed about it being a remedial programme:

“We have heard about this programme Catch Up through the school meeting with the community where they explained on why children remain behind.” (mother)
- ➔ Since its introduction in 2023, they have seen improvements in their children’s learning outcomes:

“Children learn a lot in Catch Up programme like my child has really improved in all academic areas because reading is no longer a problem to them.” (mother)

“For me I will talk about Catch Up, this is the programme that helps learners to literacy and numeracy. My children have told me that they learn literacy and numeracy at this school when they knock off from the official learning hours.” (mother)

“Children have improved in reading and writing. My child is able to read clearly. She can even read signposts along the road.” (mother)
- ➔ They have also seen a positive impact on children’s affect, or their approach to learning:

“Catch Up is also good at this school as it has improved morale for our children to come school. Before this programme was introduced, I could see that my children could have less motivation to come to school. However, these children now have a lot of interest come to school because they say they are allowed to play as they learn and they sound more eager to learn.” (mother)
- ➔ Finally, they noted how Catch Up helped children develop *“practical skills”* and *“skills for everyday life”*.

Emerging SEL themes

THEME 1

Learners enjoy Catch Up and its introduction has led to many observable improvements in learner engagement, participation, and behaviour, and while there has been some spillover to regular classes, differences are still pronounced between regular and Catch Up classes.

- The teacher interviewee described how much happier and engaged her learners seemed in Catch Up classes:

“I can tell from their smiles and their willingness to volunteer that learners enjoy Catch Up.”

She explained that this is important because teachers also need *“happy energy”* to teach well.
- One of the teacher focus group participants explained that *“the improvement is clear”* when it comes to engagement, achievement, and behaviour, and that there has been some spillover to regular classes.
- Another teacher in the focus group elaborated:

“There are active participants in regular classes, but also many non-participants. In Catch Up, everyone participates.”
- Research participants reported improved peer learning and support in Catch Up classes. One example was given by the trainer/mentor:

<i>"[In Catch Up], we give them a word problem and then they read for each other. They help each other. Even in word-building, the help each other."</i> Parents also felt that Catch Up was leading to improvements in behaviour, with one explaining: <i>"After attending classes on these lessons, my child now knows how to behave properly at home, especially when I receive visitors. Previously, he never used to behave well. Before these lessons my child was not behaving well, I used to receive reports of fighting at school. Now he is developing a good character, he is learning respect, honesty, and how to live well with others. Because of these lessons, my child understands what is right and wrong and avoids bad behaviour."</i>
THEME 2 Research participants attribute the positive changes due to Catch Up in large part to the smaller class sizes, which allow for group work and individualised support, and more active, hands-on engagement.
- Small class sizes are key to the success of Catch Up according to one teacher focus group participant: <i>"In a normal class, it is hard to concentrate on individuals in a class of 70+ learners, so only having 10 beginners to work with makes a big difference."</i> - Another teacher focus group participant elaborated: <i>"As a teacher, you build interest of trying in Catch Up group work. Praise helps to build interest. Learners interact more with each other in Catch Up. It's mingling with friends. It's both to do with space and activities."</i> - However, interestingly even in larger Catch Up classes, learners realise benefits; according to the teacher interviewee, Catch Up is <i>"very effective"</i>, even at beginner level where there are 45 learners (though she did point out that it would be important to have more trained teachers and fewer learners in different groups.) - One other reason given for the perceived effectiveness of Catch Up apart from class size and group work, is the nature of the hands-on activities. One of the teacher focus group participants provided an example from Catch Up numeracy class (which learners do seem to enjoy more than literacy): <i>"All levels enjoy numeracy. We sit on the ground with them and work with play money. After they have done the work, they want to do the activities on their own. They rush to be in the position to participate. They are not just wanting to do the work. They want to be involved."</i>
THEME 3 While there are many perceived social and emotional benefits to Catch Up ability grouping, there are also drawbacks, including ongoing stigmatising of learners from the beginner level.
- The trainer/mentor explained that ability grouping is beneficial from an SEL perspective: <i>"When learners are in the same group, they feel that the teacher can accept us all. They know they are loved. They feel accepted. They feel, 'We can do this.'"</i> - For the beginner group, she noted that they did not realise they were in the beginner group when Catch Up first was introduced but now that they know, they are motivated to improve. - This idea was echoed by one teacher focus group participant: <i>"Yes, pupils are kind to each other. In the same group, they don't degrade each other."</i> - But between levels, one teacher focus group participant explained: <i>"The story level enjoys Catch Up the most. They can express themselves. They like degrading their friends, so beginners feel embarrassed and run away. Those who are willing to be helped will enjoy and benefit."</i> - Another noted that because of low literacy levels: <i>"Beginners feel they are not part and parcel of the class in the mainstream."</i>

CATCH UP AND SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

- While acknowledging that the story level sometimes does tease the beginner level, the trainer/mentor said that:
“the beginner level doesn’t seem to care.”
- However, given reports from teachers that learners from the lower level (especially the overage ones) often feel embarrassed and run away, it does seem that these learners care and this can have a detrimental impact on learners. As one teacher focus group participant put it:
“But those who miss Catch Up don’t see the benefits.”

THEME 4

As with other schools, teachers were aware of the importance of SEL and their role in providing SEL support, but there was limited formal guidance, including how to integrate SEL into Catch Up.

- One of the teacher focus group participants noted that while SEL is not covered in Catch Up training, they did learn about it during initial teacher training and can apply that knowledge to Catch Up:
“We learned about SEL in college and these are the same learners in our Catch Up classes.”
- However, she and the other teachers noted that they would like additional training in counselling and a manual or refresher training on SEL.
- As with other schools, it seems that such training would be beneficial, especially as there is not always a shared vision or understanding about different aspects of SEL (and also the 7Cs). As an example from the focus group discussion, there was a disagreement about whether going to the teacher with a conflict was resolving the conflict or avoiding it.
- In addition, the teacher interviewee seemed to understand conflict resolution as conflict avoidance, assuming it would be enough to...
“just bring them together.”

SEL constraints and enablers	
SEL constraints	SEL enablers
✗ Not all teachers trained in Catch Up ✗ Ability grouping leading to teasing and stigma ✗ Extra workload for teachers ✗ Over-enrolment and large class sizes ✗ Absenteeism ✗ No explicit SEL component in already bulky Catch Up training ✗ Different understandings of conflict resolution and stress management based on intuition (avoidance/distraction rather than resolution/management) ✗ Teachers and learners not fluent in Tonga ✗ Remedial nature of programme leading to more advanced learners losing interest	✓ Allocating more and stronger teachers to lower levels ✓ Ability grouping allowing for empathy and peer learning within groups and motivating learners at lower levels ✓ Play-based learning ✓ Group work as a vehicle for SEL ✓ Catch Up mentors able to support teachers ✓ Happy, safe school environment ✓ Teachers seeing themselves as key SEL providers ✓ Prior knowledge of and strong intuition for SEL ✓ Increased teacher engagement and encouragement from teachers ✓ Good existing relationships within groups and between teachers and learners

School 3AN

OVERVIEW OF SCHOOL AND CATCH UP IMPLEMENTATION

<i>Description of school</i>	
The school is located about 350 metres away from the DEBS. The school environment is neat, with plants in front of the classrooms. It has a wide-open playground that provides enough space for learners to play. There is a feeding programme. The school serves a large and diverse population, which appeared to lead to tensions. When planning the school tour, the learners all identified the playground as their favourite place, yet during the walk, only one learner indicated they truly enjoy it – the others described how they experienced exclusion and rejection during play. Further, while the feeding programme/feeding area was identified as valued and a happy space by learners during the tour, it was also a place of stigma and teasing, showing how well-intentioned programmes can unintentionally create or reinforce divisions among learners. The school toilets are again a source of discomfort for learners. Teachers struggle with overcrowding and large class sizes, even in Catch Up. Further, there are limitations when it comes to school infrastructure. Teachers and learners speak multiple languages, including Nyanja and Bemba, among others, and not all are fluent in Tonga, which is the mandated language of instruction in the district.	
<i>School population</i>	
Number of learners:	1401 (698 boys, 703 girls)
Number of teachers:	24
Regular class sizes:	60-70
<i>Catch Up implementation</i>	
Catch Up introduction date:	2025, term 1
# of teachers trained in Catch Up:	9 (7 by VVOB, 2 by Catch Up mentor at school-level)
# of teachers teaching Catch Up:	9
Catch Up class sizes:	- Can be about the same as regular classes (i.e., 60-70) - However, at story level for literacy and 3-digit level for numeracy, there are few learners
Catch Up scheduling:	Daily from 12:00-13:00
Catch Up levels:	Literacy: Beginner + 1 letter; Word + simple paragraph, Story. Three digit, 4 digits Numeracy: Beginner + 1 digit, 2 digit + 3 digits. No 4 digits in numeracy.
Additional Catch Up information	- This school does not have a 4-digit numeracy level (highest level is 3-digits) - The mentor we interviewed has a regular Grade 7 class but does not teach Catch Up - The other mentor does teach Catch Up and is also the Zonal In-Service Training Coordinator (ZIC).

FINDINGS

Catch Up experience**Training experience**

- ➔ Only 5 teachers out of 27 have been trained in Catch Up and another 4-5 have been “oriented”, making teacher allocation challenging for 1,000+ learners:
“We say all teachers should be involved in Catch Up.” (mentor interview)
- ➔ Teacher allocation does not appear to be in line with Catch Up guidance as presented in the training: here, the more able teachers have been assigned to higher levels.
- ➔ Teacher preference is also taken into account for placement, and most teachers want higher levels because they say it is easier to finish the syllabus and the lower levels are more work day-to-day, according to the mentor.

Language of instruction

- ➔ As with other schools, teachers described how the province language dictate was making Catch Up difficult to implement and wanted Catch Up to be delivered in English or multiple languages, noting that learners are much stronger in English than in Tonga:
“Most children speak Bemba and Nyanja, most use Nyanja. In my class, two can read Tonga and translate for others. Usually not more than 10 per class can read Tonga.” (teacher focus group participant)
“The way it was – they are changing the syllabus now – before, Grade 3 and 4 were in local language and English and Chitonga were introduced as subjects. For Grade 1 and ECE, they are now starting English. Learners are good at English because some are speaking English at home, some are watching cartoons in English.” (teacher focus group participant)
“The curriculum is being revised. So even in Catch Up, they should redo the language. It’s a barrier. Even if the teachers are doing their best. They should revise and simplify.” (teacher focus group participant)
- ➔ During the learners’ tour, participants explained how they learned to read and that their teachers were using multiple languages:
“Teacher uses Tonga, Nyanja, and English. I know how to read now!”
- ➔ Parents were pleased to see that their children’s Tonga was improving due to Catch Up, but it was clear that language of instruction is a sensitive and emotionally charged issue that carries with it learning values, identity and opportunities.
- ➔ Some parents want their children to learn in a local language for understanding and confidence, but others insist on English for opportunity.

Value of Catch Up

- ➔ Catch Up is described by teachers as a “hands-on” approach, involving mental math and “playful competition”.
- ➔ Teachers at this school had much more mixed views about the value of Catch Up than at other schools, with a strong feeling that:
“Catch Up is a good programme that becomes diluted.” (teacher focus group participant)
“Catch Up is good but should be better organised. A survey should be done before implementation to look at specific needs. Catch Up comes as a solution, so it should not bring another problem.” (teacher focus group participant)
- ➔ Before, when they had to teach Catch Up under trees, some children would not come. Using classrooms for Catch Up has helped, but the big class sizes are still a challenge.
- ➔ There is no systematic transition for learners between levels, but informal exchanges happen between teachers, according to the mentor.

Teacher workload

- ➔ Catch Up has added significantly to the workload of teachers, especially as it was being introduced, with teachers experiencing a steep learning curve:

"We're expected to create detailed lesson plans, but this is hard to do when you are not so conversant in Catch Up yet."

Parent perspectives

- ➔ Parents had been made aware of the Catch Up programme at the school and noted that they had even been invited to a meeting at the school to see what was being taught in Catch Up.
- ➔ They also reported that their children show them the work they do for Catch Up and tell them about their lessons.
- ➔ Parents all said that Catch Up has had a positive impact on their children, both in terms of academic performance (particularly in Tonga), and in terms of engagement with learning:

"My child's performance has improved more, they are more interested in school. He comes early to school to learn in Catch Up. My child moved from position 15 to position 7 in class. He has improved because speaks Tonga at home and learn in Tonga at school." (father)

"Catch Up has helped my children to learn Tonga. They learn what they are behind in." (mother)

"Before Catch Up, he did not answer questions even if he knew the answer, but now he can write and brings the work to show me especially if they write tests." (father)

- ➔ As at many of the schools, religion plays an important role in many families' lives, with one mother noting how parents teach their children Christian values at home. An unexpected benefit of Catch Up was shared by one father:

"My child helps me to read the bible since I am not educated, they help me to read."

Emerging SEL themes

THEME 1

Research participants, in particular parents, recognised the potential for Catch Up to increase love of learning and improve both academic and social and emotional learning outcomes, but described how problems can arise when there are issues with implementation fidelity.

- According to parents, Catch Up strengthens the teacher-learner bond and the bond between learners, because in Catch Up...
"the teacher is seen as a friend" and "children learn to help friends who fail."
- Indeed, parents feel that their children are engaging more due to Catch Up:
"My child is more confident, asks questions more." (mother)
"My child likes talking to teachers, teacher say your child is respectful." (father)
- When participating in the Catch Up games (mind map and basket game) during the focus group, parents were very positive about these activities and their potential to positively impact social and emotional learning and wellbeing, they also expressed concern about how mistakes were dealt with, as a discouraging response could have a negative impact on children's self-esteem.
- According to teachers, many of the potential benefits associated with the more hands-on, more engaged Learning through Play approach of Catch Up are lost due to problems including large class sizes, infrastructure limitations, and excessive teacher workloads with no additional compensation:
"Ball toss is a good game for participation but with 60+ learners in a class...?" (teacher focus group participant) *"That's going to be a big circle!"* (interviewer)

THEME 2

While teachers have some understanding of SEL, they are not necessarily confident of their knowledge and sometimes express contradictory views, particularly when it comes to stress

management and conflict resolution, and they can underestimate potential negative implications of competition and grouping.

- When the teacher interviewee was asked to define 'stress management', she said that it was "how to handle pressure" and then provided the following example from Catch Up class:
"I tell them to relax. If they don't understand the explanation from their peers, the teacher will explain. I invite friends to explain in simple language for peer learning. Some Catch Up activities, such as 'sinking boat' cheer up learners and make them smile, even if they come annoyed from home."
 While the definition emphasises coping with pressure, and the example does include suggestions to relax and for reaching out for support, the reference to the sinking boat activity appears to be more about avoiding stress than learning to manage it, which was a theme identified at other schools.
- During the focus group, teachers noted that there were fights all the time and that sometimes teachers would leave learners to try to resolve things on their own, sometimes they would punish them with sweeping and mopping duties, while one teacher added:
"I am a motivator. I don't always punish."
 So, there are disagreements about if and how to intervene in situations of conflict, and no clear consensus-based strategies to build conflict resolution skills.
- The mentor interviewee described that some learners (especially the older learners) had been upset by the Catch Up assessment outcome and that this has resulted in low motivation and absenteeism but there was no mention of any strategy for how to address these impacts.
- Further, research participants described how learners at the beginner level were experiencing teasing and stigma, but beyond *"discouraging laughing at mistakes"* (teacher interview), there were no concrete strategies for resolving these issues.
- On the contrary, the mentor suggested that the teasing could possibly help motivate learners to persevere and improve.

THEME 3

The learners at this school come from very mixed backgrounds and their social emotional abilities/skills are also mixed.

- The teacher interviewee pointed out that since *"charity begins at home"*, whatever they display in school just shows where they are coming from. Some are not taught/aware about certain things and how to behave.
- The teacher from the focus group who was also a guidance counsellor agreed with another participant, who had explained that there was a mix in learner backgrounds and social emotional abilities/skills, in particular when it comes to conflict resolution, empathy, and stress management:
"They come from different backgrounds like my colleague was saying. There are some who will come and report when learners are fighting or causing problems, there are some who are bullies, and there are some who put themselves in the other's shoes. For example, we had one child who was an orphan and another who said, 'This is why your father died.' The orphan cried and then another friend intervened."
- Indeed, the learners who participated in the tour described how they would sometimes be bullied by learners from wealthier backgrounds:
"They do not include me when playing football."
"They say the food has insects. I feel bad."
"I will eat the food. Hate me if you want!"

THEME 4

Teachers feel they have an important role to play in learners' SEL and in providing pastoral care and serving a kind of parental role, but found themselves having to rely on what they had learned through church and their upbringing rather than formal training to fill this role.

CATCH UP AND SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

- According to the teacher interviewee, already before Catch Up, some learners freely shared with anyone and, as teachers, they build on that:
"We teach them to care for their friends. Those who understand are told to help those who don't understand. Learners learn to love each other."
- For the mentor, part of the role of the teacher is to counsel learners to see that:
"Classmates are your sisters and brothers."
- One teacher focus group participant also used an analogy to parenting and family:
"My ECE are babies. They come from a broken home. They are crying all the time. There is the issue of poverty. The child has no food, so they are sad about others having food. I have to be a mother. They cry and they fight. I have to teach them how to share, how to be kind. We are sisters, brothers."
However, she went on to say that they have not really been trained on how to do this:
"We are not really taught how. You have to rely on your own spirit guide."
- Both the family metaphor and the lack of training were echoed by the teacher interviewee:
"Learners should treat each other as brothers and sisters. We learned this at church."
She expressed interest in an *"independent training"* for SEL, which should include child management and mental health aspects.
- Indeed, one of the parents confirmed that children typically *"learn Christian values at home."*
- Despite these examples of teachers playing a pastoral role in learners' lives, during the tour, the learners seemed to suggest that some teachers were not as caring or nurturing. When stopping at the staffroom, one learner said:
"I am scared to come here."
While another said:
"Teachers share pens and they do not share with us."

SEL constraints and enablers	
SEL constraints	SEL enablers
✗ Province language mandate ✗ Large class sizes (even in Catch Up) ✗ Heavy workloads for teachers ✗ Not enough teachers teaching Catch Up ✗ Not all teachers teaching Catch Up have participated in the training (only oriented) ✗ Teacher allocation issues ✗ Differences in learner backgrounds ✗ Formal knowledge of SEL and the 7Cs seems somewhat limited ✗ Ability grouping leading to teasing ✗ Teasing viewed as a motivator ✗ Infrastructure challenges and outdoor Catch Up classes leading to absconding ✗ Reports from learners of tensions with teachers	✓ Hands-on, mentally stimulating nature of programme ✓ Presence of a guidance counsellor who is also a Catch Up teacher ✓ Teachers seeing themselves as parents / caregivers / motivators ✓ Pedagogy of play ✓ "Playful competition" ✓ Church and family paradigm supporting SEL ✓ Attempts to understand backgrounds of learners ✓ Many kind learners at the school ✓ Counselling in regular classes ✓ Happy, safe learning environment

Summary

Across all six schools, a consistent picture emerges of Catch Up as a programme that creates the conditions for social and emotional development, even though SEL is not explicitly embedded in its design or training. Teachers, learners, and parents repeatedly described improvements in confidence, participation, peer interaction, and learners' willingness to express themselves – changes attributed to the smaller class sizes, interactive pedagogy, and the relational ethos of Catch Up. These features enabled learners to feel safe, noticed, and supported, and to build new friendships and peer learning relationships. In several schools, learners described becoming less shy and more willing to ask questions, while teachers observed greater perseverance and empathy, with peers encouraging one another (*"You can try! You are almost there!"*). Parents, too, recognised shifts in children's behaviour and attitudes, often describing increased responsibility, openness, and "fellow feeling." These patterns were evident in both early adopting ("O") and newly adopting ("N") schools, suggesting that the SEL-relevant benefits of Catch Up can emerge quickly when core programme features are implemented with fidelity.

At the same time, the vignettes reveal structural and pedagogical constraints that limit the depth and consistency of SEL development. The most pervasive challenges include the absence of explicit SEL content in Catch Up training, teachers' reliance on intuition or personal upbringing to guide SEL support, and widespread uncertainty about SEL terminology and expectations. Ability grouping—central to TaRL—was widely valued for enabling targeted support and peer learning, yet it also produced unintended social consequences, including teasing, stigma, and the splitting of friendship groups, particularly for beginner level learners. Language-of-instruction policies (especially the requirement to use Tonga) further constrained learners' self-expression and teachers' confidence, particularly in multilingual communities. Teacher workload, demotivation, and the transfer of trained staff were recurrent barriers across schools, shaping the emotional climate in ways that could undermine SEL. Environmental factors such as overcrowded regular classes, poor sanitation, and safety concerns also influenced learners' wellbeing and sense of security.

Taken together, the vignettes show that SEL gains in Catch Up currently arise not from explicit instruction but from the pedagogical architecture of the programme – small groups, interactive activities, learner centred routines, and strengthened teacher-learner relationships. These enablers are remarkably consistent across schools. Yet the constraints are equally patterned: limited SEL training, language barriers, ability grouping dynamics, and teacher fatigue shape how far these benefits can extend. The six cases therefore point to a clear opportunity: Catch Up already contains many of the building blocks for SEL, but realising its full potential will require intentional integration of SEL concepts, guidance, and practices into training, classroom routines, and school-level support systems.

SENSE-MAKING WITH TRAINERS, TEACHERS, AND PARENTS

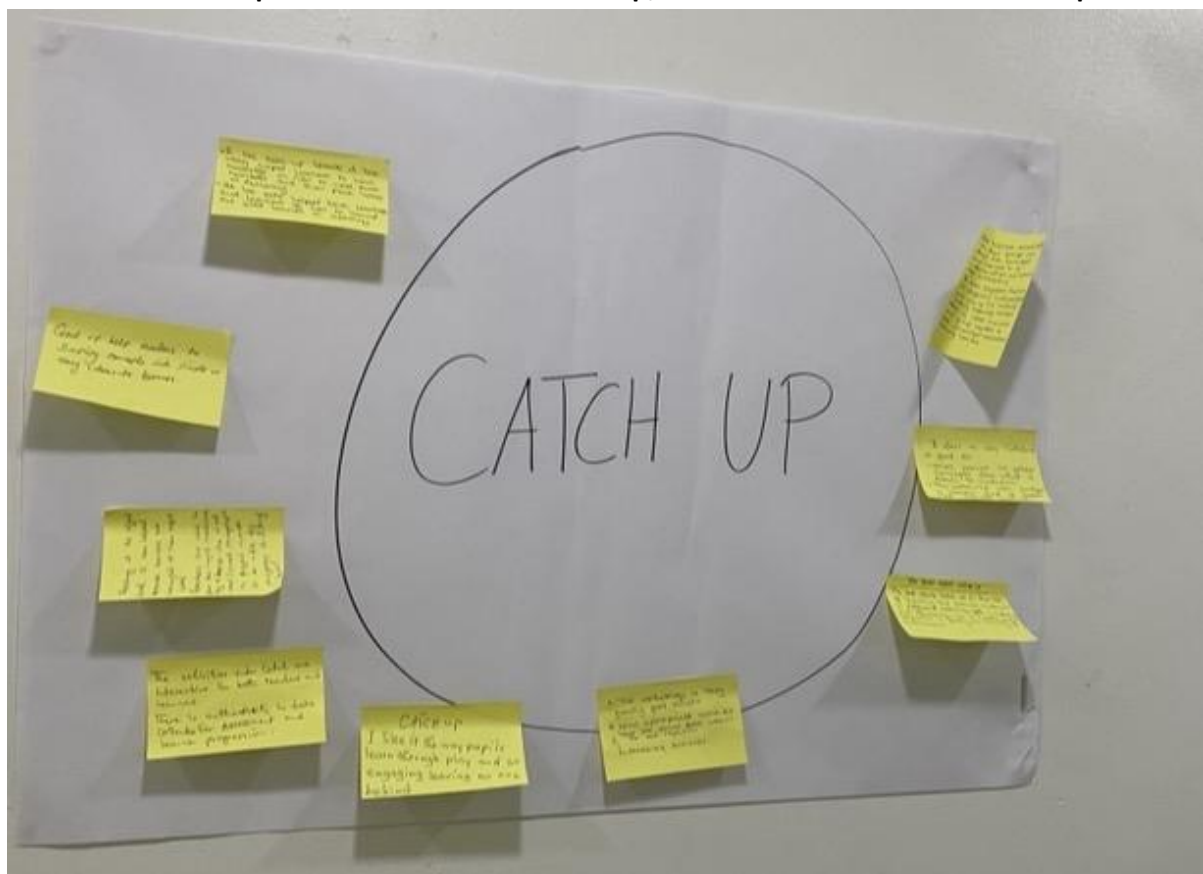
Trainer workshop: Sense-making with master trainers

We conducted a sensemaking workshop with Catch Up master trainers from the three districts we visited during our school-based research, including some of the trainers we had interviewed at the schools. Through the workshop, we aimed to explore trainers' own understandings of Catch Up and SEL, engage them in discussion about the ISELA questionnaire, and explore how playful pedagogies within Catch Up can intentionally support both academic and social-emotional outcomes. The workshop drew inspiration from Catch Up methods, combining reflective discussion, interactive tools, resource creation, and collaborative lesson design.

UNDERSTANDING THE BENEFITS OF CATCH UP

The workshop opened with introductions to the research project and the research team, followed by an icebreaker designed to capture participants' lived experiences of Catch Up. Participants introduced themselves by sharing their name, district, role, grades taught, and length of experience as Catch Up trainers. Each participant then contributed a keyword or short phrase to a shared mind map responding to the prompt: *"The greatest benefit or the best thing about Catch Up"*.

IMAGE 4: Mind map on the benefits of Catch Up, created at the trainer workshop



CATCH UP AND SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

<i>I like Catch-Up because it has really helped learners to have knowledge on how to read given numbers and their place value in numeracy.</i> <i>It has also helped both teachers and learners on how to sound out letter sounds in literacy.</i>	<i>Catch-Up help teachers to simplify concepts into simple or easy ideas to learners.</i>	<i>Teaching at the right level. It has helped because learners are taught at their right level. Teachers are able to give the right materials. e.g. a learner who is at word/simple paragraph is taught in order to be able to progress to story level.</i>
<i>The activities under Catch are interactive for both teachers and learners.</i> <i>There is authenticity in data collection for assessment and learner progression.</i>	<i>Catch-Up: I like it the way pupils learn through play and so engaging leaving no one behind.</i>	<i>1. The methodology is really yielding good results.</i> <i>2. Level appropriate activities help to deliver well attain the set objectives.</i> <i>3. Numeracy activities.</i>
<i>I feel to say Catch-Up is good for:</i> <i>- Helps learners to grasp concepts from what is known to unknown.</i> <i>- This Catch-Up also bridges a narrow gap of faster and slower learners.</i>	<i>The best about Catch-Up:</i> <i>The best about Catch Up is the use of Teaching and learning materials in different activities both in literacy and numeracy. The T/L aids are very vital in aiding the learning of the learners.</i>	<i>- CU learners interact well in their groups and this has encouraged our learners to be collaborative and lessons are interactive.</i> <i>- It has exposed teachers to different methodologies and use of T/L materials making learning skillful.</i> <i>- Use of class monitors and group leaders it has encouraged cooperation among learners</i>

As participants explained their contributions, a nuanced and practice-based picture of Catch Up emerged. Trainers emphasised that Catch Up had strengthened learners' understanding of foundational numeracy skills, particularly number recognition and place value, as well as literacy skills such as sounding out letter sounds. Several participants highlighted how Catch Up supports *teaching at the right level*, enabling teachers to provide appropriate materials based on learners' current competencies and to support progression from letters or words towards paragraphs and stories.

Catch Up was also described as helping teachers simplify complex concepts into manageable steps, bridging the gap between faster and slower learners. Participants stressed that the methodology encourages interactive learning, with strong engagement from both teachers and learners, and that its assessment approach supports authentic data collection for tracking learner progress. The use of varied teaching and learning materials was repeatedly noted as a key strength, making lessons engaging and supporting skill acquisition in both literacy and numeracy.

Social dimensions of learning also featured prominently, laying a strong foundation for the next activity on exploring social and emotional learning. Trainers reflected that Catch Up activities promote collaboration, interaction, and cooperation among learners, often through group work and

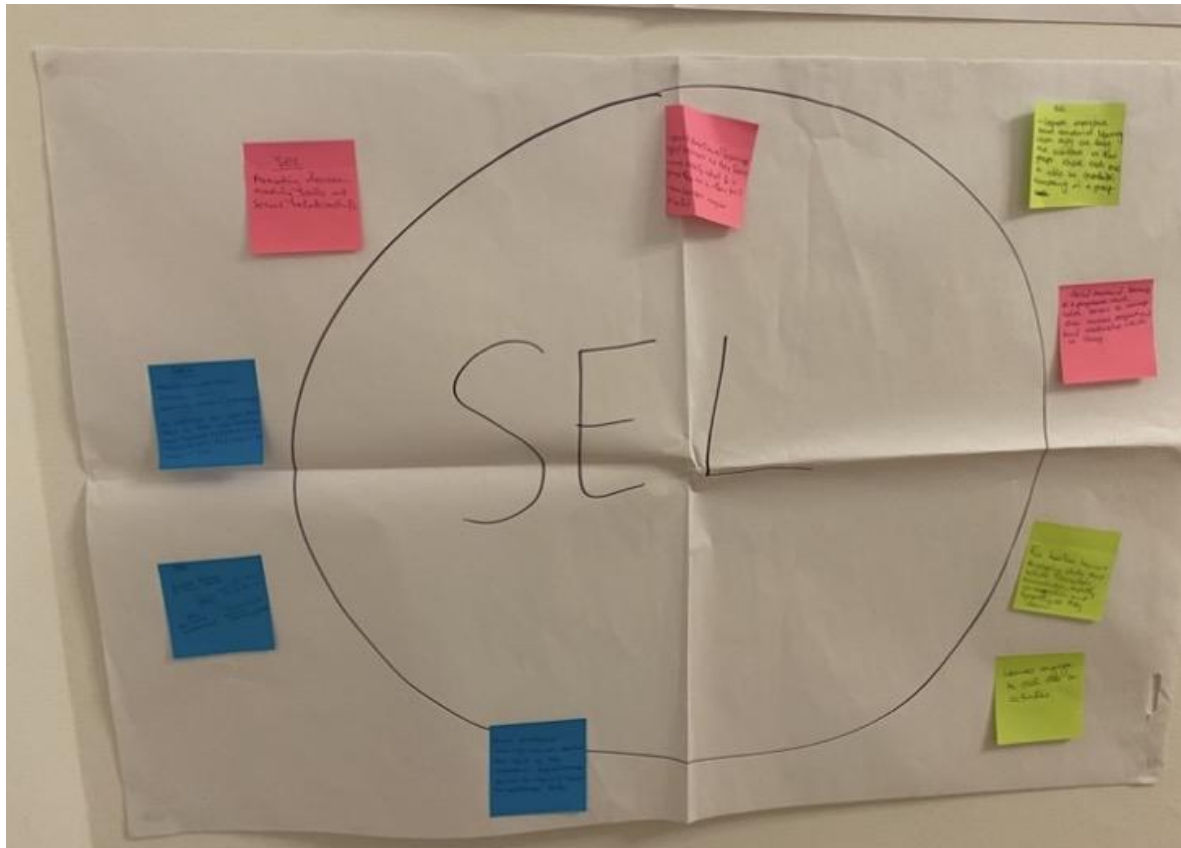
CATCH UP AND SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

the use of class monitors or group leaders. Learning through play was described as engaging and inclusive, “leaving no one behind,” while also exposing teachers to new methodologies that make learning more skilful and learner-centred.

EXPLORING UNDERSTANDINGS OF SEL

Building on the discussion of Catch Up’s benefits, participants were invited to reflect on social and emotional learning. A second mind map was created with *SEL* at the centre, and participants contributed words or short phrases capturing what SEL meant to them.

IMAGE 5: Mind map on understandings of SEL, created at the trainer workshop



<i>social – interaction</i> <i>emotion – feeling</i> <i>learning – acquiring knowledge</i> <i>As a teacher as you teach need to take also consideration how learners interact with others</i> <i>L/Env feel about the lesson & L/E.</i>	<i>Social emotional learning; learners develop the skill of self-expression, self-awareness”</i> <i>“learners to acquire social competences skills.</i>	<i>Learners experience social emotional learning when they are doing the activities in their groups where each one is able to contribute something in a group.</i>
<i>Learners engage to each other on activities.</i>	<i>-social emotional learning affect learners as they learn</i> <i>- some easily adapt to a group they are in, others fail</i> <i>- slow learners may be reluctant</i>	<i>[Presented as mini mind map, with SEL in the centre and 4 prongs]:</i> <i>- Enables learners to keep track.</i> <i>- builds on confidence.</i> <i>- has positive outcomes.</i> <i>- encourages active participation.</i>

CATCH UP AND SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

<i>Promoting decision making skills and social relationships.</i>	<i>This involves learners developing skills that include interaction, communication, empathy, corroborations and sympathy, as they learn.</i>	<i>Social emotional learning is a programme which helps learners to manage their emotions, recognise and build relationships which are strong.</i>
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Participants associated SEL with promoting decision-making skills, social relationships, interaction, emotions, and the overall learning environment. Several trainers emphasised that SEL involves considering how learners feel during lessons and how they interact with others. Contributions highlighted confidence-building, active participation, positive outcomes, and learners' ability to keep track of their own learning. Others focused on self-awareness, self-expression, empathy, communication, collaboration, and the development of social competence.

Group-based activities were seen as central to SEL, with participants noting that learners experience social and emotional learning when working together, contributing ideas, and supporting one another. At the same time, some trainers pointed out that learners respond differently to group work: while some adapt easily, others (often referred to as 'slower' learners by participants in the study) may feel reluctant or struggle to engage, underscoring the need for sensitive facilitation.

COMPARING UNDERSTANDINGS OF SEL WITH THE CATCH UP MANUAL

During a full group discussion, participants' responses were then compared with SEL concepts presented in a handout drawn from the back of the Catch Up Manual, which all teachers and trainers have a copy of (presented earlier in this report). None of the participants recognised this section of the manual, which prompted laughter and reflection. Trainers noted that while they were very familiar with other parts of the manual, explicit training on SEL and related fields of development would be highly beneficial. This moment highlighted a gap between implicit practice and explicit conceptual framing of SEL within Catch Up implementation.

EXPLORING THE ISELA TOOL

We then provided the trainers with an overview of the previous study that we were building our work on, including the ISELA tool. We then administered selected elements of the ISELA questionnaire interactively, allowing trainers to engage directly with the types of questions used to assess SEL.

A vignette from the ISELA questionnaire intended to test empathy and conflict resolution through an incident of a child spilling water on another child's painting generated particularly rich discussion. Most trainers initially interpreted the action as being motivated by jealousy rather than as an accident, which constitutes an "inappropriate" response according to the ISELA framework.

However, when probed further, participants demonstrated empathy, suggesting that the child might have felt inadequate or less competent than another learner. This highlighted a distinction between recognising emotional motivations and accurately interpreting intentions, as well as the complexity of assessing SEL through structured tools. Participants also observed that the questionnaire did not sufficiently address conflict resolution, which they felt was an important aspect of SEL in classroom settings.

There was strong consensus around the concept of perseverance, commonly described as "never giving up." Trainers agreed that perseverance could be observed over time, for example when

learners at beginner levels continue working towards higher levels in Catch Up. Continued participation and effort from all learners were also seen as indicators of perseverance. In contrast, participants agreed that the drawing task from the ISELA questionnaire did not seem to be an effective measure of perseverance.

Stress management proved more difficult to conceptualise. During the workshop, discussions often shifted towards how teachers manage stress in overcrowded classrooms rather than how learners manage stress. Participants agreed that the Catch Up structure, where the lesson moves from whole-class to group to individual activities, can help to reduce stress for both teachers and learners. However, as observed during school visits, stress management was often understood as stress avoidance, with Catch Up seen as making learning fun and engaging rather than explicitly teaching strategies for managing stress.

Hand-eye coordination was also occasionally erroneously identified as part of SEL, reflecting a broader tendency among some teachers to classify all non-academic skills under SEL. The handout on Fields of Development clarified that physical development is treated as a separate domain within the Catch Up framework, but it is conceivable that including this concept on the same handout as social emotional skills may instead contribute to confusion, with teachers potentially grouping everything non-academic as social emotional.

EXPLORING THE 7 CS OF LEARNING THROUGH PLAY

Participants then engaged in a collective reflection on the *7 Cs of Learning Through Play*. While there was broad agreement that the 7 Cs are important, participants found it challenging to recall all seven and at times proposed additional “Cs” to complete the set, much like teachers observed during school visits. We also shared a handout on the 7 Cs that was taken from the back of the Catch Up manual to prompt additional discussion. As with the previous handout, none of the participants recognised it, again noting that more explicit training on these conceptual tools would be valuable. Despite this, discussions demonstrated that trainers intuitively understood many of the principles and could readily identify how they appear in Catch Up and regular classroom activities.

CATCH UP PLANNING WITH A TWIST: GROUP MINI LESSON DESIGN

In the final activity for the workshop, participants worked in three groups to design short Catch Up activities that they felt focused on playful learning and the development of SEL. Rather than full lessons, groups were asked to plan five-minute activities and, as part of their activity plan, to explicitly articulate:

- Which of the 7 Cs were present and how they could be identified
- Which SEL skills were being developed and how

They were then asked to create the necessary learning materials and to deliver the mini lesson to the rest of the workshop participants.

Group 1 Mini Lesson

Group 1 designed a numeracy activity for the 2-3 digit literacy level using a number wheel or number circle. Each learner would take turns throwing nine stones, aiming to get them within the boundaries of one of the two circles. They would then collaboratively count out the number of stones landing in each circle and enter the numbers into the corresponding columns, where one of the circles and the corresponding column represented tens and the other ones. Through this activity, they would reinforce number recognition and place value.

CATCH UP AND SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

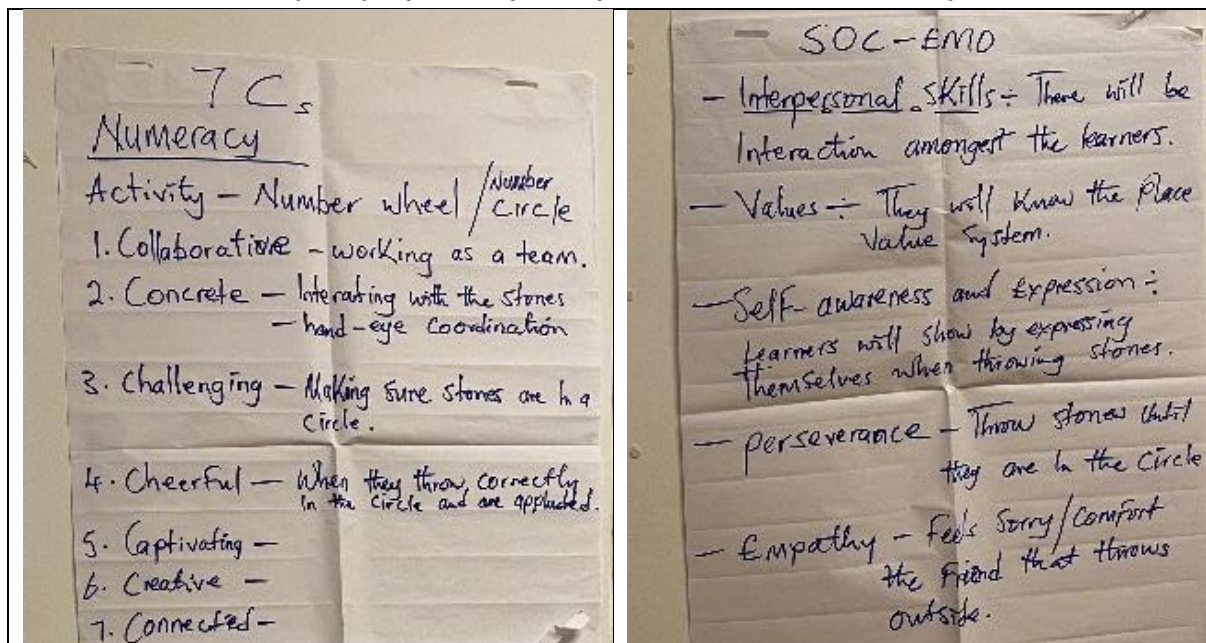
IMAGES 6-8: Group 1 delivers their mini lesson at the trainer workshop



Left to right: Trainer explains the activity; Trainer demonstrates the activity; Researcher/Facilitator completes the activity

The group's lesson plan is captured in Images 9-10.

IMAGES 9-10: Lesson plan prepared by Group 1 at the trainer workshop



Group 2 Mini Lesson

Group 2 designed a literacy activity for the Beginner and Letter level using a set of flashcards and a syllabic chart. The teacher would indicate a target syllable, and learners would take turns flipping cards from a face-down pile, with each learner receiving up to three turns to find the correct syllable. When a learner flipped the correct card, they would then go to the syllabic chart to match the syllable in the correct place. The activity was repeated, allowing learners to practice syllable recognition through a structured, game-like process. Through this activity, learners would reinforce letter-sound recognition, syllable identification, and confidence in reading.

CATCH UP AND SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

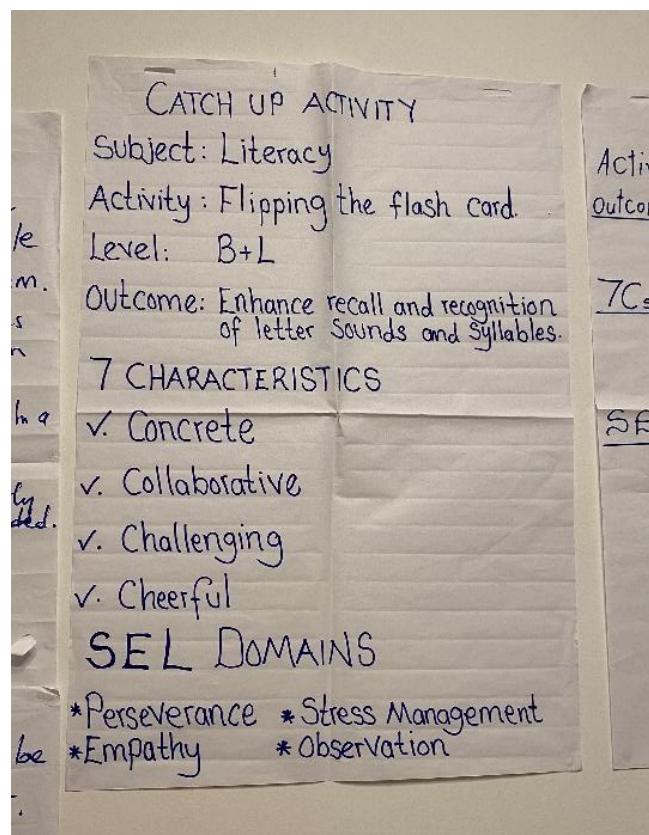
IMAGES 11-13: Group 2 delivers their mini lesson at the trainer workshop



Left to right: Learner flips cards to try to find the correct syllable; Learner picks the wrong card and all laugh, including him; Learner eventually picks the right card and goes to match it with the chart

The group's lesson plan is captured in Image 14.

IMAGE 14: Lesson plan prepared by Group 2 at the trainer workshop



Group 3 Mini Lesson

Group 3 designed a literacy activity for Beginner/Letter level using a collection of picture cards. The teacher displayed one picture at a time to the whole class and invited learners to volunteer to

CATCH UP AND SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

describe what they saw and share their ideas. Learners took turns speaking, while classmates listened and responded. The activity aimed to build learners' observation skills, imagination, and confidence in expressing their thoughts. Through this activity, learners would strengthen early reading skills, vocabulary, and expressive language, while also practising participation and respectful listening in a whole-class setting.

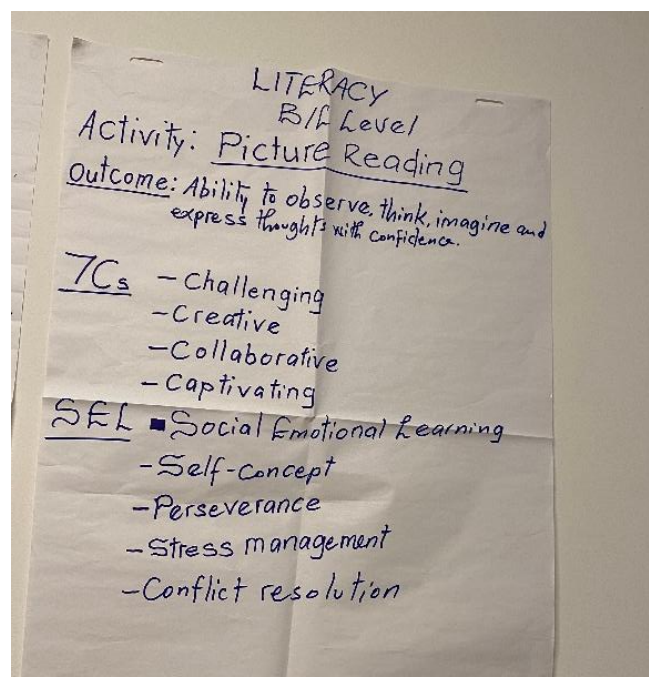
IMAGE 15: Group 3 delivers their mini lesson at the trainer workshop



The trainer points to different pictures and asks learners to identify them. Just as in *Catch Up*, the teacher sits on the ground with the learners.

The group's lesson plan is presented in Image 16.

IMAGE 16: Lesson plan prepared by Group 3 at the trainer workshop



ANALYTICAL REFLECTION ON MINI LESSON DESIGN ACTIVITY

Across the three group-designed activities, we saw strong evidence of trainers' intuitive understanding of playful, learner-centred pedagogy, and the lessons demonstrated clear promise for integrating the teaching of social and emotional skills into activities primarily designed for building literacy and numeracy. At the same time, as facilitators and researchers, this sensemaking exercise helped us uncover areas where further support is needed to enable more explicit and consistent inclusion of SEL and the 7 Cs in Catch Up practice.

As we also observed during school visits, participants found it challenging to articulate how SEL skills and the 7 Cs could be recognised or measured in practice. Only one group attempted to describe indicators for identifying the 7 Cs and SEL skills during the activity on the lesson plan, and even within this example there were some conceptual ambiguities, such as references to values being interpreted as mathematical values rather than moral or ethical ones. We consider these moments to be instructive rather than problematic, pointing to the extent to which understandings of SEL and the 7 Cs remain implicit and would benefit from more explicit framing and shared language. Unfortunately, we had run out of time to discuss the mini lesson plans fully with the participants – if we had had more time, we may have been able to explore together what some of these indicators might look like. However, in the spirit of the iterative approach of the research, we were able to incorporate this lesson into our workshop design for the upcoming workshops with teachers by leaving aside more time for exploring what the 7 Cs and social and emotional skills might look like in practice before teachers demonstrated their mini lessons.

As facilitators and researchers reflecting on the workshop, Group 2's activity also led us to a particularly valuable insight into how play-based learning operates in practice. The game gave learners three turns to flip the correct card, and if they succeeded, they could then match it on the syllabic chart. This structure made it clear that the stakes for "failing" were intentionally low: a learner could be unsuccessful simply because they were unlucky in flipping the wrong syllable from the face-down cards, or because they were still developing the ability to recognise the correct syllable. In both cases, learners were able to continue trying within the three-turn limit without penalty, which appeared to encourage laughter, reduce fear of making mistakes, and sustain engagement. This observation resonates with the "playful competition" we saw in many schools, where chance and repetition create a safe space for learners to take risks and continue participating even when they do not succeed immediately.

Overall, the workshop functioned as a productive sensemaking space, highlighting both the strong foundations already in place and the need for more explicit guidance, shared language, and practical tools to support trainers and teachers in intentionally planning for, observing, and reflecting on SEL and the 7 Cs within Catch Up sessions.

Teacher workshop 1: Sense-making with teachers from Chibombo and Kabwe

In the spirit of iterative learning, this sensemaking workshop built on lessons learned from the previous workshop we conducted with master trainers. Based on those reflections, we intentionally adapted both the content and structure of the day. In particular, we did not explore the ISELA questionnaire and instead devoted more time to discussions on defining the 7Cs and social and emotional development and – in particular – how to measure them or how teachers would be able to tell if the 7 Cs are present or if a particular social and emotional skill is being built. The workshop was designed as a collective sensemaking process around teachers' experiences of implementing Catch Up, as well as their own understandings of and experiences with social and emotional learning.

CATCH UP AND SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

The workshop drew inspiration from Catch Up methods, combining reflective discussion, interactive tools, resource creation, and collaborative lesson design.

UNDERSTANDING THE BENEFITS OF CATCH UP

We began by inviting teachers to introduce themselves and contribute to a collective mind map on the benefits of the Catch Up programme using sticky notes. Teachers' contributions foregrounded strong literacy and numeracy gains, often described as "breakthroughs," which they closely linked to the enabling conditions of Catch Up, particularly small class sizes and learner-centred activities.

Teachers noted that "learners are free to participate in a lesson because of the size of the class," which supports learners "to break through in numeracy and literacy." Many described improvements in reading, handwriting, sentence building, and counting, with some reporting that "most of the learners are progressing from one level to another" and that "90% of the learners are able to read and numerate."

Importantly, these academic gains were frequently intertwined with social and emotional benefits, even though we did not specifically ask about SEL. Of course, they may have been primed to think about benefits in socioemotional terms given the information provided in the workshop invitation. These teachers highlighted similar benefits to those identified during school visits: self confidence, interaction, engagement, and motivation. Catch Up was described as "boost[ing] confidence," helping learners "regain confidence in their abilities, reducing anxiety and stress related to feeling behind." Teachers also emphasised enjoyment and interaction: learners "enjoy the games," "interact freely with their friends and the teacher," and feel motivated to attend school. Several teachers highlighted transfer effects, noting that "I also use some of the activities' methods in regular class."

Relational benefits were also emphasised. One teacher explained that Catch Up "give[s] us the opportunity to share experiences, deepen trust and reinforce the bond between teacher and learner," creating space where "friendships are nurtured" and "mutual interests are explored." Friendships and improved teacher-learner relationships were common themes emerging from the school visits as benefits of Catch Up.

EXPLORING UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL BENEFITS OF EDUCATION

Teachers were then asked to reflect on social and emotional benefits of education and Catch Up. The participant responses are provided in Table 4, grouped according to broad social emotional themes identified during analysis.

TABLE 4: Workshop 1 participants' reflections on SE benefits of education and Catch Up

THEME	PARTICIPANT QUOTES
 Expression, voice, confidence, self-concept	"Learners are able to express themselves freely. They are also able to correct their followers."
	"Learners are free to show how they feel because in catch-up greeting is cardinal."
	"It boosts the confidence of the learners."
	"Increase high self esteem and self awareness. Learners tend to appreciate their values, emotions and belief."

CATCH UP AND SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

 Interaction, socialisation, belonging, emotional wellbeing (learners)	"It has helped most learners to be able to associate and interact in class."
	"Brings the learners together especially when it comes to the activities."
	"Learners are excited to meet in one class with different grades."
	"Learners are free to play and interact with their friends."
	"Learners are able to interact because they don't feel left out when they are in class because their confidence has been built through Catch-up."
	"Activities done at school arouse learner's mood even if the learner had feeling low."
 Comfort, encouragement	"comfort – other people gives comfort or there is an interchange of encouragement in case one undergoes problems."
 Resilience, coping, help-seeking	"Increase resilience, social and emotional skills equip learners with the ability to copy with challenges situations and develop resilience."
	"if one has some financial crisis, they are able to open up to their friend or workmate."
 Life skills, life experience	"They will ever use their acquired skills in real life."
	"Knowledge. One learns a lot of things from environment around."
 Interaction, socialisation, belonging (teachers)	"As a teacher it has made me know a lot of things through interaction. I'm able to ask questions and be helped."
	"There is socialization amongst teachers especially during meeting for example during continuous professional development."
	"I'm able to interact with my colleagues at work."
	"I'm able to connect with my colleagues at work."
	"Some time we become emotional when headteacher or sponsor is against is against you." [negative]

As can be seen from the table, strong themes emerged, including expression, confidence, belonging and interaction, with teachers noting that learners are "able to express themselves freely," "free to show how they feel," and "do not feel left out when they are in class because their confidence has been built through Catch Up."

CATCH UP AND SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

As with the trainers' workshop, when the *TaRL Impact of Learning through Play on Fields of Development* handout from the Catch Up manual was shared with teachers, no one recognised it, despite being otherwise familiar with their manuals. Comparing their responses with the handout led to interesting insights.

Many of the participants focused on benefits for *teachers*, which are not mentioned in the handout and which echoes one of the themes emerging from the school visits – that education is relational, and that learners' social and emotional learning and wellbeing is intertwined with teachers' social and emotional learning and wellbeing.

It is also worth noting that one of the teachers, in spite of the question being posed in terms of *benefits*, phrased their response in negative terms, noting how teachers can become emotional if the headteacher or sponsor is "against" them. This comment serves to underscore the paradoxical situation teachers find themselves in that was also alluded to in the school visits – that they are simultaneously motivated and demotivated. Participants also noted that "comfort" was not really included in the handout.

RECOGNISING AND MEASURING SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL BENEFITS AND THE 7 CS

Teachers worked in groups to select a number of social, emotional, and creative benefits (either from their list or from the handouts) and then identify relevant observable indicators. They were also asked to define the 7Cs and then come up with potential indicators that could be used to measure whether or not the 7Cs are present. Their outputs are summarised in Tables 5 and 6.

TABLE 5: Workshop 1 teachers' definitions and indicators of social, emotional & creative benefits

Benefit	Teacher-defined indicators
Exploration and experimental	"Learners are willing to carry on activity. Learners are more engaged in class activities."
Social competence	"Ability of the child to demonstrate social skills e.g. enhanced peer interactions."
Self-concept	"Enhanced free participation and valuing others' answers during group work"
Creativity	"Children doing pictures of imaginative mind and analysing materials/sorting items."
Value	"Ability to accommodate different views during group work."
Social competence	"Making good relationships with teachers. For example, when learners are interactive when given tasks. This happens in numeracy and literacy."

TABLE 6: Workshop 1 teacher-defined indicators of the 7 Cs²

Characteristic	Teacher-defined indicators
Collaborative	"The learners are able to work in groups. Interactions, share experiences"
Concrete	"Learners are able to use real objects. In numeracy and literacy they use sticks, apples to count."
Connected	"Participation by learners, for example, in the mind map, learners will provide answers"
Creativity	"Literacy, given an activity of picture reading, learner will come up with appropriate words, sentences and stories."
Challenging	"Activity (clap and snap) when the teacher demonstrates this activity, the learners are able to answer and make connections in the whole class, in groups and as individual."
Captivating	"In the activity 'building words'- when learners start forming words discussed."

During plenary discussion, teachers reflected on the challenges of measurement. They noted that social and emotional benefits are difficult to assess because "children come from different homes with different personalities," and behaviours may differ between school and home contexts.

Again, these insights echoed emerging themes from the school visits, with many teachers, trainers, mentors, and parents commenting on the importance of understanding learner backgrounds and recognising the significant role played by the home and family in socialising learners. Measuring values was seen as particularly complex, as learners may display contrasting behaviours in different environments.

CATCH UP PLANNING WITH A TWIST: GROUP MINI LESSON DESIGN

In the final activity, participants worked in three groups to design short Catch Up activities (including learning resources) that they felt focused on playful learning and the development of SEL. Rather than full lessons, groups were asked to plan five-minute activities and, as part of their plan, to explicitly articulate which 7 Cs and social and emotional skills would be included and how they as teachers would know this was happening.

In other words, as part of their planning, they were asked to identify indicators they could potentially use to track progress towards SEL. They were then asked to create the necessary learning materials and to deliver the mini lesson to the rest of the workshop participants. The three mini lesson plans developed are shared below, followed by an analytical discussion of the design exercise.

² Note that there were three groups in total, covering two Cs each, meaning that one of the Cs was not covered.

TABLE 7: Group 1 mini lesson plan (Teacher workshop 1)

Study area	Literacy
Activity	Word building
Social and emotional benefits	• abstract thinking • self awareness and expression • values • social competence • eye hand coordination
7 Cs	Challenging, concrete, creativity, connected, cheerful, collaborative, captivating

TABLE 8: Group 2 mini lesson plan (Teacher workshop 1)

Study area	Numeracy
Activity	Subtraction using bundles and sticks
Social and emotional benefits	• <i>self-concept</i>: when the learner was asked the question, some of the learners were like, madam, I want to do it. There was that self-concept. Also when the teacher was demonstrating, other learners were like madam, it is not this it is that. • <i>interpersonal skills</i> • <i>social emotional</i>
7 Cs	• <i>Concrete</i>: Learners are able to use real objects (bundles and sticks, creativity), • <i>Collaborative</i>: Learners are able to interact in groups and share experiences, • <i>Challenging</i>: there were a lot of questions here and there, they could get confused, here and there. • <i>Captivating</i>: the lesson was involving, • <i>Connected</i>: learners were connected to the lesson in that they were asked questions, what are you supposed to do? They were connecting the operation of the day to the activity, • <i>Cheerful</i>: we could laugh, feel good by the end of the day.

TABLE 9: Group 3 mini lesson plan (Teacher workshop 1)

Study area	Numeracy
Activity	Tossing the ball for addition and subtraction
Social and emotional benefits	• <i>Self-Concept</i>: The learners were able to ask their friends questions friend were responding to those questions. Learners were able to give correct answers. • <i>Self-awareness</i>: When learners are giving correct answers on addition and subtraction, they develop knowledge about themselves of what they can do and what they cannot do. • <i>Social competence</i>: they were able to interact as they were expecting the ball from their friends

7 Cs	The teacher will be able to see the pupils give correct additional and subtraction answers which helps to know that they are able to do the activity. • <i>Collaboration</i>: they learn from each other and build relationships. They were also able to work together as they waited for the ball as they could ask each other numeracy questions as they wait for the ball • <i>Challenging</i>: Learners try and fail, then they try and make the connections of the activity • <i>Connected</i>: It makes learners to build up their existing knowledge, their minds and their interest • <i>Cheerful</i>: As they do the activity, learners will be doing it with a ball while enjoying the activity as they toss the ball to their friends • <i>Concrete</i>: Through hands on experience, learners are able absorbed in the activity since they are able to play with the ball in the exercise.
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ANALYTICAL REFLECTION ON MINI LESSON DESIGN ACTIVITY

Across all three activities, teachers demonstrated an emerging ability to link learning activities from Catch Up to social and emotional benefits and to the characteristics of learning through play, and to prepare for and deliver the lessons with these additional goals in mind. However, there was variation across groups in the extent to which these links were made explicit. Two of the three groups were able to articulate specific indicators for how social and emotional benefits and the 7Cs might be recognised during the activity, while Group 1 did not provide concrete indicators. Group 1 also listed eye-hand coordination as a social and emotional benefit, a categorisation that echoes a similar challenge observed during the workshop with master trainers. As in that earlier workshop, we view this as a productive insight into how boundaries between developmental domains are experienced as blurred in practice and how shared conceptual language is still developing.

Where indicators were provided, they tended to focus on observable learner behaviours during interaction, participation, and problem-solving. In the *Subtraction using bundles and sticks* activity, teachers pointed to learners volunteering to answer questions, correcting the teacher, and asking questions as signs of self-concept and interpersonal skills. These indicators suggest an understanding of social and emotional development as closely tied to learners' willingness to take risks, assert ideas, and engage actively in learning in front of peers. Similarly, in the *Tossing the ball* activity, teachers identified indicators such as learners asking peers questions, giving correct answers, waiting for the ball, and continuing to try after initial failure. These behaviours were interpreted as evidence of self-awareness, social competence, and challenge, reflecting a view of learning as both social and iterative.

Notably, the indicators identified by these two groups were grounded in everyday classroom interactions rather than in formal assessment tools. Teachers drew on familiar moments – such as learners laughing, responding to peers, or persisting through difficulty – to infer social and emotional growth, reinforcing the idea that much of teachers' knowledge about SEL is tacit and based on experience, rather than on lessons learned through professional development and supportive supervision. Echoing our discussions with teachers at schools, workshop participants also seemed to be alert to noticing shifts in learner confidence, participation, and interaction, even when they find it difficult to translate these observations into formalised indicators or measurement strategies.

At the same time, the difficulty experienced by one group in specifying indicators, and the cross-domain categorisation of certain benefits (erroneously including eye-hand coordination as a social emotional benefit), highlight an ongoing challenge in making SEL and the 7Cs more explicit within planning and reflection processes for Catch Up. This challenge mirrors what we heard repeatedly during conversations with teachers in schools, where social and emotional development was often

described through examples and stories rather than through shared terminology or structured observation criteria. Teachers clearly recognise these dimensions of learning, but they do not always have the language or tools to name them consistently.

Taken together, these observations suggest that the key developmental need is not to introduce entirely new concepts, but to support teachers in articulating and systematising what they already notice and value in their practice. Creating more opportunities to unpack examples, compare indicators, and jointly reflect on what social and emotional development “looks like” in Catch Up sessions may help bridge the gap between intuitive understanding and explicit planning. In this sense, the mini lesson design activity functioned as both a diagnostic and developmental exercise, revealing strong foundations alongside clear opportunities for further sensemaking and support.

Teacher workshop 2: Sense-making with teachers from Mkushi and Kapiri Mposhi

This sensemaking workshop followed the same format as the previous teacher workshop. The workshop was designed as a collective sensemaking process around teachers’ experiences of implementing Catch Up, as well as their own understandings of and experiences with social and emotional learning. The workshop drew inspiration from Catch Up methods, combining reflective discussion, interactive tools, resource creation, and collaborative lesson design.

UNDERSTANDING THE BENEFITS OF CATCH UP

As with the other workshops, we began by inviting teachers to introduce themselves and contribute to a collective mind map on the benefits of the Catch Up programme using sticky notes. Teachers’ contributions foregrounded strong academic gains, particularly in literacy and numeracy, which they linked to learner-centred methods and learning at the appropriate level (TaRL approach). Teachers reported that Catch Up “improves learners’ academic performance in terms of reading and writing,” and noted that it supports learners to progress in numeracy and language skills. One teacher described improved literacy as learners gaining “skills in reading, writing comprehension,” while another emphasised numeracy gains, noting that “Learners have improved in terms of reading and writing numbers.” Teachers also highlighted language learning, reporting that Catch Up has enabled learners to “read Ichibemba,” though they noted that this did not always transfer to English, stating, “How I wish it was also in English... they are not able to read English.” This latter comment echoes the finding from the schools that teachers find it challenging to deal with language of instruction requirements in a multilingual environment.

In addition to these academic gains, participants also highlighted key social and emotional benefits, mirroring what we observed in earlier workshops and school visits. This foreshadowed the later discussion on SEL and the 7 Cs, showing that teachers already see Catch Up as supporting holistic development.

A central theme was learners’ increased **confidence**. Teachers explained that Catch Up “increases learner confidence, through social individual activities,” and that it supports learners to become “self-assured in their abilities.” Several teachers emphasised that learners are now able to “speak in front,” and that even shy learners are now included, noting that Catch Up “builds learners’ confidence... Even shy are able to participate.” **Motivation** was also strongly emphasised. Teachers described how Catch Up “increases confidence and motivation when they are taught at the right level,” and that learners “are now scrambling to read, they run to read.” These comments suggest that when learning is accessible, appropriately paced, and enjoyable (as is the nature of Learning through Play and TaRL approaches) learners become more engaged and eager to participate.

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Teachers consistently highlighted increased **social interaction** and stronger **peer relationships**. Catch Up was described as strengthening social bonds and “reconnecting with friends,” and creating spaces where learners can freely interact and cooperate. Teachers reported that Catch Up “promotes teamwork” and that “There is teamwork among learners in terms of accomplishing tasks together.”

Several teachers also noted that Catch Up supports learners to “socialise with others” and that there is “interaction through different activities.” These findings align with observations from school visits, where Catch Up classrooms often appeared more collaborative and cohesive than regular classes.

Teachers identified emotional benefits such as **reduced anxiety** and improved **emotional wellbeing**. They described how learners feel “more capable and less anxious especially when they understand what others already know,” suggesting that comprehension and understanding can help reduce fear and increase participation. These comments reinforce the view that Catch Up supports learners not only academically but also emotionally.

Several teachers highlighted improvements in **teacher-learner interaction and learner engagement**. One teacher noted “Free expression, teacher-pupil interaction improves,” and described learners as having “more interest in reading.” Another teacher observed that when books are left out, “you find learners reading them,” indicating increased learner initiative and enthusiasm.

Teachers also emphasised Catch Up’s **inclusive nature and opportunities for participation**. They noted that the programme “helps backward learners to catch-up” and “promotes participation in learners as they are all involved during catch-up”, suggesting that Catch Up supports learners who are behind without excluding them from classroom participation, reinforcing the view that the programme is designed to be inclusive and learner-centred. However, it is important to note that teachers and parents across schools sometimes referred to learners as ‘slow’ or ‘backward’, which is non-inclusive language that is typically discouraged in TaRL approaches.

EXPLORING UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL BENEFITS OF EDUCATION

Teachers were then asked to reflect directly on social and emotional benefits of education and Catch Up. Table 10 provides responses, grouped according to broad social emotional themes.

TABLE 10: Workshop 2 participants’ reflections on SE benefits of education and Catch Up

Theme	Participant quotes
 Expression, voice, confidence, self-concept	“It increases confidence in learners.”
	“It increases confidence.”
	“It promotes a confidence in learners hence help them to be more involved in school work.”
	“[It makes learners to be interactive.] Promotes confidence in learners especially when the learner is not emotionally well.”
	“Learners gain courage to speak publicly.”
	“Pupils speak freely in public.”

CATCH UP AND SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

 Interaction and socialisation	"Learners become free to socialise with others."
	"There is interaction through different activities."
	"Learners are able to interact with others."
	"Able to interact with other learners and appreciate their friends."
	"There is good interaction in schools [and learn a lot of things from your peers]."
	"It makes learners to be interactive. [Promotes confidence in learners especially when the learner is not emotionally well.]"
 Community understanding and social awareness	"Helps good understanding of things in our communities."
 Relationships and peer learning	"[There is good interaction in schools] and learn a lot of things from your peers."
	"It helps to develop good relationship with friends."
	"It improves learners' skills to work with other learners."
 Communication and interpersonal skills	"Improves communication skills among learners because they interact with a lot of friends."
	"Improves communication and interpersonal relationship."
	"Interactive skills like speaking and listening are improved and help learners acquire concepts easily."
 Emotional wellbeing and regulation	"It helps to have peace of mind and lessen worries."
	"They learn emotional intelligence, for example they are able to control their emotional."
 Academic learning	"It promotes learners' ability to read and write."

Overall, teachers' responses clustered around a set of interrelated social and emotional outcomes, with confidence and self-expression and interaction and socialisation emerging as the most prominent themes. Participants noted that Catch Up supports learners to "speak freely in public," "gain courage," and become "more involved in school work," suggesting that the programme helps learners develop stronger voice and agency. Teachers also described how learners become "free to socialise with others" and are able to "interact with other learners and appreciate their friends."

Communication and interpersonal skills also featured strongly, particularly the development of speaking and listening abilities through peer interaction. Teachers highlighted relationship-building and peer learning, noting that learners “learn a lot of things from your peers” and develop “good relationship[s] with friends.” Emotional wellbeing and regulation appeared less frequently but were still present, with teachers describing learners as having “peace of mind” and being able to “control their emotional.” These themes are broadly consistent with the social and emotional benefits listed in the TaRL Impact of LtP on Fields of Development handout (which, again, the participants did not recognise).

One response referred to academic learning rather than socioemotional outcomes, noting that Catch Up “promotes learners’ ability to read and write.” While this may reflect how teachers often understand learning holistically, it also suggests that this participant interpreted the question through an academic lens rather than explicitly focusing on social and emotional development. Teachers also linked social and emotional benefits directly to learning, for example noting that “interactive skills like speaking and listening are improved and help learners acquire concepts easily,” which indicates that they see SEL and academic learning as mutually reinforcing rather than separate domains.

Notably, unlike the previous workshop, no participants in this group mentioned teacher SEL or wellbeing. This absence may reflect the fact that these teachers had not been implementing Catch Up for as long in their schools, and therefore may not yet have been considering the programme’s impact on their own wellbeing or professional relationships in the same way.

RECOGNISING AND MEASURING SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL BENEFITS AND THE 7 CS

Teachers worked in groups to select a number of social, emotional, and creative benefits (either from their list or from the handouts) and then identify relevant observable indicators. They were also asked to define the 7Cs and then come up with potential indicators that could be used to measure whether or not the 7Cs are present. Their outputs are summarised in Tables 11 and 12.

TABLE 11: Workshop 2 teachers’ definitions and indicators of social, emotional & creative benefits

Benefit	Teacher-defined indicators
Interpersonal skills	“When learners are able to interact and communicate effectively for example in group work they talk to each other learners are willing to carry on activity. Learners are more engaged in class activities.”
Social competence	“When learners are able to build relationships and communicate with others in a way they are respectful, empathetic and adaptable.”
Values	“When the learners are able to show principled behaviour for instance kindness, decision making, kindness [sic. Repetition], honesty.”
Self-awareness & expression	“Helps one to know their strengths and weaknesses acknowledgement. They are conscious of what they are doing and they willingly participate in activities. They accept their short-comings for instance, they can write on charts.”

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Social Emotional Wellbeing	“They are able to withstand pressure for example they don’t pull out the paper from their books when they get things wrong. They also adapt to different environments, for instance, can perform both in an indoor & outdoor activity”
Empathy	“They also know what to say at the right time (realization); they stop laughing at their friend when they give wrong answers.”
Self concept	• “if the learner is able to do what was taught correctly and becomes aware of his ability to do things correctly” • “if the learner is able to identify things correctly on their own when give tasks with the teacher”
Self regulation	• “If a child is able to control him/herself in terms of behaviour in class” • “If a child is able to abide by regulations / instruction given.”

TABLE 12: Workshop 2 teacher-defined indicators of the 7 Cs³

Characteristic	Teacher-defined indicators
Concrete	“Learners are willing to use materials provided, for example, expansion cards in numeracy, word building using syllable diary.”
Collaboration	“Learners manage group activities as a team, for example, tossing the ball. They build inter-personal relationship through group activities.”
Creativity	“Learners bring new ideas. Learners express themselves in different ways. Expressing their own views.”
Challenging	“Learners discover things on their own, for example, when they are able to make words from letters/syllables.”
Captivating	“Learners are making decision on what to do, for example, the formula to use in numeracy.”
Connected	“Learners are able to relate to the knowledge they gain to the outside environment, for example play money.”

Across the two tables, teachers demonstrated a strong ability to translate abstract concepts into observable classroom behaviours. For the social, emotional, and creative benefits, indicators emphasised participation, interaction, and learners’ capacity to engage independently, suggesting that teachers view SEL as manifesting through relational and action-based behaviours. For example, interpersonal skills and social competence were defined through learners’ willingness to engage in group work and communicate respectfully, while self-awareness and self-concept were linked to learners recognising their strengths, participating willingly, and completing tasks accurately. Some concepts, such as “values” seemed slightly more challenging for teachers to define.

³ Note that there were three groups in total, covering two Cs each, meaning that one of the Cs was not covered.

CATCH UP AND SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

For the 7 Characteristics of Learning through Play (the 7 Cs), teachers similarly identified indicators that reflected how play is happening in the classroom. Their indicators emphasised hands-on engagement and learner agency, such as learners “use materials provided,” “manage group activities as a team,” and “discover things on their own.” This suggests that teachers perceive the 7 Cs not as social or emotional outcomes, but as observable features of play-based pedagogy.

CATCH UP PLANNING WITH A TWIST: GROUP MINI LESSON DESIGN

In the final activity, participants worked in three groups to design short Catch Up activities (including learning resources) that they felt focused on playful learning and the development of SEL. Rather than full lessons, groups were asked to plan five-minute activities and, as part of their plan, to explicitly articulate which 7 Cs and social and emotional skills would be included and how they as teachers would know this was happening.

In other words, as part of their planning, they were asked to identify indicators they could potentially use to track progress towards SEL. They were then asked to create the necessary learning materials and to deliver the mini lesson to the rest of the workshop participants. The three mini lesson plans developed are shared below, followed by an analytical discussion of the design exercise.

TABLE 13: Group 1 mini lesson plan (Teacher workshop 2)

Study area	Literacy
Activity	Basket game Enhances recall and recognition of letter sound and syllables and words
Social and emotional benefits	• Self regulation (there are rules to follow) • Curiosity and interest • Self awareness and expression
7 Cs	• <i>Challenging</i>: Learners may pick a tough/challenging syllable/word • <i>Collaborative</i>: If a learner has picked a word/syllable which they are not able to read, others can come in and help • <i>Connected</i>: Learners are able to build up their interest and already existing knowledge

TABLE 14: Group 2 mini lesson plan (Teacher workshop 2)

Study area	Numeracy
Activity	Tossing the ball Addition – building accuracy, speed, speaking
Social and emotional benefits	Collaboration, concentration, critical thinking, expression, physical well-being, eye-coordination. The teacher will know that the lesson has the above benefits when there are accurate responses, attentiveness, flow of the activity. After further probing • there were interpersonal skills as children were [sic. Text missing]

7 Cs	• activity • concrete • captivating • connected • collaborative • creative • cheerful • challenging
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TABLE 15: Group 3 mini lesson plan (Teacher workshop 2)

Study area	Literacy
Activity	Correct the incorrect Skills: Reading, writing, listening
Social and emotional benefits	<i>self-awareness and expression:</i> Learners are able to identify problems in a sentence.
7 Cs	<i>Challenging:</i> Learners are challenged to discover themselves (the problem in a sentence)

ANALYTICAL REFLECTION ON MINI LESSON DESIGN ACTIVITY

Across the three mini lessons, teachers demonstrated a strong ability to integrate foundational literacy and numeracy skills with playful, learner-centred approaches. All three activities were designed to promote active participation, and each group explicitly linked learning outcomes to social and emotional benefits and the 7 Cs, indicating that teachers are able to recognise and intentionally plan for play-based pedagogy, even when focusing primarily on academic skills.

Group 1's basket game emphasised literacy through recall and recognition of letter sounds, syllables, and words, and included rules that supported self-regulation. The activity also incorporated curiosity and self-expression, while the 7 Cs focused on challenge, collaboration, and connectedness. This combination suggests that teachers understand how play can create a structured yet open space for learners to take risks, support one another, and build on prior knowledge. Group 3 similarly built in challenge through the "Correct the incorrect" activity, which required learners to identify errors in sentences, reinforcing self-awareness and expression. The 7 C of challenging here is clearly aligned to the cognitive effort required, showing that teachers view challenge as central to meaningful play.

Group 2's numeracy activity — tossing the ball — was the most elaborated in terms of both SEL and the 7 Cs. Teachers identified a broad range of social and emotional benefits, including collaboration, concentration, critical thinking, expression, and physical well-being, with observable indicators such as "accurate responses, attentiveness, flow of the activity." After further probing, the group also recognised interpersonal skills, suggesting that the activity supported social interaction as well as individual cognition. In addition, the group identified nearly all of the 7 Cs, including concrete, captivating, connected, collaborative, creative, cheerful, and challenging. This breadth suggests that teachers can recognise multiple dimensions of play when the activity is dynamic and interactive, and it aligns with the patterns we observed during school visits where playful games often naturally elicited multiple characteristics simultaneously.

At the same time, the mini lessons also revealed areas for further support. Group 1 and Group 3 did not provide fully specified observable indicators for all the benefits listed, which mirrors the challenge we saw in the earlier workshop with master trainers. For example, while Group 3 clearly identified self-awareness and expression as a benefit, the indicator provided was more a description of the task (“Learners are able to identify problems in a sentence”) than a behavioural sign that the skill was developing. Similarly, Group 1 identified self-regulation, curiosity, and self-awareness, but did not specify what a teacher would observe in learners to confirm these outcomes. These gaps suggest that while teachers have strong tacit knowledge of SEL and play-based learning, they may benefit from further practice in articulating observable indicators that make these benefits measurable and discussable in a shared language.

Overall, the mini lesson activity served as a valuable sensemaking exercise. It showed that teachers can design playful, interactive learning experiences that support both academic skills and socioemotional development, but also highlighted the ongoing need for clearer frameworks and shared terminology to support more explicit planning, observation, and reflection

Sense-making focus groups with parents

Following our school visits and teacher workshops, we conducted sense-making focus groups with parents and caregivers of Catch Up learners from the six schools we had previously visited. These sessions were designed not only to gather parents’ perspectives on children’s learning, but also to support collective reflection on Catch Up and its potential social and emotional benefits.

The focus groups began with an icebreaker to build rapport and encourage participants to share their experiences as caregivers, including what they value most about their children’s schooling. This was followed by a discussion of parents’ understanding of the school and the Catch Up programme, including what their children share at home about their learning.

Then, to help parents engage with the ideas of playful learning and experience firsthand an example of the type of activity their children would be exposed to during Catch Up, we demonstrated a simple “names of fruit” mind map activity and asked parents to reflect on what children might be learning through such an activity.

The second half of the session centred on parents’ views on the purpose of schooling, with particular attention to social and emotional outcomes, and culminated in a demonstration of a second Catch Up activity, a basket game to prompt discussion of how learning through play may support social and emotional development.

Most of the data from these focus groups have been incorporated into the school vignettes, where they complement the perspectives of teachers, mentors, trainers, and learners. In this subsection, we focus specifically on the key ways in which parents helped us make sense of our analysis, particularly by clarifying how they understand social and emotional dimensions of learning and the role of families in supporting SEL and wellbeing. These insights are captured in Tables 16 to 21.

TABLE 16: Catch Up as a driver of academic improvement and confidence

Insight 1: Parents across schools, including the ones with more recent implementation, strongly linked Catch Up to improved literacy and numeracy, often describing learners as progressing faster than expected.	
Observation	Illustrative Quotes
 Improved reading and numeracy	“Children in catch-up can count up to 1000” (School 2AO) “My child reads better than a grade seven” (School 2AO) “Reading is no longer a problem” (School 3AO) “My child can now read and write properly” (School 1AO)
 Increase in confidence and participation	“She is more confident... speaks about what happens at school freely” (School 1AO) “Shyness ends when they start school” (School 3AN) “My child has suddenly developed confidence... no longer shy to read in public” (School 1AN) “Children are able to present their ideas and ask for anything at home” (School 3AO)

TABLE 17: Catch Up and school as sites of character formation

Insight 2: Parents emphasised that school and Catch Up shape behaviour, discipline, and values, often describing these outcomes in practical terms rather than technical SEL language.	
Observation	Illustrative Quotes
 Discipline, respect, and good behaviour	“They greet us... they respect everyone” (School 2AO) “Children learn good morals and values” (School 3AN) “Children have improved in respect and discipline... they do not fight” (School 1AO) “Children learn respect and cleanliness” (School 2AN)
 Responsibility and future orientation	“I want my children to be independent so that they can be employed and reduce poverty” (School 3AO) “My child wants to be a nurse/teacher and work hard” (School 1AO)

TABLE 18: SEL is understood through behaviour change and relationships

Insight 3: Parents often described SEL through observable changes in relationships, emotions, and interactions rather than using the term “SEL” itself.	
Observation	Illustrative Quotes
 Empathy and care for others	“Children share food, pencils and pens with each other” (School 1AO) “My child is able to stay away from trouble and advise his friends not to do bad things” (School 1AN) “Children learn to help friends who fail” (School 3AN)

CATCH UP AND SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

 Interpersonal skills, peer cooperation	"Children are able to communicate easily amongst themselves" (School 1AN) "Children learn leadership... how to live with others" (School 2AO) "Children can now interact well with each other and encourage each other about school" (School 3AO)
 Self-control and perseverance	"Now they finish their homework alone even if it can be challenging" (School 1AO) "My child is now able to control herself... behaves better" (School 3AO) "Children are able to follow rules and wait for their turn" (School 3AO)

TABLE 19: Parents as active partners in SEL along with the church and community

Insight 4: Parents clearly saw themselves as central to children's emotional development and learning success, describing home, and often the church, as the foundation for values, discipline, and motivation.	
Observation	Illustrative Quotes
 Parents' key role in SEL and learning	"Schools do not make children, parents make children" (School 2AN) "If we are friendly...children will open up" (School 2AO) "I feel good to be called Dad... I have a responsibility" (School 3AN) "If Catch Up materials were given to us for use, it can really help us to help our children at home." (School 2AN)
 Centrality of the church and community	"He even helps us by taking his siblings to church." (School 1AO) "My child has developed confidence to the point of being able to read the Bible, even in church." (School 1AN) "We learn Christian values at home." (School 3AN) "My child helps me to read the bible since I am not educated, they help me to read." (School 3AN)

TABLE 20: Catch Up activities are conducive to building SEL

Insight 5: When given the opportunity to participate in Catch Up activities, parents were able to link them directly to social and emotional benefits, especially the basket game.	
Observation	Illustrative Quotes
 Mind map builds participation and cooperation	"This opens children's minds, builds confidence and encourages cooperation." (School 3AN) "Children can enjoy reading and making a sentence. You can come with friend to class to help you." (School 2AN) "Children participate more, children learn to contribute. They develop critical thinking." (School 2AO)
 Basket game aids cooperation	"Pupils are able to learn to help each other because if their friend fails to answer correctly they are able to come in and help." (School 1AO) "They are able to follow rules and wait for their turn to pick a number from the basket. They learn patience and giving each other chance." (School 3AO)

TABLE 21: Language tensions around local identity formation versus future opportunities

Insight 6: Across schools, the majority of parents expressed a strong preference for English instruction due to future employment and exam success, though they all agreed that the valuing of local languages is important in supporting both identity-building and understanding.	
Observation	Illustrative Quotes
 English as opportunity	“Catch-up should also be taught in English... important to know both English and local language” (School 2AO) “English is linked to opportunity... in another country you can ask for directions” (School 2AN) “They learn how to communicate in English, which is good for them when they grow up” (School 3AO)
 Local language as foundation	“Let us not throw away our mother tongue. A tree has roots and leaves, but roots are the foundation we have talked about for the goodness of Catch Up.” (School 2AN) “Local language supports participation and confidence.” (School 3AN)

Across all schools, parents helped us make sense of the analysis by describing Catch Up as a programme that supports both learning and social-emotional development. They interpreted SEL through practical behaviours – confidence, respect, empathy, cooperation, discipline, and resilience – while also emphasising the critical role of home and family in reinforcing these outcomes. Parents also highlighted the importance of language choices and structural barriers, showing how SEL and academic progress are shaped by broader social contexts.

IV: KEY TAKEAWAYS

INTRODUCTION

In this section, we aim to synthesise some of the key insights emerging from the study, organised around the four questions that guided the research. Based on our reflective discussions and collaborative sense-making activities with research participants, the sections distils key takeaways regarding: (1) how teachers, trainers, mentors, learners, and caregivers understand SEL (perceptions), (2) the social and emotional impacts they attribute to the Catch Up programme (impacts), (3) the teaching practices that appear to support or constrain the impacts (practices), and (4) the programme components and contextual factors that appear to drive SEL-related change across schools (drivers).

PERCEPTIONS

Research question: What is social emotional learning according to teachers and caregivers in Zambian schools and what role, if any, should schools/teachers play in supporting learners' social and emotional development?

How SEL is understood

KEY TAKEAWAY:

SEL is understood intuitively and relationally rather than as a discrete technical construct

When asked how they would define “social and emotional learning”, most research participants seemed concerned that they would not be able to provide the ‘correct’ or ‘textbook’ definition. However, when we noted that the term could be defined in multiple ways and that there was no agreed upon definition, they were able to articulate their understanding of the concept and underline its importance for education. For a mentor from School 2AN, SEL means:

“engaging learners in the lesson. They collaborate, the experience social learning. They learn to socialise. For emotional, maybe we need to learn to build confidence in them. You need to praise and correct in a polite way so they don’t feel bad.”

Overwhelmingly, teachers, trainers, mentors, and caregivers defined SEL in terms of *relationships, belonging, confidence, respect*, and *emotional safety*, rather than in terms of abstract competencies or frameworks. For example, one of the master trainers at our sensemaking workshop explained:

“Learners experience social emotional learning when they are doing the activities in their groups where each one is able to contribute something in a group.”

Indeed, in describing the social and emotional benefits of the Catch Up programme, one parent from School 3AO emphasised how “children can now interact well with each other.”

Interestingly, when discussing key concepts as presented in the ISELA questionnaire, some teachers expressed discomfort with certain SEL labels or scales, noting stigma, cultural mismatch, or lack of clarity.

KEY TAKEAWAY:

SEL is seen as closely linked to moral education and religious values, with kindness and empathy emerging as central concepts to SEL

Many teachers explicitly framed SEL as part of their moral responsibility, drawing on family, religious, and community paradigms rather than formal SEL language. One teacher from School 1AO described this responsibility as follows:

“We teach them morals. We teach kindness. This is part of the role of a teacher.”

Christianity was widely practised in the communities visited, and parents and teachers alike emphasised the importance of learning “Christian values”, with a particular focus on being family. In the words of one teacher from School 3AN:

“Learners should treat each other as brothers and sisters. We learned this at church.”

As a result, kindness was a highly valued quality among participants, with many teachers proudly noting that their learners would describe them as “kind”, and parents describing positive changes in children’s behaviour towards others, with one parent from School 1AN explaining:

“When it comes to my child, I have noticed that he has developed an attitude of fellow-feeling.”

“Fellow feeling” was a concept that was widely understood across the schools and considered not only synonymous with the concept of empathy, but also as somehow an innate part of Zambian culture, with one mentor from School 1AN describing it as “to carry someone’s problem like it’s your own.”

KEY TAKEAWAY:

Broadly speaking, teachers are able to distinguish between emotional compliance and emotional wellbeing

For many teachers in the study, engagement is key to ensuring success in the classroom, as put by a teacher at School 1AO, who noted: “When they feel good, they can learn.” Interestingly, many teachers seemed adept at interpreting learner behaviour, or, as one teacher from School 1AN put it, “reading learners’ emotions.” In particular, many teachers had learned to interpret quiet and noise dependent on context: in one situation, quiet may indicate active listening and engagement and noise distraction, while the opposite may be true in another situation. For a teacher at School 1AO:

“There is a difference between listening and being quiet because you are scared.”

Perceived role of schools and teachers

KEY TAKEAWAY:

SEL is seen as foundational to learning, not an optional add-on, and teachers see themselves as central actors in learners’ social and emotional development

Across schools, teachers, trainers, and mentors believed that SEL cannot be separated from teaching practice and classroom climate and learners frequently linked feelings of safety and wellbeing directly to the presence and behaviour of their teacher. Most teachers therefore felt they had an

active role to play in the social and emotional development and wellbeing. For example, in describing his understanding of SEL, a trainer from School 2AN said:

“What comes to mind is the ability to make learners enjoy the lesson, to help them belong. You are a parent in place of their parent. Learners feel ‘they understand me and can help me.’”

Seeing the teacher as a parental figure was not unique to this trainer: Across schools, teachers described themselves as filling a parental or caregiving role beyond their role as a teacher. Others saw themselves in other caregiving roles, as explained by a teacher from School 1AO:

“A teacher is supposed to be a counsellor. A teacher is supposed to be a friend.”

In other words, for most teachers, they not only feel they have a role to play in learners’ SEL but that they have a *duty of care* equivalent to that of a parent or counsellor, which suggests they take learners social and emotional development and wellbeing very seriously.

KEY TAKEAWAY:

Teachers recognise the impact of learner backgrounds and try to compensate for difficult home environments, but there are limits to the support they can provide

One teacher from School 2AO explained that when responding to learners’ social and emotional needs, it is important to “Look at where they come from.” This sentiment was echoed by a teacher at School 3AN, who said:

“My ECE are babies. They come from a broken home. They are crying all the time. There is the issue of poverty. The child has no food, so they are sad about others having food. I have to be a mother. They cry and they fight. I have to teach them how to share, how to be kind. We are sisters, brothers.”

Indeed, even as teachers and parents acknowledged that learners’ stress often originates from home (e.g. poverty, violence, loss), they also recognised that teachers cannot fully address these challenges alone, especially in the absence of support and training. The ECE teacher from School 3AN explained:

“We are not really taught how. You have to rely on your own spirit guide.”

IMPACTS

Research question: What, if any, are the impacts of the Catch Up programme on social emotional learning?

Observed and perceived impacts

KEY TAKEAWAY:

Catch Up appears to lead to positive changes in empathy and peer interaction

As noted above, both empathy and peer interaction were considered to be central SEL concepts. Further, these were areas where research participants across schools reported positive changes that they directly attributed to Catch Up. The small but statistically significant positive effect on the empathy score presented in the previous study was strongly reinforced in the current study,

particularly when it comes to behaviours such as helping peers, providing encouragement, and exhibiting cooperative behaviour. One teacher at School 1AN told us how, before Catch Up, learners who were not managing well would get negative comments from their peers and be seen as failures, but that with Catch Up, peers give encouragement and want to lift up their fellow learners, saying: “You can try! You are almost there!” Parents from all schools observed an increase in “fellow feeling”, with children helping siblings and parents at home and encouraging each other.

KEY TAKEAWAY:

Catch Up strengthens learners’ sense of belonging and attachment to school

Echoing the sentiment of teachers across schools, a teacher from School 1AN noted that one of the strengths of Catch Up is that it “helps ensure that all learners feel included.” As a result, improved attendance, eagerness to attend sessions, and positive anticipation of learning were widely reported by teachers, trainers and mentors, even in schools where Catch Up had only recently been introduced. One trainer at School 2AN explained how happy learners were to go to Catch Up, even as it would involve additional teaching time:

“They remind teachers it’s time for Catch Up!”

Parents, too, noticed this change, with one mother from School 1AN saying:

“My child has improved in how she attends school because of this programme.”

KEY TAKEAWAY:

Learners demonstrate increased confidence, willingness to participate, and perseverance

Teachers, learners, and parents consistently reported reduced shyness, greater self-expression, and increased classroom participation. Despite having only introduced Catch Up relatively recently, teachers School 1AN all noticed a positive change in learners, which one of them explained as follows:

“Before Catch Up, most learners would just be present. Catch Up has opened them up. They are free to express themselves.”

This change was confirmed by the learners themselves during the school tour as they told us:

“Before, we were shy. Now we ask questions.”

Another area where teachers, trainers, and mentors observed improvement across all schools was in perseverance. As a teacher from School 2AO put it: “Learners keep trying until they get it correct.” As noted earlier, [the previous study](#) did not find a statistically significant improvement in the perseverance domain, though this is more likely due to differences in how perseverance is conceptualised, with teachers in our qualitative study consistently viewing it as learners continuing to try until they get it right, without reference to seeking help instead of giving up. The mentor from School 1AO provided a clear explanation as to how Catch Up can contribute to perseverance as follows:

“The way Catch Up teaching is done – individual, group, teacher demonstration – this helps learners keep trying until they find the answer.”

Limits and caveats

KEY TAKEAWAY:

Positive impacts often manifest as emotional relief rather than skill acquisition

Across schools, teachers described Catch Up as helping learners forget stress temporarily, rather than explicitly teaching stress management or conflict resolution strategies. As a teacher from School 1AN described:

“Catch Up helps by being entertaining, so learners forget about their stress or troubles at home for a bit.”

Further, when asked about whether or not Catch Up has an impact on conflict resolution, many teachers did answer in the affirmative. However, their responses typically referred more to conflict avoidance rather than actual resolution. For example, another teacher at School 1AN explained that “What causes conflict in class is when they are idle” so Catch Up helps by distracting from conflict. Indeed, one teacher from School 1AO noted that “more activities mean less fighting.”

Avoiding or distracting from stress and conflict (as opposed to managing and resolving) was a theme seen at other schools as well, and while these are clearly social and emotional benefits of Catch Up, they cannot be defined as social and emotional *skills*. In other words, these are examples of social and emotional *benefits* rather than social and emotional *learning* per se.

KEY TAKEAWAY:

Negative or mixed SEL impacts are also present

While schools in general reported improvements *within* Catch Up groups once the programme had started, research participants did also note that older learners in particular could be upset by the Catch Up assessment outcome, resulting in low motivation and absenteeism among these learners. This negative impact was compounded by teasing of beginner learners by peers from more advanced levels, with teachers reporting few strategies for addressing this problem, beyond “discouraging laughing at mistakes” (teacher, School 3AN).

KEY TAKEAWAY:

Differences in findings between the quantitative and qualitative studies may reflect measurement challenges rather than a given impact (or lack thereof) on learner SEL

The qualitative research revealed that across schools, teachers, trainers, and mentors reported positive changes in empathy and perseverance, which they attributed to the Catch Up programme. However, the previous study found only a small but significant higher increase in empathy scores in treatment schools, and no impact on perseverance. While we are not in a position to generalise from our qualitative data collection and analysis, we believe that the different conceptualisations of these domains between the ISELA instrument on the one hand and teachers and trainers we interviewed on the other would warrant a refinement of the questionnaire for future research, particularly when it comes to the perseverance domain. On a related note, the observed decline in the “network” component of conflict resolution as measured by the ISELA in the previous study may reflect increasing maturity, independence, or self-efficacy, especially among older learners, rather than deteriorating social skills.

PRACTICES

Research question: How, if at all, do teachers' knowledge, attitudes, and practices of Catch Up relate to learners social and emotional development?

*Teacher practices that support SEL***KEY TAKEAWAY:**

Teachers' abilities to facilitate learning through play in Catch Up currently matters more for learners' SEL than the teaching of explicit SEL content

Teachers, trainers and mentors repeatedly emphasised that SEL emerges from *how* Catch Up is taught, not from lessons designed specifically to build SEL skills. One key aspect of the pedagogical approach to Catch Up that supports SEL from the perspective of research participants is the learning through play approach. The mentor from School 2AN explained:

"You learn through play. Learners enjoy and socialise and do mental maths. The praise makes them feel good."

In fact, a mother at our sense-making focus group with parents from School 2AN also saw the strengths of the learning through play approach when reflecting on the Catch Up basket game that they had just played together as part of the demonstration:

"We were playing in the game at the same time we were learning. For example, the basket game helps children to develop self-control, they wait for their turn."

KEY TAKEAWAY:

Teachers integrate SEL into classes by using prior experience

Many teachers rely on past training, their teaching experience, their family lives, religious values, and instinct to integrate SEL into both regular and Catch Up classes, noting that their ability to support SEL draws more from years of teaching, family life, or religious values than from Catch Up training. For a teacher from School 1AO:

"Most of the activities I do in class that help in promoting SEL is learned through experiences I have gained in over a decade of teaching experience. [. . .] It's in me."

*Constraints on effective practice***KEY TAKEAWAY:**

SEL is typically not explicitly integrated into Catch Up training activities or planning processes

One of the key constraints identified by teachers, trainers and mentors across schools when it comes to supporting SEL through Catch Up is that it is not explicitly included in the training or planning, beyond being mentioned in a handout at the back of the manuals. As one teacher from School 2AN put it:

"In Catch Up, we did not learn conflict resolution. If I can have information about conflict resolution, I can teach."

For a teacher at School 1AO, SEL should be a priority at Catch Up training:

“More emphasis must be given on SEL during the training because it is one of the important domains that learners have to develop.”

Trainers from School 1AO felt that SEL could be effectively incorporated in multi-day refresher trainings for groups of teachers rather than adding to an already crowded initial training programme.

One reason it would be important to include SEL in training is that teachers report seeing changes in learners' SEL but currently have to rely on own experience to interpret learner behaviour. As the mentor from School 1AO explained, because Catch Up was not designed to address SEL intentionally, there is a limit to the depth of observed outcomes. She also warned that it is also difficult to know how to build these skills and to do it in a way that does not put the literacy and numeracy goals of the programme at risk.

KEY TAKEAWAY:

Teachers feel under-supported and demotivated, undermining effective support for learners' SEL

While teachers across schools were generally very positive about the Catch Up programme, including its impact on learners' engagement and SEL, it was also clear that the heavy workloads, lack of compensation, and limited refresher training undermine teachers' emotional capacity to support learners. The mentor at School 1AO expressed great concern for teachers who were trying to cope with the additional workload with no additional compensation, saying:

“It's devastating. They need to be motivated.”

Indeed, teachers at School 1AN were enthused about the Catch Up programme, but were struggling with fatigue and feeling under-valued, explaining:

“We need to improve motivation to help Catch Up teachers teach with passion!”

The learners at School 1AN also recognised the importance of teacher support: when visiting the staffroom during the school tour, they reported liking this place because it was good for their teachers:

“Teachers get tired when on duty. They need rest, just like us!”

The increased workload and fatigue may indirectly affect classroom climate and learner wellbeing as it affects motivation. In fact, in the words of one teacher at School 3AO:

“Catch Up is a good programme that becomes diluted.”

KEY TAKEAWAY:

Ambiguous language policies constrain self-expression and participation

A common theme across schools in the study is that the district language mandate is causing challenges for the implementation of the Catch Up programme, especially in literacy. When it comes to supporting SEL, in particular, self-expression and participation, language of instruction can also be a barrier. As the trainer/mentor from School 2AO explained:

“Pupils draw back; they don't participate because they can't express themselves in a language they can't speak. So, you find they keep quiet, in as much as you try to encourage

them. What I've also noticed is when it comes to activities where they need to chat, they prefer telling a story in a language they speak, even though the Catch Up strategy says they should speak the local language of that area. So, it's actually disadvantaging them because they can't interact."

Further, many teachers were not able to speak Tonga fluently themselves, and, as a result, faced challenges in engaging fully with learners. According to one teacher from School 3AO: "I can't express myself in Chitonga, so it's a challenge." While having an official language of instruction for a district is not necessarily problematic, enforcing sole reliance on that language in multilingual contexts disproportionately affects literacy, confidence, and emotional engagement.

DRIVERS

Research question: Which components of Catch Up, if any, are responsible for driving social and emotional skills development?

Key enabling components

KEY TAKEAWAY:

Small class sizes and the pedagogical approaches they enable are one of the most consistently cited drivers of SEL

Across most schools, one of the key differences between regular classes and Catch Up classes was class size, with Catch Up classes typically being much smaller than regular classes. Reduced class size was seen to enable inclusion, attention, safety, and emotional connection across all schools. One teacher from School 1AN explained that class sizes were essential for ensuring both one-on-one engagement and opportunities for peer support and interaction, which are key mechanisms for supporting both learning and wellbeing:

"One of the good things about Catch Up is that it allows for one-on-one, which is not possible in regular classes. This helps ensure that all learners feel included."

KEY TAKEAWAY:

Moving from the whole class to group work to individual support is also seen as an important driver for SEL

One of the hallmarks of Catch Up that was recognised by research participants was moving from the whole class to group work to individualised attention. According to a trainer from School 1AO: "Sessions are structured so that everyone is involved." For a teacher from one of our sensemaking workshops, the reason this is effective is as follows:

"When learners are able to interact and communicate effectively for example in group work they talk to each other and are willing to carry on activity. Learners are more engaged in class activities."

Other research participants highlighted how structured opportunities for learners to work with peers they would not normally interact with fosters empathy and cooperation, while shifting from whole class activities to group work to one-on-one support can facilitate perseverance, as does clear progression and achievable milestones, which motivates learners to persist, even as these measures are not currently captured in assessments.

KEY TAKEAWAY:

Play-based learning is another powerful driver

As noted earlier, play-based learning is viewed across schools to be a powerful driver of learners' enjoyment and openness, and ultimately their overall wellbeing and SEL. One particularly valuable insight into how play-based learning operates in practice to build SEL, particularly in terms of self concept and perseverance was gained during the sensemaking workshop with master trainers. One group of trainers demonstrated a syllable flipping game, which gave learners three turns to flip the correct card, and if they succeeded, they could then match it on the syllabic chart. As there were two ways to be unsuccessful – either they were unlucky in flipping the wrong syllable from the face-down card or they were still developing the ability to recognise the correct syllable – the stakes for “failure” were lowered. Ultimately, the game appeared to encourage laughter, reduce fear of making mistakes, and sustain engagement.

KEY TAKEAWAY:

Positive discipline and emotional safety distinguish Catch Up from regular classes

Catch Up is associated with encouragement rather than fear, which learners explicitly link to their willingness to participate. According to parents at School 3AN, Catch Up strengthens the teacher-learner bond and the bond between learners, because in Catch Up, “the teacher is seen as a friend” and “children learn to help friends who fail”. In fact, teachers described how important it was to have routine check-ins and informal conversations with learners at the start of class and to ‘get down to their level.’ As one teacher from School 1AN explained, the Catch Up set-up and approach allows for a more meaningful relationship with learners: “We sit as if we are friends with them.” Learners from School 2AO also noticed a difference:

“We feel free in Catch Up class. If you fail to answer, you cannot be whipped. You will be helped by others to read.”

The idea that the Catch Up programme may indirectly lend itself to more positive forms of discipline and classroom management is worth exploring further, especially as there does seem to be evidence that some form of corporal punishment is practised in some schools, despite a nationwide ban.

Contextual and conditional drivers and drivers with mixed effects

KEY TAKEAWAY:

The ability grouping associated with TaRL can both support and undermine SEL

While ability grouping is one of the hallmarks of Teaching at the Right Level approaches and it does seem to contribute to improvements in peer learning, new friendships, and motivation, it can also lead to problems between groups, including splitting of friendship groups and teasing or bullying, according to research participants from a number of schools. Teasing often persists in regular classes relating to the groupings for Catch Up, and even happens *within* Catch Up groups at times. Indeed, at School 2AO, the mentor described how in the lowest Catch Up level for literacy, sometimes when beginners try to read, they are mocked by peers who are able to sound out letters, and, as a result, end up feeling very discouraged and insecure.

KEY TAKEAWAY:

For many teachers, learners appeared to build more SEL skills in Catch Up numeracy than in literacy classes, but this could relate to language of instruction

At some schools, research participants suggested that learners seemed to engage more with Catch Up numeracy than with Catch Up literacy. According to one of the trainers from School 1AO:

“If they are stuck with literacy, they will just look at you. Their confidence is low. With numeracy, they are excited. With literacy, no.”

As previously discussed, this challenge with engagement may be related to challenges with Tonga as the mandated language of instruction in a multilingual context, as this means there are multiple languages of play, not just one. Teachers who reported code-switching seemed to have the greatest success in connecting with learners and engaging them in the lesson. In other words, it seems that language flexibility enhances SEL when treated as an asset and code-switching and multilingual approaches can support expression, confidence, and inclusion, particularly in literacy. As one parent from School 2AN explained:

“Learning should be done in different languages [. . .]. To be fully educated you need to learn both English and local language. Let us not throw away our mother tongue. A tree has roots and leaves, but roots are the foundation we have talked about the goodness of Catch Up. We have talked about Catch Up intervention as a solution.”

KEY TAKEAWAY:

Mentorship and school-level leadership shape implementation quality while structural factors outside Catch Up also influence outcomes

Schools with strong mentors and peer support structures showed more consistent and positive SEL-related practices. Given that the Catch Up training is only four or five days, the mentor has a key role to play in ensuring that teachers are able to continue to improve their practice. Many teachers described how they were better able to provide support to learners if they themselves feel supported by their mentor and other school leaders. At School 2AO, the mentor had a particularly important role to play. As the school had lost a number of Catch Up teachers through teacher transfers, the trainer/mentor ended up holding a special Catch Up orientation during a HIM meeting to allow for more teachers to be able to teach Catch Up and now they are able to split according to ability level, with learners from different Grades in the same Catch Up group. According to research participants, feeding programmes, sanitation, overcrowding, availability of resources, and other factors strongly shape the conditions under which SEL benefits can emerge.

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

SUMMARY

This exploratory study set out to understand if and how the Zambian government's Catch Up programme influences the social-emotional learning (SEL) of Grade 3-5 learners, building on a previous study that aimed to investigate the impact of Catch Up on students' SEL outcomes and teachers' knowledge, attitudes, and practices, through the administration of an adapted version of the International Social Emotional Learning Assessment tool (ISELA), classroom and implementation fidelity observations, teacher surveys, and qualitative interviews. Our research adopted a qualitatively driven mixed-methods approach and unfolded in three phases: a review of literature, Catch Up materials, and the ISELA tool; school-level mini case studies and sensemaking workshops with teachers and trainers; and a synthesis phase that revisited the dataset from the previous study and incorporated sense-making insights parent focus groups.

A distinctive feature of this study was its iterative, analytical approach, which intentionally re-envisioned research as a form of collaborative educational practice. Rather than relying on enumerators to collect data for later interpretation, our team of national and international researchers acted as analysts in the field, embedding analysis directly into data collection. This approach drew on principles of play and critical reflection, moving beyond standard interviews and focus groups, to open space for more meaningful interaction with study participants. Teachers, trainers, and mentors were treated as professional colleagues whose interpretive insights actively shaped the research, rather than as passive respondents. Schools, in turn, became sites of ongoing, collaborative sense-making, where analysis unfolded in conversation with teachers, learners, and caregivers on-site and not in distant academic settings, thus leveraging the collective experience and expertise of both researchers and research participants.

Across schools, the findings reveal that Catch Up meaningfully shapes learners' social and emotional experiences, even though SEL is not an explicit programme objective. Teachers, caregivers, and learners consistently described improvements in empathy, peer interaction, confidence, participation, and sense of belonging, changes they directly linked to Catch Up. As one teacher explained, *"Catch Up has opened them up. They are free to express themselves."* These benefits appear to arise from the programme's pedagogical approach rather than the teaching of formal SEL content. Catch Up design features that seem particularly important for the development of SEL are the small class sizes, moving from whole class to group work to one-on-one instruction, learning through play activities, positive discipline, and strengthened teacher-learner relationships.

At the same time, the study highlights important limitations. First, as SEL content is not explicitly included in Catch Up training or materials, there is also no guidance for teachers to assess SEL, which means that reports of the positive impacts of the Catch Up programme on learner SEL and wellbeing remain observational in nature. On a related note, discussing concepts from the ISELA with teachers, trainers, and mentors, revisiting the ISELA tool with master trainers at our sense-making workshop, and exploring the handout from the Catch Up training materials on social and emotional benefits of Learning through Play revealed that more work is needed to co-construct a meaningful, relevant, and contextualised framework for SEL in Zambian primary schools that can successfully capture the positive effects as understood by Catch Up teachers and trainers.

Second, the social and emotional benefits resulting from Catch Up are not necessarily in the form of SEL skills acquisition. For example, many teachers reported a reduction in conflict and stress due to Catch Up, which they explained was because children were being kept busy and engaged through programme activities. In other words, children were not actually learning how to resolve conflict or manage stress through Catch Up, they were simply not exposed to as much to conflict or were

distracted from thinking about the source of their stress. A third limitation is that negative effects persist, including teasing linked to ability grouping, which have a potentially detrimental social and emotional impact on the learners being teased, including low self-esteem and disengagement.

One striking insight from the research is that teachers were overwhelmingly positive about the Catch Up programme, even though it involved more work for them without additional compensation. even at the one school where teachers' views on Catch Up were more mixed, the consensus was that:

“Catch Up is good but should be better organised. [. . .] Catch Up comes as a solution, so it should not bring another problem.”

One growing problem associated with Catch Up that puts the many academic and social and emotional benefits of the programme at risk is that teachers feel under-supported, fatigued, and insufficiently trained to intentionally foster SEL, despite seeing themselves as central to learners' social and emotional development and wellbeing. As one teacher noted, *“We are not really taught how. You have to rely on your own spirit guide.”* Overall, the findings suggest that Catch Up holds strong potential to support SEL, but realising this potential requires intentional integration of SEL into training, measurement, and system level support. The programme's existing strengths, including its relational ethos, playful pedagogy, and inclusive structure, provide a powerful foundation on which to build.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The above findings motivate a number of recommendations for policy, practice, and further research into SEL in Zambian schools and the potential role of Catch Up in particular.

Policy-level recommendations

STRENGTHEN THE INTEGRATION OF SEL INTO NATIONAL CURRICULA AND TEACHER EDUCATION

Teachers and mentors recognize SEL as “foundational to learning, not an optional add-on”. While recognising existing SEL content in teacher training and elements of non-cognitive skills development in curricula, there is demand for better preparation for applying SEL concepts in day-to-day teaching, as well as for recognising the importance of SEL for *all* age groups, not just young children. Familiarity both with formal definitions and practical teaching strategies for SEL remains limited. There is, however, a strong pool of individual and local experience and best practices that could be shared through formal training channels.

Such strengthened, culturally grounded curriculum and pedagogical guidance could benefit from aligning and explicitly connecting with local values such as “fellow feeling”, treating each other as family, and moral education, that teachers made frequent references to, whether they recognised formal SEL concepts or not.

REVISIT LANGUAGE-OF-INSTRUCTION POLICIES IN MULTILINGUAL CONTEXTS

To a varying degree, all schools visited as part of the study faced a multilingual reality – both among learners and teachers. In principle, one strength of Catch Up is the explicit focus on identifying the local language of play rather than the official language of instruction, which recognises the barriers non-native speakers of the language of instruction face in the classroom. As one mentor noted, “Pupils draw back... because they can't express themselves in a language they can't speak.”

In some cases, Catch Up teachers face barriers taking full advantage of the benefits of the programme's local language focus. There is some confusion around how teaching in the 'local language' is to be operationalised in settings where language diversity goes beyond the choice between the official language of instruction and a single local language dominant at district level. In some cases, large numbers of Catch Up learners are not fluent in either and miss out on one of the potential benefits of Catch Up, if teachers are unsure if code-switching and the use of English or the language dominant among a specific group of Catch Up is prohibited or encouraged. Clear guidance recognising the full range of school-level language diversity and embracing it via a flexible and asset-based approach may unlock additional Catch Up impacts for more learners, and reduce gap between literacy and numeracy perceived by some teachers and learners.

IMPROVE TEACHER WORKING CONDITIONS AND SUPPORT

Strengthening teacher working conditions is essential for sustaining Catch Up's positive academic and social-emotional effects. While the programme assumes teachers to be "professionals" who are "imaginative, creative, and well-motivated", it also requires them to take on substantial additional responsibilities, from planning and delivering daily one-hour sessions outside regular teaching time, preparing extra materials, monitoring learner progress, and, in some cases, even cascading training to peers without compensation or support.

Teachers consistently expressed commitment to Catch Up and recognised its value but also reported feeling under-valued, fatigued, and demotivated and expressed concern that the programme could be "diluted" without adequate support. Strengthening workload management, compensation, and staffing, and ensuring equitable access to training and mentoring, would help to reduce burnout and enable teachers to maintain the emotionally supportive, play-based learning environments that underpin the success of the programme. At the policy level, this would require formal recognition of the additional labour Catch Up demands, including through clear provisions for compensation and structured staffing and support mechanisms to sustain teacher motivation and programme quality, which could be achieved by mobilising support from technical and financial partners.

Practice- and programme-level recommendations

INTEGRATE SEL EXPLICITLY INTO CATCH UP TRAINING AND IMPLEMENTATION

Teachers identified parts of the Catch Up training that are inherently relevant to developing learners SEL, but requested content more explicitly focused on topics such as conflict resolution, emotional safety, and interpreting learner behaviour and assessing SEL, areas teachers explicitly requested: "In Catch Up, we did not learn conflict resolution. If I can have information... I can teach." Such additional content should above all be practical and build on teachers' existing knowledge and practices where appropriate but also challenge existing practices conflating conflict management by teachers with learners' abilities to *resolve* conflict.

At the same time, the initial Catch Up training is already seen as being too short to support additional content. Refresher trainings should be recognised as an integral part of continuous Catch Up training that serve not only as a reminder, but an opportunity to deepen and elaborate on SEL aspects of Catch Up. All this should not distract from or dilute the effectiveness of Catch Up's teaching of numeracy and literacy. SEL objectives should be integrated into numeracy and literacy activities.

RETAIN AND STRENGTHEN THE PEDAGOGICAL DRIVERS OF SEL ALREADY EMBEDDED IN CATCH UP

Small class sizes are a crucial element of Catch Up's benefits, as they enable inclusion, attention, and emotional connection. Where Catch Up groups end up overcrowded with a similar number of learners as regular classes, teachers room to faithfully implement the Catch Up approach is undermined. It is crucial to ensure that schools have sufficient numbers of trained Catch Up teachers to ensure reasonable group size, at all times, including early in the programme when there may be a backlog of beginner-level learners.

The sequencing of whole class engagement, group work, and one-on-one guidance within a single Catch Up lesson, with an emphasis on learning through play throughout, is an approach that teachers and parents identified as a distinctive Catch Up feature and a key mechanism for how Catch Up builds confidence, perseverance, and enjoyment among learners. Similarly, positive discipline and classroom management approaches that both teachers and learners recognize as distinguishing Catch Up from regular classes and that make learners feel safe: "We feel free in Catch Up class... you will be helped by others to read." Catch Up training and implementation support should continue to actively reinforce the specific pedagogical practices that teachers, learners, and parents identify as making a difference.

SUPPORT TEACHERS AS KEY AGENTS OF SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND WELLBEING

Beyond enacting policy-level recommendations to improve teachers' working conditions and support mechanisms, it is essential to explore how to better support teachers as key agents of learners' social and emotional development by providing access to practical day-to-day tools and structures to strengthen their confidence and wellbeing. Alongside modifications to existing Catch Up materials to foreground the development of social and emotional skills in parallel with supporting literacy and numeracy development, teachers would benefit from simple, everyday tools to help them create an emotionally supportive learning environment, including wellbeing check-in activity guidance, low-stakes feedback routines, and structured reflection prompts.

As schools function as key sites of socialisation, where children learn how to interact, collaborate, and navigate emotions, teachers also need guidance on how to work with parents and families as partners in reinforcing these skills beyond the Catch Up classroom. Peer learning and collaborative planning, supported by mentors and master trainers, can reduce the isolation teachers often feel when implementing Catch Up and to reinforce a school-wide approach to Catch Up and social and emotional development. Further, ensuring that all teachers not just a selected few, can participate in refresher trainings and ongoing professional development, is essential for sustaining confidence, consistency, and SEL-aligned pedagogy across Catch Up classes and across schools.

Research recommendations

REVIEW, REFINE, AND CO-CREATE TOOLS FOR THE MEASUREMENT/ASSESSMENT OF SEL

The ISELA tool itself was conceived and designed as a pragmatic approach that prioritises simplicity in localization and deployment in resource-poor settings and emergency situations in particular. The use of ISELA for the evaluation of Catch Up has likewise been driven by pragmatic considerations, and changes have been kept to a minimum to stay close to the original tool.

In moving forward, gaining even deeper insights into Catch Up and SEL would benefit from reviewing what parts of the tool have worked well and which could be revised further for the Zambian context. This includes both options for adaptations that ISELA itself envisages, but that have not yet been

exploited (such as creating new vignettes), as well as steps that go beyond the items currently included (such as increasing the pool of questions so that re-testing can introduce some items not previously seen by respondents). While such an exercise would require renewed psychometric validation, strictly speaking this is necessary in any case. A key consideration is that for purposes of evaluating SEL impacts of Catch Up, the tool must be able to obtain valid results for teenagers. A first step would be to conduct exploratory research with key stakeholders designed to co-develop a framework, building on ISELA as appropriate.

INVESTIGATE DIFFERENTIAL SEL IMPACTS BETWEEN SCHOOLS, BETWEEN CATCH UP SUBJECTS, AND BETWEEN LEVELS

Our school visits showed large differences in Catch Up implementation between schools. Less in terms of individual sessions are conducted, but in terms of the availability of Catch Up teachers, the intensity of their training, scheduling, the inclusion of over-age learners, and group size. Many of these factors potentially influence the effectiveness of Catch Up in terms of improving SEL skills. Accordingly, additional research is needed that takes such factors into account, in order to account for differences between schools.

Our qualitative research findings also suggest that Catch Up sessions for literacy and numeracy were not viewed as equivalent in terms of SEL outcomes by some teachers and learners. Partly this relates to the greater sensitivity of literacy classes to the question of language, but also to the range and nature of the activities. These differences between literacy and numeracy Catch Up classes are worth further exploration.

Similarly, it is not a given that SEL effects will be the same for learners in groups at different levels of Catch Up progression, and indeed, such differences were noted by teachers in our study. The relationship between SEL and level may be nonlinear. Beginners may face ‘higher stakes’ in SEL terms, with potential for both stigma but also for a sense of progress and achievement. But learners at the highest level, too, are at risk of boredom and lacking a perspective, and may benefit from additional investment into a variety of activities also at higher levels. Future research and evaluation studies should differentiate carefully between participants at different Catch Up levels.

EXPLORE SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN SEL PRACTICES AND OUTCOMES BETWEEN CATCH UP CLASSES AND REGULAR CLASSES

Sustainable impacts of Catch Up should extend beyond the Catch Up sessions themselves and potentially lead to improvements in school climate, pedagogy, and SEL in general. This is reflected in research designs where the whole school belongs to the treatment or control group, and our qualitative findings confirm significant spill-over into regular classrooms. Numerous teachers reported the ambition to include the Catch Up spirit or even concrete activities in their regular teaching. These ambitions are constrained, however, by starkly different conditions in some cases. In most schools visited, Catch Up groups are much smaller in size than regular classes, allowing not only for different methods and activities, but also affecting engagement and discipline. Learners’ SEL outcomes need to be understood not only in relation to whether the school implements Catch Up, but in relation to the volume and quality of Catch Up sessions they actually participate in. It is important, therefore, to investigate further how teachers and learners experience these differences between regular and Catch Up classes, including lessons from teachers dealing with excessively large Catch Up groups that might be transferable to regular classrooms. Understanding how the distinctive features of Catch Up classes are experienced will also help establish that any positive impacts can in fact be attributed to the Catch Up approach as such rather than to the additional instruction time it results in.

EXAMINE THE SEL IMPACTS OF ABILITY GROUPING MORE DEEPLY

To date, questions around the potential impact of Catch Up on SEL have focused on the effects of the pedagogy and teaching practice. The qualitative findings presented here highlight how the structure and process of Catch Up implementation may also affects learners' SEL in their own right, in ways that require additional investigation.

This includes unintended consequences of the assessment for determining the initial Catch Up groups, the transparency of the placement, and the consequences of progressing (or not) from one level to another. The way these processes affect learners' self-concept, confidence, etc. remain understood and are reportedly not consistently taken into account in school-level decisions around Catch Up.

The TaRL approach successfully applies its core principle of grouping according to current proficiency. This justifies separate ability groups, but greater awareness is needed of the potential for teasing and bullying of learners who are, or struggle to progress from, the beginner group. Learners are well aware of the performance differences between the groups, whether these are articulated explicitly by teachers and group names or not. There is evidence that peer-learning approaches can be leveraged to achieve positive gains from the grouping in relation to empathy and other SEL skills, and it is important to investigate how these can be maximised, and unintended stigmatization of membership in lower level groups minimised effectively, as part of the TaRL approach.

DESIGN STUDIES TO ASSESS THE SHORT- AND LONG-TERM SEL OUTCOMES ATTRIBUTABLE TO THE CATCH UP PROGRAMME

The initial evaluation observed the effects of an early roll-out of Catch Up over a relatively short period of time. While the present study benefitted from access to schools and teachers who in some cases have several years of Catch Up experience by now, and gained a robust picture of established Catch Up *practice*, there continues to be limited evidence on the *effects* Catch Up has on learners medium and longer term outcomes.

While the immediate effects in terms of school climate, feeling of belonging, sense of progression, etc. appear worthwhile either way, it would be important to assess the extent to which the presence and implementation quality of Catch Up leads to sustained gains in learning outcomes among school graduates, for instance, as well as whether any gains in SEL skills persist beyond the time of active participation in the programme.

Despite the numerous methodological challenges, including the diminishing availability of a control group, and developmental changes in learners during the age range such a study would need to cover, an attempt at beginning to collect data suitable as a baseline for a longitudinal comparison would be worthwhile.

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VII: ANNEX: REVISITING THE PREVIOUS STUDY

Introduction

The following sections present analyses based on revisiting the quantitative data from the previous study on Catch Up and SEL, in order to interrogate those data from additional angles suggested by the qualitative analysis at the heart of approach. The wording 'revisit' is deliberate and emphasises that the present purpose is not to replicate the original results 1-to-1, even as a baseline. The key previous findings were summarised by the report authors as follows:

"Across the three models [with different controls] we find strong robust evidence that the Catch-Up program positively influenced the empathy domain. We estimate an effect of 0.15 SD significant at 1%-level. We also find a positive impact on the sub-scale 'story' of the conflict resolution domain. The main effect is equal to 0.11 SD significant at 5%-level. At the same time, we find a negative impact of -0.08 SD significant at 5%-level on the sub-scale 'network' of the conflict resolution domain... We find that the Catch-Up program had the largest effects on children in community schools. SEL-domains empathy and story regarding the group of male children, and children with a wealth status above the median, were also more impacted. The negative impact on network appears again among girls and children with a wealth status below the median."

While an exact replication of the previous results as a baseline for further exploration was not possible, as we only had access to selected input data (as explained in the [Methodology Section](#)), we were able to achieve equivalent descriptive results, with numbers to within two decimals for the descriptive statistics of the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics at baseline with and without attrition, and significant differences between them disappearing after inverse-probability weighting. The previous study report notes that the main results remained robust to considerable variations in model specification, including changes to the sample and matching approach.

We therefore consider the closeness of baseline results achievable with the available data and documentation to be 'good enough' to proceed with additional quantitative analyses that can be interpreted in continuity with the previous results. Nevertheless, some ambiguities could only be dealt with through assumptions, so the results remain tentative and do not drive our overall conclusions and recommendations.

A brief description of the ISELA questionnaire and how it was utilised in the previous study is presented in the box below, in order to support the reader's understanding of the analysis to follow:

Summary of the Child Questionnaire Used in the Previous Study

The child-level questionnaire used in the earlier Catch Up study collected essential background information on each learner, including demographic details, household composition, socio-economic conditions, and basic schooling experiences. These sections provided contextual data needed to interpret children's social and emotional learning (SEL) outcomes. It then assessed domains through child-friendly tasks, vignettes, and simple performance activities:

Relationships

Identifies the size and use of children's support networks at home, with friends, and with adults in school or the community and captures whether children seek help when sad, facing conflict, or working on something difficult.

Stress management

Explores strategies children use to calm down when angry or upset and responses are coded as appropriate or inappropriate coping behaviours.

Empathy

Uses picture-based scenarios to assess recognition of emotions such as sadness and anger and includes short stories about ambiguous provocations and asks how children would respond or help others.

Perseverance

Involves a drawing task completed with the non-dominant hand to observe persistence with a challenging activity and indicates willingness to continue despite difficulty or frustration.

Conflict resolution

Presents vignettes about sharing and peer conflict where children describe how they would respond and whether they can generate multiple constructive strategies.

Learning Environment Safety

Captures children's experiences of fear, bullying, exclusion, or violence at school in the past week.

Self-Concept

Uses a drawing-based activity to explore children's future hopes and their ability to imagine themselves in that future.

Note: In several sections, items were intentionally cross-referenced across domains. Selected questions from the Relationships module (e.g., seeking help when sad, facing conflict, or working on something difficult) also contributed to the composite scores for Stress Management, Perseverance, Empathy, and Conflict Resolution, reflecting the interconnected nature of children's social support networks and their broader SEL competencies.

Differences between schools

The previous analysis observed that the intraclass correlation (ICC) of SEL outcomes was low and that there was therefore no need for a multilevel analysis. As a result, school level factors were not included in the previous analysis, because any meaningful effect would have induced a correlation between children at the same school, contrary to the lack of significant ICC observed. What is not

clear, however, is if the measures from the previous study can account for all the different ways school-level dynamics might manifest.⁴

While the effect previously estimated already accounts for effects operating *through* treatment-induced changes at the school level, such changes can also be examined in their own right. This perspective is particularly important if we are less interested in school factors as potential statistical controls, and more interested in the mechanisms of how Catch Up – which, after all, is implemented at school level – affects SEL. Indeed, as can be seen in our [School Vignettes](#), we have observed large differences between schools in how Catch Up is conducted in practice, beyond those captured in the implementation fidelity measure of the previous study that focused more on pedagogical practice within individual sessions. The more structural, school-level implementation differences documented in the present study include vast differences in the Catch Up training received by Catch Up instructors, and Catch Up group sizes, for example. While data on these school-level factors are not included in the dataset of ISELA scores, the following discussion presents the results of analyses we conducted relating SEL to available data on the school environment, which include variables on whether learners feel safe, on teasing, exclusion, and physical violence between learners, as well as on verbal and physical abuse by teachers or other adults.⁵

To what extent do these types of variables collected as part of the previous study reflect i) individual perceptions, or ii) characteristics of the school that are perceived and reported, reasonably consistently between learners at the same school? Learning environment scores, both general and those relating to the behaviour of adults, exhibit little correlation within schools, as shown by a two-way ANOVA of (Table 22). This result occurs despite the fact that these questions regarding the learning environment mostly concern observations of third parties (other learners and teachers), rather than individual respondents' own experiences. To the extent that events such as an adult hitting a child occur, they would be observable by a certain number of other learners. As such, their reports would be correlated. If abuse behaviour mostly occurs inside classrooms during lessons, the pool of observers would be more limited. However, the inclusion of an interaction of grade and school, which given the sampling corresponds to classrooms nested within schools, does not emerge as a significant explanation either.

TABLE 22: Analysis of variance of learner reporting of adults scream/yell, hit/kick, threaten to hurt a child at school

	Df	Sum Sq	Mean Sq	F value	Pr(>F)	
Grade	2	0.6781	0.339	2.448	0.08667	
School	77	22.67	0.2944	2.126	7.467e-08	* * *
Grade:School	150	22.12	0.1474	1.065	0.2857	
Residuals	2364	327.4	0.1385			

Signif. codes: '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1

⁴ As noted previously, we are revisiting only the ISELA related data from the previous study. It is worth noting that while observations were undertaken for the previous study, these were *classroom* observations, so would not necessarily shed light on school-level dynamics. For our qualitative research, we were able to include a school-level analysis dimension to our research, given the nature of our efforts to target groups of relevant stakeholders, including teachers, trainers, mentors, caregivers, and learners from across the school community.

⁵ Questions: "In the last week, did an adult in your center/school scream or yell at a child?", "In the last week, did an adult in your center/school hit or kick a child?", "In the last week, did an adult in your center/school threaten or hurt a child?"

Importantly, however, the above analysis concerns the extent to which there is variation in learning environment between schools. A key observation with respect to SEL should be that **at most schools most learners witness abusive behaviour by adults on a weekly basis!** This observation suggests that an individualistic focus on improving learners' personal SEL skills such as conflict resolution needs to at least be complemented by – and can only go so far in the absence of – 'whole school' approaches to promoting safe learning environments.

To shed further light on whether learning environment scores display limited variation between schools because the learning environment is in fact similar between them, or because the measure captures individual *perceptions* of the learning environment, we also examined the rank-correlation of the mean learning environment score at each school at baseline and endline. This correlation is very modest (at around 0.2), suggesting that relative learning environment scores at school level are not simply close to each other, but stable, but that they are not very persistent over time.

We are left, therefore, with the observation that the **learning environment scores captured by ISELA appear to represent individual perceptions of the environment, rather than stable and verifiable objective differences between schools.** In terms of methodology, it may be worth investigating in future revisions or local adaptations of ISELA whether the current practice of starting this module with two explicitly subjective questions about personal feelings of fear distorts subsequent responses to ostensibly more objective features of the environment. Learners who initially stated that they are afraid at school might feel a need to affirm the occurrence of negative events to retrospectively justify their initial subjective response.

Learning and home environment

Next, we investigate a question unrelated to Catch Up implementation as such, but of general interest with respect to the interpretation of ISELA items on seeking help from adults as indicative of SEL: *To what extent are perceptions of the learning environment with respect to teacher behaviour related to responses to the ISELA instrument about relationships with adults at the school?* In particular, we are interested in the following questions from the ISELA:

- “Do you talk to any adult in your school or community when you feel sad?”
- “Do you ask any adult in your school or community for help when you have a problem with a friend?”, and
- “If you are working on something difficult, do you ask an adult from your school or community for help?”

The first point we noted is that the **reported likelihood to ask an adult at school for support in any of the above scenarios is uncorrelated with having reported observations of abusive behaviour by adults at school.** This finding is not necessarily contradictory. To begin with, both types of questions relate to *individual* occurrences rather than a *generalised* assessment of the school environment as a whole, and it is of course perfectly possible for a learner to encounter both trusted and feared adults at school. A negative reading of the finding would be that abusive behaviour (which is not framed as such in the questionnaire) is so common and normalised that it has no impact on learners' choices. In other words, if it is perceived as normal that adults would yell at children at least sometimes, that by itself is not a reason to avoid asking them for help with a difficult task, for instance. A more positive reading might be that learners, who, after all, are at least in Grade 3 and no longer small children, are able to differentiate between trusted and feared adults and therefore do not develop a generalised distrust of adults from observing abusive behaviour by some.

These are speculative explanations, however. It is noteworthy that the qualitative data collected for the present study showed passing ambiguous references to the existence of corporal punishment, even as this was not a topic that the vast majority of respondents brought up, including when discussing learner-teacher relationships or conflict resolution. In terms of the legal environment, corporal punishment in Zambian schools has been prohibited since the 2011 Education Act, and the Children's Code Act of 2022 made it illegal in all settings, leading to the global End Corporal Punishment campaign [certifying Zambia as having fully achieved legal reform](#). However, Zambia's initial report to the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child in 2017 attested to corporal punishment still being practised even after the 2011 prohibition. It is unclear, therefore, whether the topic was not mentioned by adult respondents due to a reluctance to admit to a practice that is officially illegal, or on the contrary, because it remains normalised to the extent of not being worth mentioning. Of interest too is that at the school where children did bring up corporal punishment ([School 2AO](#)), learners and parents appeared to associate Catch Up with positive reinforcement and as diverging from the corporal punishment experienced in regular classes. It appears that more research is needed, and that future investigations into SEL in Zambia would greatly benefit from incorporating items on school climate, bullying, and violence from the Global School-Based Student Health Survey (GSHS) (WHO, 2018; Bishops et al., 2023) or the MICS child discipline module (UNICEF, 2025; based on Straus et al., 1998). That a detailed investigation along these lines would be worthwhile is reinforced by the recent incidental finding that corporal punishment continues to be witnessed or experienced by a significant minority of children, but less commonly in Catch Up schools and especially in Catch Up classes (de Barros and Lubozha, 2026).

The data from the previous study also include variables on violence or other abusive behaviour learners experience at home. As will be seen in our [School Vignettes](#), in the present study, teachers repeatedly mentioned violence and abuse in the home as one cause of stress and poor performance among some of their learners. Similarly to the school environment, however, reports of adults screaming, shouting, pushing, or slapping among household members do not appear to be negatively correlated with asking someone at home for help. **One explanation that we can tentatively rule out is that learners' response is driven simply by the availability or 'supply' of supportive adults.** Even questions such as: "Do you talk to anyone else at home when you feel sad?" appear unrelated to either the total number of household members or the number of adults.

Repeat assessment

As noted earlier, the previous study used the adapted ISELA to conduct a baseline and endline assessment of the same individuals. Such longitudinal, or in this case, paired, observations are statistically advantageous. The ISELA guidance document explicitly endorses the collection of longitudinal data (Save the Children 2023, Table 'How can we use ISELA', p. 8), especially in evaluation studies. However, **we note that the psychometric validation study (D'sa and Krupar, 2021) does not appear to have validated the implications of repeated assessment of the same individuals.** While the tool's reliability was assessed in terms of items in relation to constructs, and in terms of consistency between different assessors, there is no documented investigation of its reliability in terms of producing consistent results for the same individual on multiple occasions, or on any 'practice effects', which will be discussed briefly here.

It seems plausible that respondents would score higher the second time around on at least some of the items, such as the drawing task that forms part of the perseverance assessment, where respondents would likely be more successful on future attempts as they know which shapes to expect and have drawn them before. Arguably, this likelihood to score higher the second time around also applies to other items, specifically ones that have a clear socially desirable response. These items include some of the empathy and conflict resolution tasks, as evidenced by the fact that ISELA

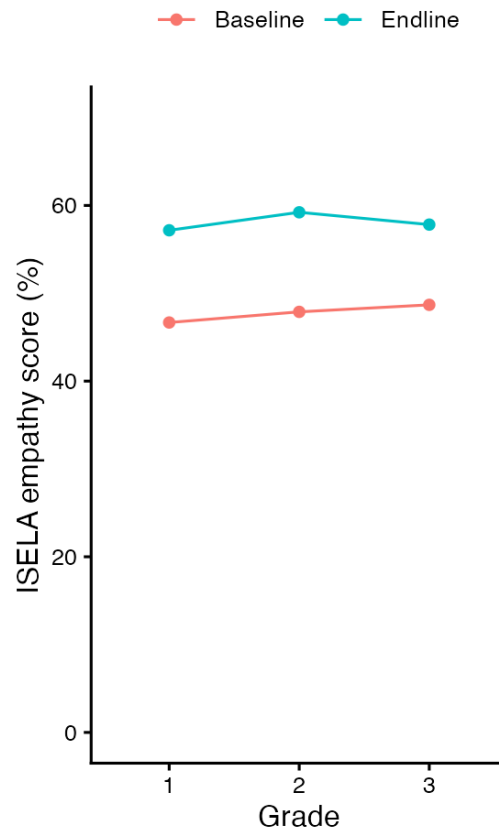
categorises responses as ‘correct/appropriate’ versus ‘incorrect/inappropriate’. While the ISELA guidance explicitly cautions assessors to “be sure not to show on your face or through your body what you think about the child’s response”, this is in recognition of the fact that children are in fact “very quick to notice your body language or facial expressions”. Even if assessors succeed in not influencing responses at the time, they may still provide non-verbal feedback after the fact, especially once the answer has been recorded. Such signals of how the response was received may influence how the respondent will answer the same question on another occasion. This is especially true if the same story vignettes are repeated in the questionnaire, instead of alternatives that have been validated as being equivalent. In addition, nothing stops children from discussing and comparing their responses with each other in between a first and second assessment. To reduce the risk of social desirability bias associated with more direct research tools such as surveys or interviews, the present study used a more natural, less direct approach by engaging learners in a group activity – a tour of the school – and then asking informal questions ‘in passing’.

While it may well be the case that a repeated assessment of the same respondents is valid, this remains an assumption until the reliability of the instrument is tested in this regard. The need to at least investigate this issue as a potential source of distortion is highlighted by the data themselves. It has been noted that the internal consistency of the ISELA scores collected in the previous study is high across all five SEL-domains both at baseline and endline (Cabus et al. 2023, Table 7). In addition, however, it is evident that the internal consistency increased considerably between the two rounds, from a baseline level that closely matched the internal consistency observed by D’sa and Krupar. This increase is consistent with respondents who, for the endline assessment, already knew which questions would be asked and gave more consistent answers. In other words, it is consistent with respondents literally ‘getting better’ at responding to the ISELA questionnaire.

As noted previously, such a practice effect would apply most obviously to the task of drawing geometric shapes with the non-dominant hand as part of the perseverance sub-task. However, our ability to test this potential practice effect is undermined by the fact that the drawing task ended up being too easy in general and the vast majority of respondents successfully completed it already at the first attempt.

Similarly, however, the use of story vignettes that the respondents are already familiar with may be expected to lead to a ‘practice effect’ with respect to the empathy domain. Indeed, **it is noteworthy that empathy scores increased significantly even in the control group.** It is still the case that the increase was higher in the treatment group (with inverse-probability weights), but this difference is smaller than the secular increase. Moreover, the increase in average raw empathy score of around 10 percentage points among 7-15 year old learners with both baseline and endline assessment is highly consistent. Variation across schools is significant, and the number of observations at individual schools not always sufficient for a conclusive assessment. Nominally, only three schools show marginal declines of between 1 and 5 percentage points, while a quarter saw increases of 15 points or more. Pooling across schools to increase robustness, the increase is highly consistent among learners at every age and from every grade (the latter shown in Figure 5). The latter two shifts are large enough to rule out a general background trend that has been ongoing continuously, because if the older children had already been experiencing such upward shifts for several years, their scores would already have been higher at the time of the baseline assessment. The possibility of some spill-over of the treatment into the control group has been noted both in the previous study and in our qualitative findings at schools that nominally started implementing Catch Up only recently. However, there is no evidence of such spillover so widespread that it could explain a uniform increase in empathy scores at every control school.

FIGURE 5: Empathy scores increased uniformly across grades in the control group between baseline and endline assessments



We are left with the observation that **this otherwise inexplicable pattern is at least consistent with an instrument-specific practice effect among respondents assessed for a second time**. One recommendation is therefore to ensure that future evaluations using ISELA include ‘new’ respondents at treatment locations, i.e., repeated cross-sections, at least in addition to paired assessments.

Perseverance

The qualitative findings from our present study suggest that a positive effect of Catch Up on perseverance (as a construct) was one of the most widely shared expectations among research participants. Catch Up offers demonstrably achievable progression milestones, and learners can see peers succeed who started at the same level, suggesting that the programme design lends itself to supporting development of perseverance among learners. At the level of individual sessions, many Catch Up activities are designed as “try till you succeed” rather than “success/failure”. However, the previous study did not find a statistically significant improvement in the perseverance domain.

According to our analysis of previous study data, the lack of a statistically significant improvement in the perseverance SEL domain as measured by ISELA is not a contradiction when we consider the specific items loading onto this construct. In ISELA, two different groups, and indeed two different kinds, of items are related to perseverance. One is a task of drawing increasingly complex figures with one’s non-dominant hand under time pressure, while always having the option to abandon this awkward task. The other is questions from the relationships module about whether the respondent seeks help from various groups of people (friends, household members, adults at school), when they are working on a difficult problem.

Notably, there is an ambiguity in the ISELA guidance as to how these are combined. On the one hand, the guidance states that the relationships items are used “along with the items in the Perseverance task to create the composite score” (p. 6). On the other hand, it states that “for measuring children’s Perseverance, use the questions in relationships only” (p. 15), despite the fact that the document defines perseverance following Von Culin, Tsukayama, & Duckworth (2014) as a child’s ability to stay on task despite the task being difficult, and delays in achieving success, an ability with at best an ambiguous link to asking for help. Indeed, the psychometric validation study (D’sa and Krupar, 2021) found that the drawing tasks were too easy, resulting in little variation among respondents, the vast majority of whom achieved a full score, and that as a result, the factor analysis could only confirm a model with a single factor relating to the relationship variables. The Catch Up evaluation used the same geometric target shapes (i.e., without adding more challenging shapes as part of the local adaptation), but it is unclear whether this task was included in the perseverance score or conducted despite ultimately not being included in the score.

Regardless, **it may be argued that neither the probability of giving up on a low-stakes whimsical task lasting at most a few minutes nor the tendency to ask others for help are directly informative of the way perseverance manifests in the context of Catch Up**, either in learners’ Catch Up progression or how Catch Up teachers tend to understand it. In terms of their progression between Catch Up levels, this requires learners to stick with their goal across a timespan of months or even years, rather than minutes. For some teachers we interviewed, perseverance refers to a learner’s persistence in completing a task or grasping a concept until they have achieved it on their own, without asking for help. In fact, they may view a child asking for help as a sign that the child has given up. Typical characterisations of perseverance with Catch Up tasks made no reference to seeking help. Examples include: “The way Catch Up teaching is done – individual, group, teacher demonstration – this helps learners keep trying until they find the answer.” (mentor, School 1AO), and “Learners keep trying until they get it correct.” (teacher, School 2AO).

Notably, perseverance was not among the domains for which an attempt was made in ISELA’s psychometric validation to test the construct validity. Ultimately, external or construct validity is inherently a non-statistical concept. In a given context, it needs to be established anew to what extent ‘perseverance’ as measured by ISELA, however reliable and internally consistent, corresponds to what ‘perseverance’ is taken to mean by stakeholders. At a minimum this is necessary even if the instrument remains as is in order to avoid misinterpretations of the results by stakeholders in terms of their intuitive understanding of the SEL concepts being measured.

Changes over age and grade

Over-age enrolment remains widespread, but during the early roll out of Catch Up, there may have been an additional ‘back log’ of older participants. In Central province, Catch Up has been implemented since 2023 and the challenge of over-age Catch Up participants may have become less acute in quantitative terms (although the present study did still find instances of much older participants being mentioned). In any case, at the time of the previous study, **around a quarter of participants were older than 12 and outside of the nominal age range for ISELA by the time of the endline assessment**. The mere fact that the instrument was not intended for teenagers does not by itself imply that it loses validity.

However, it may be argued that the upper age cut-off is not arbitrary, but reflects an instrument design that assumes pre-pubescent respondents, in terms of social, emotional, and moral development. In particular, **the strong role attributed to the relationship module, and the assumption that a willingness to consult adults at home or at school about personal issues is**

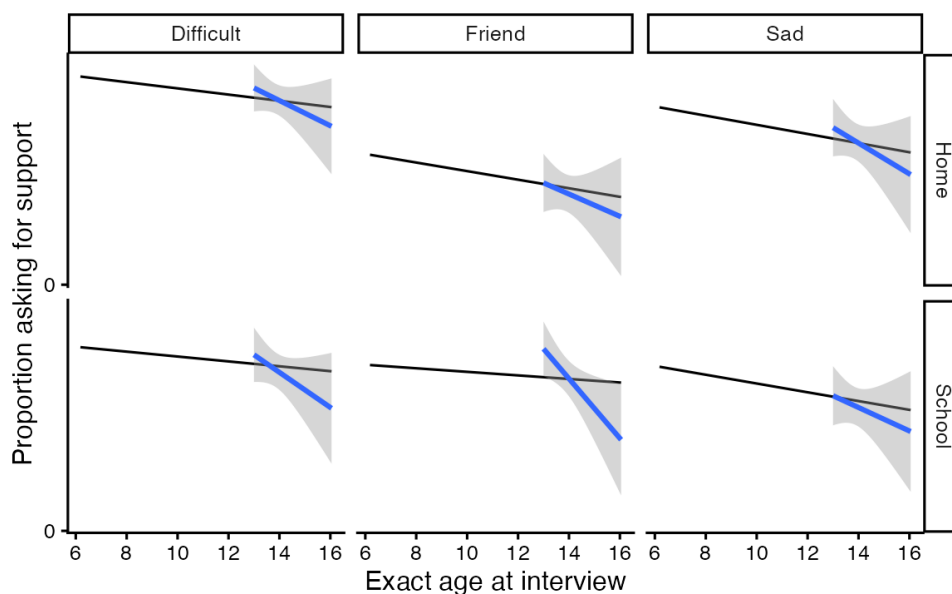
indicative of high SEL skills and vice-versa, may not be applicable to older children or adolescents.

Note that the corresponding items of the ISELA questionnaire do not ask whether respondents feel that they *could* talk to a friend/someone at home/an adult at school if they wanted to, but that for a 'correct' response, respondents are required to report that they *do* in fact ask for help. In adolescents, a reduced tendency to seek out advice from adults may reflect natural development progression. While it is possible for this reduced tendency to represent an effective loss of SEL skill because it could suggest that the respondent is overestimating their own abilities, this cannot simply be assumed. Doing so would risk of penalising individuals for their greater maturity, independence, and actual ability to solve their own problems by assigning them a low relationship score.

This concern is not academic, but of practical consequence for the present analysis. Because age and grade are highly correlated, including both in statistical analysis is undesirable. Accordingly, the previous analysis focused on grade information, which is more complete and more accurate. However, doing so renders invisible the fact that learners' actual age continued to increase during the six to eight months between the baseline and endline assessments, even while their grade remained constant. While perhaps seemingly minor, the implications should not be underestimated *a priori*. For 9-year-olds in grade 3, seven months represent over 6 percent of their entire lifetime, and 20 percent of their school career, during a time of rapid developmental progression. At the other end of the age range, even if the duration is moderate, as outlined above, the effect may be amplified if the shift translates into a significant number of learners who cross over a major development threshold.

Indeed, in the data we can observe that learners become less likely to report that they talk to family members or adults at school or in the community as they become older, and that the decline tends to be steeper once they become teenagers (Figure 6). To the extent that learners' propensity to seek advice or help from adults declines naturally as they grow older, the result that they are less likely to do so at an endline assessment compared to a baseline when they were half a year younger need not be interpreted as a loss of SEL skills. This is especially true for teenagers who during this time age out of the age range for which the instrument was designed.

FIGURE 6: Proportion asking for support at home or at school/in the community when faced with different kinds of challenges (feeling sad, facing a problem with a friend, working on a difficult task), by exact age in days.

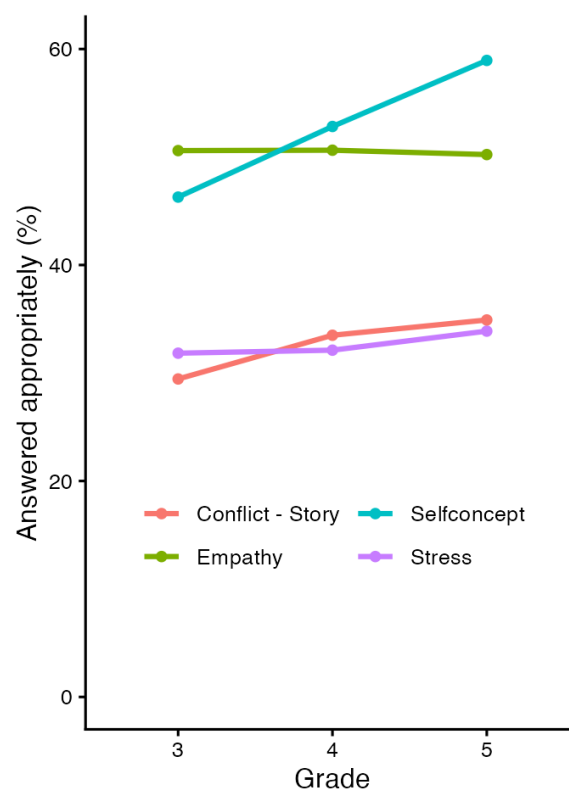


Note: Values predicted by OLS regression on unweighted baseline data.

Another issue is highlighted by the relationship between average ISELA scores and school grade. Note that in the psychometric validation study, increasing scores by grade were not merely observed, but served as evidence for validating the questionnaire. In other words, it is purposefully designed to capture SEL skills that are assumed to increase over (primary school) grades.

While this does not disentangle the effects of grade from age, consider the implications of ISELA scores increasing as a result of having spent more time in school. D'sa and Krupa found increases in the 4-8 percentage point range per grade for Self-Concept, Stress Management, Empathy, and the story component of Conflict Resolution. With the exception of empathy scores that display no gradient, we observe broadly comparable patterns in the present data (Figure 7).

FIGURE 7: Scores in certain domains tend to increase by grade (unweighted baseline scores).



The implication is that the benchmark for asserting an effect of Catch Up may need to be raised. **A comparison with a 'business as usual' control group arguably sets the bar too low, because the two groups differ in total instruction time.** Even if Catch Up pedagogy had no independent effect on SEL, the Catch Up programme could still lead to higher SEL scores simply by virtue of learners benefiting from a greater exposure to class time. At some schools, learners attending in three shifts would theoretically only receive three hours of regular instruction, meaning that an additional hour of Catch Up every day represents a 33 percent increase in class time. Arguably this is an underestimate of the additional instruction exposure, if this is understood as time and intensity of access to a teacher. Smaller group sizes in Catch Up would then mean that Catch Up class counts for more, even if it applied mainstream pedagogy. **Even disregarding the smaller class size, by the end of Grade 5, a learner who has been exposed to Catch Up since the beginning of Grade 3 would effectively have gained the equivalent of an entire year of instruction and its associated SEL effects, independently of the value of pedagogical innovation.**

Summary

Revisiting the quantitative ISELA scores in light of the qualitative analysis shows that the patterns of divergence are at least consistent with plausible explanations, some substantive, some methodological. Overall, the quantitative data showed few apparent SEL effects of Catch Up of impactful magnitude. Several of those would lose statistical significance in the presence of an adjustment of significance levels to the fact that multiple domains were tested. The largest effect, on empathy scores, has a reported effect size (Cohen's *d*) of 0.141 SD. Conventionally, effects below 0.2 SD are considered 'small' (Sawilovsky 2009). However, best practice is to interpret effect sizes not to indiscriminate norms, but in relation to the domain, methodology, and other studies in the same field. While not exactly comparable due to using a different definition (Hedges' *g*) meta-analysis of school-based SEL interventions found mean effect sizes of 0.57 (Durlak et al. 2011) and 0.219 (Cipriano et al. 2023) on SEL skills. The measurable empathy effect is therefore moderate even by the standard of SEL interventions. In absolute terms, it translates to around a 3 percentage point shift in terms of the number of items answered appropriately. With 9 empathy items asked of any one learner, this roughly corresponds to one additional appropriate answer by every third respondent.

This previous finding of at most a modest effect is consistent with our findings to the extent that our study participants reported few if any explicit SEL content in either the Catch Up training or classes. Participants in the present study also noted that it would be difficult to measure the actual effect as a result, especially as the positive influence of Catch Up on SEL seems to emerge from less tangible and more inherent features, such as a focus on group work and individual time with the teacher, smaller class sizes, the play-based activities, and clear and achievable opportunities for progression. Further, many learners' socio-emotional challenges (such as abuse at home, or food insecurity) cannot be addressed by Catch Up. Moreover, even as teachers were overwhelmingly supportive of Catch Up, our qualitative research uncovered the potential for partly off-setting negative SEL impacts, such as the teasing by more advanced level learners of learners whose status as beginners is formalised and made visible by Catch Up.

Teachers did express an expectation that learners' perseverance would benefit from Catch Up. That ISELA's perseverance measure on the face of it does not show an improvement does not contradict this, once the specific nature of the way the construct is operationalised is taken into account. Neither the short drawing task, that is insufficiently challenging for most learners, nor the tendency to ask others for advice, the two components of the ISELA perseverance score, is necessarily indicative of what it takes or what benefits from progressing between Catch Up levels. Of note, ISELA explicitly does not cover the extent to which children display or develop a 'growth mindset' (D'sa and Krupar, 2021, p. 24).

A gain in empathy compared to the control, and – closely related – more appropriate responses to conflict scenarios, aligns well with our qualitative findings that focused on group work, including with children outside of learners' circle of friends, as one of the main opportunities for Catch Up to positively affect SEL. At the same time, the large empathy gain even in the control group raises critical questions about whether respondents 'get better' at answering the ISELA questionnaire with practice. This would explain the universal gains despite the fact that the qualitative research uncovered large differences in Catch Up implementation between schools.

While the apparent decline in the 'network' component of conflict resolution did not find a plausible explanation in the information provided by interviewees with respect to the content of Catch Up classes, the interviews uncovered relevant structural factors. It is apparent that many participants are severely over-age even for grade 5 (and in some schools, learners from even higher grades may also

attend Catch Up). Given that the network score essentially captures the extent to which respondents seek the advice of adults, the observed pattern may well be influenced by changing maturity of older respondents between the baseline and endline assessments. While this consideration does not directly explain why such an effect would be more pronounced in the treatment group, there is room for it to have played a role. Age was included in the previous report in the comparison between study participants who suffered attrition and those who did not, but not used in the main analysis at the time. It is unknown to what extent exact age (i.e., not rounded to whole years), much less by grade, was balanced between the treatment and control groups after inverse-probability weighting (Cabus et al. 2023, Table 6).

The intention behind the relationship questions in ISELA may be that asking for help is a genuine reflection of SEL, in terms of children recognising their own emotions, recognising the benefit of opening up and being comforted, or the ability to express themselves. Nevertheless, a lower tendency to ask for help is not necessarily a bad thing, if it reflects greater competence or self-confidence at resolving issues without help. Of note, this interpretation would also allow us to make sense of the previous finding of a negative effect on the relationship component of conflict resolution, i.e., a reduced likelihood of asking for help, to be strongest for girls and less wealthy learners. These groups may plausibly have experienced lower baseline and greater gains in self-confidence and self-efficacy.

In sum, the qualitative research uncovered complementary insights that help us make sense of some counterintuitive results of the ISELA assessment, and more generally, why the impact on SEL skills as measured by ISELA are modest, despite a near universal recognition among learners, teachers, families, and administrators alike of Catch Up as a highly successful programme.