

ELA in Schools prototype: Lessons from qualitative research

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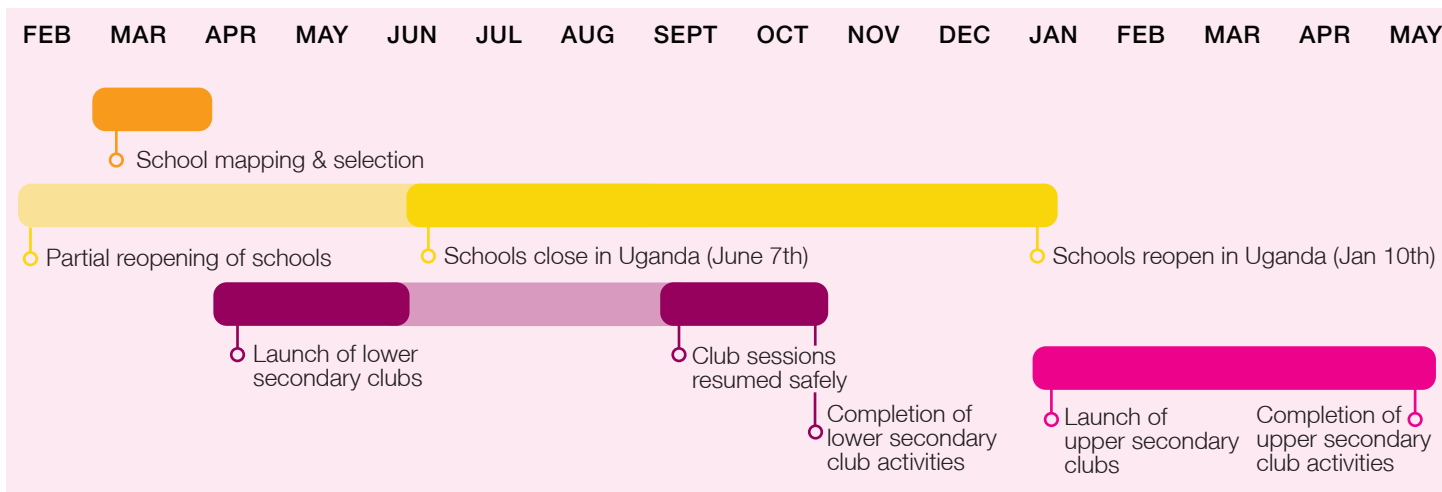
Background

Aimed at generating a pathway to scale through government schools, ELA in Schools (or ELAS) is a multi-stage project implemented by BRAC Uganda. At its core, ELAS is an adaptation of BRAC's Empowerment and Livelihoods for Adolescents (ELA) program. Before designing ELAS, BRAC's Independent Evaluation and Research Cell (IERC) conducted in-depth, qualitative research, culminating in a [formative stage report](#) published by BRAC in June 2021. Following the formative stage, BRAC Uganda implemented a small-scale prototype designed to identify programmatic challenges, iterate, and adapt. This report highlights learnings from that prototype stage and is structured as follows: First, we outline the ELA in Schools implementation and the key components of the prototype. Then, we highlight the key questions that drove the prototype's learning activities. Finally, we report key findings in the form of lessons learned.

Prototyping ELA in Schools

ELAS is an adaptation of ELA, which maintains

the core content and goals of the original program. ELA traditionally engages adolescent girls and young women (AGYW) in a club setting (a "safe space") with social activities and games, coupled with mentorship and empowerment training. Many ELA programs now also offer clubs for adolescent boys and young men (ABYM). ELA in Schools engages both girls and boys in after-school clubs separated by gender. Boys' clubs utilize a curriculum emphasizing positive masculinity and other topics relevant to young men navigating adolescence. Girls' clubs maintain the original ELA content related to livelihood and empowerment training. Teachers, rather than near-peers from the community as in ELA, are trained to serve as mentors, club leaders, and facilitators of content delivery, with male teachers leading clubs for boys and female teachers leading clubs for girls. During the prototype stage, ELAS clubs met on school premises rather than in rented or borrowed "safe spaces" elsewhere in the community, as with ELA. Similar to traditional ELA, ELAS programs involve parents and

Figure 1: Implementation Timeline


caregiver meetings to provide caretakers with information about the ELAS clubs and address any questions or concerns they may have.

The ELAS prototype was implemented in eight schools in the Mityana and Mubende districts of Uganda from mid-2021 to mid-2022. The prototype was planned for two cohorts of students, with content adapted for age and differing slightly for lower secondary (S1 and S2) and upper secondary (S3 and S5) club members. Students in S4 and S6 are generally preparing for candidate examinations and were thus excluded from the prototype, so they could focus on exam preparation. We developed a shortened version of ELA’s content, focusing on just 12 weeks of lessons for each cohort. A wireframe of the topics covered is included in Annex A. The content is highly participatory, involving role-playing and other games and exercises.

Figure 1 presents the timeline of implementation. We expected that the club activities would run for approximately six months, with the younger cohort of beneficiaries in lower secondary participating

in the program for 12 weeks, followed by the older cohort in upper secondary. This plan was disrupted by a new outbreak of COVID-19 that took place in mid-2021, about midway through the programming for the younger cohort. Schools first closed in Uganda in March 2020 and began to re-open in 2021, but following the mid-2021 surge, they did not fully reopen until January 2022. While the full effects of school closures are unknown, Ugandan schools were closed longer than in any other country, 83 weeks¹, compared to an average school closure period of 40 weeks (including 20 weeks each of full and partial closures).²

With schools closed for an extended time, we were eager to reengage with participants. Tellingly, the teacher-mentors were reluctant to halt the programming even with schools closed and asked BRAC for permission to continue the club sessions even during the shutdown. We sought permission from the Ugandan Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) and with support from schools we safely resumed club activities in September 2021. A number of safety protocols were taken to ensure that club sessions could be held safely

¹ UNESCO Global Education Coalition. (n.d.) *Education: From disruption to recovery*. Retrieved from <https://web.archive.org/unesco.org/20220320090818/https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/>

² Giannini, S., Jenkins, R., & Saavedra, J. (2022, January 24). *100 weeks into the pandemic: the importance of keeping schools open and investing in learning recovery programs*. World Bank Blogs - Education for Global Development. Retrieved from <https://blogs.worldbank.org/education/100-weeks-pandemic-importance-keeping-schools-open-and-investing-learning-recovery>

during the school closure, including setting up handwashing facilities, masking, limiting the number of attendees per session, and holding the sessions outside when possible. We then waited until schools reopened to launch the clubs for the older cohort of club participants. Programming concluded in May 2022.

Questions motivating the prototype stage

Several key questions motivated the prototype stage of implementation and its research and learning activities. Understanding that classroom teaching and delivering ELA content require differing skills—teaching vs. mentoring—BRAC wanted to explore what it would mean to have teachers in the role of mentor which is usually filled by a community member. Additionally, knowing that teachers are already working full time and this is an extra commitment, BRAC wanted to learn what motivated teachers to be mentors and if additional motivation was needed to fulfill this extra role. Furthermore, we asked, what incentives would motivate teachers to be good mentors? We were also interested in how BRAC should modify the ELA curriculum to work within school timetables while capturing and retaining students’ attention and delivering positive outcomes. Finally, we were determined to understand the experiences of AGYW and ABYM in school settings and how we can best use ELAS clubs to create safe spaces in schools.

Study design

We recognized that the research for the prototype stage would be exploratory and highly iterative. Our goal with this research was not to capture impact but to inform the

program’s next stage, which will include a more rigorous impact evaluation. We set up a plan to collect data on both the older and younger ELAS cohorts. Table 1 summarizes the data collected for this study. In addition to these formal research activities, BRAC Uganda’s monitoring team routinely collected data, including a weekly feedback survey from teacher-mentors that recorded attendance and challenges encountered during that week’s session.

Findings

In the following sections, we detail the findings of our prototype study. We have chosen to focus on lessons that can be applied to the next stage of the ELA in Schools project as well as lessons that may be more generally relevant to program implementers, policymakers, and applied researchers.

Lesson 1: Menstrual education is vital—for both males and females

Before embarking on the ELA in Schools project, we knew that a lack of menstrual supplies was a huge issue for AGYW. In Sub-Saharan Africa, approximately one in ten AGYW misses school while menstruating.³ Additionally, schools are not typically where AGYW in Sub-Saharan Africa learn about menstruation.⁴ The most common source of information on this in Uganda is typically one’s mother (40.6%), followed by peers (24.7%), with teachers representing only 14.2% of those surveyed by Miiro et al. (2018).⁵

In interviews with teacher-mentors and head teachers, numerous participants discussed menstruation as a reason for AGYW missing

³ UNESCO. (2014). *Puberty education & menstrual hygiene management. Good Policy and Practice in Health Education, Booklet 9.* <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000226792>

⁴ Tamiru, S., Mamo, K., Acidria, P., Mushi, R., Ali, C. S., & Ndebele, L. (2015). *Towards a sustainable solution for school menstrual hygiene management: Cases of Ethiopia, Uganda, South-Sudan, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe.* *Waterline*, 34(1), 92-102. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3362/1756-3488.2015.009>

⁵ Miiro, G., Rutakumwa, R., Nakiyingi-Miuro, J., Nakuya, K., Musoke, S., Namakula, J., Francis, S., Torondel, B., Gibson, L. J., Ross, D. A., & Weiss, H. A. (2018). *Menstrual health and school absenteeism among adolescent girls in Uganda (MENISCUS): a feasibility study.* *BMC Women’s Health*, 18(4). doi:10.1186/s12905-017-0502-z.

Table 1: Summary of Data Collected

Population	Methodology	Sample size	Description of sample
ABYM	Club observations	10	Male upper secondary classes in S3 and S5 participating in-person in the ELA-in school club sessions
AGYW	Club observations	12	Female upper secondary classes in S3 and S5 participating in-person in the ELA-in school club sessions
Teachers	Semi-structured interviews	18	In the first cohort, 4 teacher-mentors (including 2 male and 2 female) were interviewed in December 2021.
Head teachers	Semi-structured interviews	8	8 head teachers were interviewed in the second cohort
Girls	Focus group discussions	10	In the first cohort (S1 & S2), 2 FGDs were conducted in December 2021 In the second cohort (S3 & S5), 8 FGDs were conducted in April - May 2022
Boys	Focus group discussions	8	In the first cohort (S1 & S2) 2 FGDs were conducted in December 2021 In the second cohort (S3 & S5), 6 FGDs were conducted in April - May 2022
Parents	Focus group discussions	4	In the second cohort (S3 & S5), 4 FGDs with parents of beneficiaries were conducted in April - May 2022

Club observation involved observing an entire club session and all members of the club. Typically, focus group discussions had eight participants per session. Therefore, this table captures the number of data collection points but not necessarily the number of individuals captured per activity.

school and acknowledged the inputs (i.e., sanitary pads) BRAC contributed to the schools. Access to pads can help keep AGYW in school, but the cost can be prohibitive. Although it is difficult to draw a causal link between menstruation and absenteeism, Tamiru et al. (2015) estimate that 49% of AGYW (in the five African countries surveyed) miss four school days per month when experiencing their period. Therefore, a simple input of sanitary pads can benefit AGYW lacking such resources.

Moreover, from the prototype, we learned how important it is to educate AGYW as well as their male peers about the changing bodies of adolescent girls. One teacher-mentor of ABYM in Mityana explained that the ABYM enjoyed

the sessions on menstruation and consent, as they were learning about these topics for the first time. This content is lacking from the Ugandan curriculum and is a value-add of ELAS. By teaching both girls and boys about the changes AGYW experience during puberty, accounts suggest that we are de-stigmatizing these bodily changes and creating greater empathy for the opposite sex. This relates directly to the next lesson we will discuss, engaging ABYM through ELA in Schools.

Lesson 2: Inclusion of boys is critical to AGYW outcomes

Our formative research gave us a preliminary view of the importance of engaging adolescent boys and young men. ELA is historically a program for young women, and boys'

engagement in this area is relatively new for BRAC Uganda; positive outcomes for young women tend to remain our primary area of focus regarding adolescent programs. Additionally, we were interested in exploring ways to make the program lean and scalable, and creating separate clubs for boys would entail additional costs. We therefore, prototyped two variations of ELAS, establishing boys' clubs in six of the eight schools, while the two remaining schools had no boys' clubs.

Two of the eight schools where we offered ELAS programming did not include clubs for ABYM. Through research in these schools, we found that leaving out ABYM can create animosity, as the boys feel excluded. We also lose out on the positive effects that engaging males can have on their relationships with their female peers, as discussed above in the section on menstruation. Although there were only two schools without boys' clubs, the headteachers of both these schools spoke bluntly about leaving them out, noting that "BRAC should change that." Their rationale is hard to ignore. One head teacher explained,

"... another challenge which we see is that adolescent boys are neglected. When you look at the society, the NGOs are all concentrating on the girls, and boys are ignored. Likewise, whenever they are talking, they are talking about the girl child. They are empowering the girl child, and the boys now are almost being ignored, and it is becoming a very big challenge. So that is what I can see because you find the mothers, they don't mind much about the boys."

Seeing positive changes when boys are engaged and negative sentiments when they are not is a strong rationale that BRAC Uganda should continue offering ABYM programming through iterations of ELAS.

Lesson 3: Safe spaces in schools are possible—but environmental challenges persist

A core component of the ELA model is creating safe spaces for AGYW. Before launching the ELAS prototype, we worried about the safety of AGYW in schools as well as the ability of teachers to be effective mentors, and for a good reason. According to Violence Against Children (VAC) surveys, "more than 1 in 20 girls in Uganda reported sexual abuse in school in the previous 12 months."⁶ Therefore, we were concerned about schools being a safe place for youth and our choice to utilize teachers as mentors instead of near-peers. If girls did not feel safe, we were concerned they would not be receptive to the program's content.

Without downplaying the issue of in-school violence, we did not see this emerge as a major issue in our research. One AGYW in a Mityana-based school explained, "I feel safe when I am at school. When I am at school, I can communicate with my friends, and different teachers give us different advice ... which my parents fail to do because of limited time."

Those who said they did not feel comfortable in school did not attribute this to harassment or abuse (which is not to say that it did not exist) but rather spoke about not feeling welcome because they could not afford their school fees or food. For example, one AGYW in Mityana explained, "I don't feel safe because I am always worried that they are going to send me home for school fees, and I usually don't have money to eat."

During the COVID shutdown, it is important to note that teacher-mentors received reports of abuse taking place in or near the home environment, which led us to provide additional psycho-social support training so that teacher-mentors could properly handle and refer cases related to trauma and mental health. We

⁶Carvalho, S., & Evans, D. K. (2022). *Girls' education and women's equality: How to get more out of the world's most promising investment*. Center for Global Development.

continue to explore ways to support teachers in this regard, knowing that ELAS will put them on the front lines of support for adolescents in challenging circumstances.

Parents and caregivers of club participants also noted similar experiences. We know that engaging parents is important for youth programming, but parents face a host of challenges that the program does not address. We are still figuring out how to work with schools and parents to ensure that club members can continue to attend the club sessions even when they do not pay their school fees. One mother explained, “The main challenge is mostly me, the fact that I am a single mother. ... When I delay paying her school fees, then they chase her back home. I then tell them I don’t have money...”

Even those who shared negative feelings about the school environment still shared positive sentiments regarding their teacher-mentors, who appeared to be successful in creating a club environment where students could speak freely and, if necessary, approach the teacher-mentor privately with sensitive issues.

Lesson 4: Finding good teacher-mentors was easier than expected

We anticipated challenges in the teacher-mentor model in this adaptation of ELA. However, we worked with school administrators on recommendations for the role and did not face expected challenges in recruitment and delivery of content with teacher mentors. This approach appeared to be successful in developing a cohort of dedicated and capable teacher-mentors with the right values to act as counselors and role models for students.

AGYW and ABYM both spoke fondly of their mentors in focus group discussions. In Mubende, one upper secondary student described his mentor as “funny, caring and also a good time manager.” Another ABYM

stated, “He is like a brother to us.” When asked to describe her teacher-mentor, an AGYW in Mityana stated,

“I would describe her as a cooperative, friendly, and simple person because I once consulted her on why a girl can have two menstrual cycles in a month, and she told me it’s normal. I trust her because she doesn’t disclose what we share with her.”

Sentiments like this were reassuring. We had been skeptical about whether teachers could be mentors, given the power divide between students and their teachers. We were also aware of reports that teachers can sometimes be perpetrators of violence toward students. Through the prototype, we learned that our selection criteria and engaging the head teachers in the teacher-mentor selection process ensured that we would have teachers devoted to the clubs and accessible to club participants. These may not be average teachers, but we feel confident that a rigorous selection process can help ensure that future club mentors can effectively lead club sessions while creating an enabling and supportive environment for adolescents.

We also wanted to explore different incentive structures for teacher-mentors. In the prototype, mentors received an honorarium to lead the club sessions, a certificate at the end of the program, mobile phone airtime, and a stipend to cover travel expenses when



Boys in an ELAS club learn from their teacher-mentor.

they were asked to attend trainings. Although we had a small sample of teacher-mentors (n=14) and no counterfactual group, we have gained some insight into mentor incentives from interviews with the teacher-mentors and head teachers. First, teacher-mentors greatly appreciate the support BRAC Uganda provided them during the prototype. This gratitude comes through in the interviews as well as in the interactions between teacher-mentors and BRAC staff. We also know that while teacher-mentors value the incentives for leading the clubs, long-term incentives may not be necessary. Instead, an initial push may be necessary to encourage teachers to take on the role. One teacher noted,

“You look at this ELAS club and don’t think money is important, but it helps me personally. There are topics that you read through before attending to the members, and you feel these topics are helpful to the teacher-mentor also. Even without that remuneration, I think I can work.”

Others explained that a travel stipend or airtime would be necessary if they had to travel or call BRAC staff. Finally, when discussing incentives, teacher-mentors would often discuss the incentives to students, mentioning how seeing the students receive recognition with BRAC t-shirts or prizes brings great joy to participants.

Lesson 5: Students are hungry for more content

We intentionally designed the prototype to be the length of one term - 12 weeks - of content to allow us to gain some operational knowledge of how this content would work in a school setting without implementing a full year of programming. As mentioned, our goal was not to capture impact but to inform this project’s subsequent scale-up through detailed and iterative qualitative research. With that said, we can confidently say that beneficiaries want more than 12 weeks of content.



Many ELAS club members started income generating activities at their schools, like horticulture.

We received somewhat less straightforward feedback on what parts of the curriculum should be emphasized, or if any should be removed. There was no consensus among the club members regarding their favorite ELAS content. When asked if anything should be removed from the curriculum, we received occasional suggestions from boys who do not like poetry or girls who do not care for netball or jumping rope. In terms of what should be emphasized, ABYM said they wanted content related to budgeting and saving, like their female counterparts received. (This was not included in the initial ABYM curriculum but can easily be adapted for ABYM for the next stage.) Both males and females said they wanted practical content on skilling or content that can lead to income-generating activities.

Teacher-mentors spoke of the need for content that covers gender-based violence and intimate partner violence, as these are challenges that their students experience, especially during the COVID shutdown. Through monitoring data, we learned that teacher-mentors would like to see smaller cohorts, even while noting a desire to engage more youth in the program. Setting a cap on the number of club members may help ensure that content is adequately delivered since the ELAS content is participatory in nature and, therefore, hard to facilitate with large groups. For the most part, beneficiaries spoke fondly of their experiences in the club, merely expressing a desire for more content.

The positive answers led us to ask whether students were telling researchers what they thought they wanted to hear, but we were reassured by at least some negative answers. We heard some ABYM say that their least favorite day of the week was when they had ELAS club because they could not play football. Responses of this nature reassured us that participants felt free to be honest in focus group discussions and not just share overly positive sentiments.

Lesson 6: Stakeholder engagement is key to the success of the program

We already knew the importance of community engagement from years of running ELA clubs, and our experience with ELAS confirms this. Regular and perhaps even more frequent engagements with parents are needed. When asked what challenges his male peers' experience, one ABYM from a Mityana-based school explained, "Most of them come from

families who don't see education as a priority, and therefore their attitude towards learning is interrupted because of the environment. Some parents are not supportive because they are illiterate." Others, including teachers, spoke of abuse or other challenges at home, which the parents' meetings directly try to address.

Next stage

In conclusion, the ELAS prototype implementation has led to important lessons that BRAC can consider as it prepares for the future of ELA in Schools. In the third and final stage of the ELA in Schools project, BRAC, in partnership with Dr. Manisha Shah and Dr. Jennifer Seager, will conduct an evaluation in 150 schools in Uganda. We aim to run the pilot throughout 2023 with research findings expected in 2024. As of November 2022, school mapping for the sampling frame is already underway.



ELAS students in Mityana (left) and Mubende (right) celebrate graduating from the ELAS program.

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Annex A: Prototype Learning Plans

Adolescent Girls & Young Women

Lower Secondary

1. Introduction to the Club and Building Trust
2. My Tree of Life
3. Managing Emotions: How am I feeling?
4. Active Listening
5. Assertive Behavior
6. Puberty and Menstruation
7. Budgeting with What I Have
8. Savings
9. Finding My Pathway
10. Setting Goals for My Future
11. A Sisterhood of ELAS

Upper Secondary

1. Introduction to the Club and Building Trust
2. My Tree of Life
3. Managing Emotions: How am I feeling?
4. Assertive Behavior
5. Menstruation - The Physical and Practical
6. Budgeting with What I Have
7. Savings and Investment
8. Finding My Own Pathway
9. Skills for Overcoming Obstacles
10. Setting Goals for My Future
11. A Sisterhood

Adolescent Boys & Young Men

Lower Secondary

1. Who am I and who are we together?
2. Strength, Passion and Courage
3. Building Friendships
4. My Biology
5. Roles and Expectations
6. Reimagining the Young, Modern, African Man
7. Relationships with Girls and Women (Social and Emotional)
8. Magnetic Attraction
9. Menstruation and Consent
10. Who I want to be in the world?
11. Graduation Time!

Upper Secondary

1. Who am I and who are we together?
2. Strength, Passion and Courage
3. Building Friendships
4. My Biology
5. Roles and Expectations
6. Reimagining the Young, Modern, African Man
7. Relationships with Girls and Women (Social and Emotional)
8. Magnetic Attraction
9. Menstruation and Consent
10. Who I want to be in the world?
11. Graduation Time!