Teach For All - Action Learning for Holistic Student Development

Accelerating practitioner-led action learning to improve educational opportunities in Colombia

How can we develop students holistically so they can shape a better future for themselves and all of us?

The motivation

Teach For All has embarked on a journey to bolster the evidence base surrounding efforts to cultivate holistic student outcomes and strengthen teacher development through action research and learning. Over the past decade, Teach For All hosted more than 4,000 students, teachers, teacher coaches, and others from dozens of countries to visit and study transformational classrooms in communities around the world. From these collective studies, a new model of teaching and learning emerged that challenges the conventional "control and instruct" paradigm and offers guidance for creating more relational, culturally affirming, student-centered, and discovery-based classrooms. This model, known as Teaching As Collective Leadership (TACL), provides a framework for students, teachers, coaches, and program designers to cultivate leadership in students—empowering them to build a more just, equitable, and sustainable world for themselves, their communities, and ultimately, all of us.

Currently, Teach For All network partners are starting to engage in contextualization of the TACL framework and action learning around it to support measurable improvements in students' holistic outcomes and to equip teachers to better meet the needs of students holistically.

Enseña por Colombia (ExC), with a unique geopolitical context and strategic priorities, has been a pioneer in this approach. In collaboration with a research team from Universidad de Los Andes, ExC along with Teach For All developed and rigorously tested a series of programmatic changes inspired by the TACL framework. Those included resources and training modules designed to equip teachers with the mindsets, practices, and skills to support social and emotional learning (SEL), develop leadership at every level, and foster collective leadership among key actors of the educational system working together around shared purposes.

Background

The project team, which included research and program staff from Teach For All, ExC, and Universidad de Los Andes, aimed to answer three key questions:

1. What is the impact of the TACL-inspired programmatic changes on students' learning of academic and SEL skills?
2. What is the impact of the TACL-inspired programmatic changes on teachers' SEL skills, wellbeing and teaching practices?

As part of this effort, the project team also evaluated the overall impact of the ExC program on its participants and students using a program-wide evaluation on teacher and student outcomes.

Design Interventions

ExC engaged in a process of internal reflection and stakeholder collaboration to better support all children amid current social and political challenges. As a result, and following Teach For All's Action Learning approach, the project team designed program adaptations inspired by TACL which focused on:

1. Strengthening wellbeing strategies for teachers and teacher coaches
2. Giving more relevance to SEL skills in teacher training and support processes
3. Fostering collective leadership where teachers see students as leaders, themselves as learners, and communities as power, based on the TACL framework

The goal of the project was to enhance both student academic outcomes and SEL outcomes in four carefully selected skills tailored to the context and needs of ExC: self-leadership, relationship skills, responsible decision-making, and working with others with purpose. These skills include both individual and collaborative skills, which are highlighted within the TACL framework as important for individuals to develop over time as they grow in their capacity to exercise collective leadership.

A new SEL training module was developed for teacher coaches and teachers, offering practical tools to help integrate these skills into their practice. Additionally, the SEL module included a repository of 100 curated strategies to support SEL implementation within the classroom. To enhance implementation, the project team refined the teacher support strategy, incorporating dedicated SEL actions and clearer guidance on classroom practices. Recognizing the importance of teachers' wellbeing, the project team also designed a targeted strategy informed by teacher and coach feedback.

Piloting, Learning, and Adapting

Between 2022 and 2023, the project team designed, piloted, and refined the program through multiple cycles of testing and feedback from diverse stakeholders. The process began with rapid pilots of key intervention elements and incorporated structured input and data from various sources.

ExC received timely, actionable feedback that helped them quickly refine their approach before broader implementation by piloting programmatic adjustments. Through focus groups and three rounds of classroom observations, the project team monitored 21 teachers and four coaches from four different regions of Colombia. They reported strong support from school principals, who recognized the positive impact of SEL on student interactions. Teachers in the pilot became more aware of SEL, integrating it into their planning and creating more positive classroom environments. SEL language use also became more common among teachers and students. Feedback highlighted the need for more practice time during training and opportunities for peer learning and strategy sharing.

Developing measurement strategy, tools, and metrics

To assess the impact of the program adaptations, the project team designed a set of measurement instruments to evaluate:

- Student academic outcomes and SEL outcomes,
- Teacher mindsets and practices, SEL skills, and wellbeing,
- The perceptions of teachers, students, and the broader educational community.

The evaluation

Throughout 2024, the project team conducted a more rigorous assessment to understand how improvements in teacher and coach development influenced student learning outcomes, particularly in SEL. Two evaluation methods were used: a randomized controlled trial (RCT) comparing traditional ExC schools to ExC schools with SEL training, and a matching difference-in-differences matching analysis comparing traditional ExC schools to non-ExC schools.

The study included two rounds of data collection: baseline data collection took place from April 15 to May 24, and endline data collection occurred from September 23 to November 4. Overall, 73 schools participated in both baseline and endline data collection—46 ExC and 27 control. More than 3,800 students and 110 teachers participated in both rounds of data collection, and qualitative data was also collected from almost 120 classroom observations in both instances.

The RCT was conducted to understand the impact of a SEL focused strategy by dividing ExC schools into two groups. One group of teachers received specialized SEL-focused training and support, while the other received traditional ExC training. To assess the impact of the approach on students' academic and SEL outcomes—as well as on teachers' SEL, mindsets, and pedagogical practices—the team applied a combination of developed quantitative and qualitative strategies and tools.

Moreover, to understand the impact of the overall ExC program on students and teachers, the project team employed a mixed-methods approach. Quantitatively, a matching difference-in-differences approach was used, comparing changes over time between traditional ExC schools and a matched sample of non-ExC schools. Qualitatively, the team gathered insights from principals, teachers, and teacher coaches, as well as through external classroom observations, to assess the perceived impact of ExC's support on teacher mindsets, SEL practices, and student learning. This combined approach enabled a holistic analysis of the program's influence on academic outcomes, SEL outcomes, and pedagogical practices.

Findings

1. Findings from the Randomized Controlled Trial (SEL-Focused Training and Support)

On Students

- **Students of ExC teachers who received the SEL-focused training achieved similar academic and SEL outcomes compared to students of ExC teachers who did not receive this SEL focus.**
- Students in grades 6–9 with teachers who received SEL-focused training demonstrated improvements in self-leadership and relationship skills.
- In upper-secondary grades, results were more varied, with negative results in responsible decision-making and sustained SEL practice.
- Students in SEL-trained classrooms showed more respectful and collaborative interactions, greater participation, and warmer non-verbal communication. Also, SEL-related language became more common among teachers and students, fostering shared understanding and intentional use of socio-emotional concepts.

On Teachers

- SEL-trained teachers displayed stronger lesson planning and classroom management, integrating SEL into everyday routines and instruction.
- They were more likely to use collaborative and student-centered strategies, promoting empathy, dialogue, and emotional awareness.
- Classroom observations reflected improved teacher–student relationships and more inclusive classroom climates.
- While teachers reported deeper awareness of SEL and growth in strategic thinking and adaptability, there were no significant differences in overall wellbeing, with heavy workloads remaining a consistent challenge.

On the School Community

- Teacher coaches and principals viewed the SEL-focused approach as a valuable tool to strengthen both academic learning and collective leadership in schools.
- They highlighted visible changes in teachers' planning, reflective practice, and ability to connect SEL with academic objectives.

2. Findings from the Overall Impact Evaluation (ExC vs. Non-ExC Schools)

On Students

- Across the study period, students of ExC teachers performed similarly overall to students in comparable non-ExC schools in both academic and SEL outcomes.
- However, ExC teachers had a positive and significant impact in primary grades, particularly improving math and reading results among girls.
- At the secondary level, ExC students demonstrated gains in self-leadership, suggesting early effects of leadership development.
- In classrooms led by ExC teachers, students were more likely to participate equitably and collaborate effectively with peers.

On Teachers

- ExC teachers were more likely to apply practices aligned with the TACL framework, including fostering trust, encouraging student voice, and valuing diversity.
- They demonstrated greater intentionality and reflection in lesson planning and feedback.
- Although ExC teachers reported greater self-efficacy and sense of control over their work, their wellbeing remained similar to that of teachers outside the program, with ongoing cognitive and emotional demands noted as challenges.

On the School Community

- Classroom observations showed that ExC teachers created more inclusive and participatory environments compared to non-ExC teachers.
- School leaders emphasized that ExC teachers' presence helped strengthen relationships, collaboration, and collective purpose within their communities.

Lessons learned

While quantitative outcomes did not demonstrate the desired impact, qualitative feedback and experiential learning revealed important insights that will guide future iterations of TACL-inspired adaptations. Given these mixed results, the Teach For All network is committed to strengthening its SEL work through an ongoing, iterative process—continuously developing, testing, and refining interventions based on data and feedback from teachers, students, and school leaders.

An emerging hypothesis for future work across Teach For All and its network partners is the value of adaptive approaches to teacher development. Sustained impact may depend on supporting educators through both belief formation and technical capacity-building. This includes a dual emphasis on fostering shifts in teachers' mindsets and perspectives, alongside building practical instructional skills. Shared purpose is essential for shifting mindsets and fostering collective leadership across classrooms and institutions, and future work will continue to strengthen this alignment.

Additionally, strengthening academic learning and SEL in tandem is crucial—SEL should not be an add-on but deeply integrated with academic goals. Future program iterations will intentionally embed this connection across training, coaching, and resource development. Finally, evaluation and evidence processes must evolve from compliance exercises into learning tools that inform pedagogy and decision-making, helping practitioners and organizations continuously adapt and improve their approaches.

From Insight to Impact: Advancing Action Learning for Holistic Student Development

By setting holistic student development as a core objective and grounding its work in rigorous evidence and measurement, Teach For All aims to help reshape education systems that empower students to become leaders of a better future.

Teach For All's partnership with ExC and the use of Action Learning has deepened our understanding of both the opportunities and challenges involved in helping teachers who develop students holistically. While the project highlighted promising strategies—such as fostering SEL—it also underscored a critical reality: around the world, it remains difficult to support teachers consistently in advancing students' holistic outcomes.

This experience reinforced the importance of continuous and iterative processes for improvement. In this project, teachers, coaches, and researchers worked together to develop, test, and refine new practices, learning iteratively from real-world implementation. Yet even with these efforts, achieving measurable and sustained improvements in holistic student development proved complex and a long-term investment.

In response, the Global Institute for Shaping a Better Future, an initiative of Teach For All, is building on these lessons. The Global Institute is committed to bridging the gap between research and practice by:

- **Describing successful teacher development approaches for holistic outcomes:** Exploring what is working in teacher development for holistic outcomes across contexts
- **Innovating on how to develop teachers to support students holistically:** Designing, implementing, and monitoring innovations using new tools and strategies through action research
- **Evaluating innovations in teacher development on holistic outcomes:** Assessing outcomes of the most promising innovations in teacher development to generate knowledge about how to support teachers who develop students holistically

Teach For All believes that the most powerful solutions emerge when practitioners and researchers work in close collaboration, creating learning ecosystems that not only study effective practices but actively shape them. Teach For All's global organization is committed to sharing insights from these collaborative efforts and invites others who are exploring similar questions about the future of education to connect and learn together. To learn more about how to get involved, visit the Global Institute.

Read the full Report: https://gobierno.uniandes.edu.co/teach-for-all/