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A second chance at school

Over-age girls who've had a later start in school get a chance to accelerate their studies, strongly supported by Ottawa-based CODE and Liberia's WE-CARE Foundation.

By Claire Wanjiru Bolton



Reading Liberia books developed by CODE in partnership with local authors and illustrators feature prominently in the Girls' Accelerated Learning Initiative, which aims to help over-age girls master literacy and numeracy skills. Without this program, girls such as Annie and Sarah, above from left, who are too old for their grade, are at high risk of never completing primary school as they contend with many social and economic barriers.

Grace hunches over her desk to write. Watching her, it seems she's trying to hide her size and blend into the sea of much younger and smaller children around her. She's 16 and sitting in a Grade 1 classroom in rural Liberia. If you were to flip through her notebook, you would be impressed by her penmanship. She has mastered the art of copying notes from the chipped chalkboard. Grace shows up every day, conquering her shame and determined to learn.

So, what's holding her back? She can't read.

In sub-Saharan Africa alone, 88 per cent, or 202 million children, are not meeting minimum proficiency levels in

literacy. Amongst over-age students – those whose learning is truncated by late entry into the school system and early departure during adolescence – the rate is often higher. This example of Learning Poverty, as defined by the World Bank and UNESCO, is the inability to read and understand a simple text by age 10. Learning Poverty has catastrophic downstream impacts on children like Grace.

The ability to read is a foundational stepping-stone, a gateway skill that allows students to progress successfully through school and to realize their potential as literate, empowered and self-reliant citizens. Conversely, if children can't read by age 10, or at least by the end of primary

school, they are likely to never learn to read in later years.

Over-age girls such as Grace have the odds stacked against them. They suffer under the weight of compounding pressures and multiple barriers to success. A late start in school finds them in overcrowded and desperately under-resourced classrooms where teachers often lack the skill to cater to their unique pedagogical needs. A lack of parental support, feelings of low self-worth, low family literacy and mounting social pressures push girls into unwanted sexual activity, teen pregnancy, early marriages and into the labour market to support their families. Unless something changes, girls such as Grace

quickly drop out and are relegated to a life of poverty.

As in other post-conflict countries, in Liberia, over-age enrolment remains a civil war legacy. But there are other persistent economic and social challenges that contribute to the high prevalence of children getting a later start in school. For girls, in particular, this includes a disproportionate burden of care for younger siblings and household chores, as well as safety concerns when girls need to travel a long distance to school.

Over-age enrolment in Liberia is the highest in sub-Saharan Africa, with 74 per cent of students (both girls and boys) too old for their grade. And although the incidence of over-age enrolment is nearly the same for boys and girls, girls face a greater risk of dropping out sooner for the many reasons noted above.

Over-age girls need to advance quickly if they are to have a fighting chance at completing primary school and successfully transitioning into higher levels of education. And that is precisely what the Girls' Accelerated Learning Initiative (GALI) aims to do.

The program, established by CODE (an Ottawa-based international development organization) and its local partner, the WE-CARE Foundation in Monrovia, aims to give girls like Grace an academic lifeline.

The program presently provides 383 over-age girls at 25 primary schools in Bomi, Margibi and Montserrado counties in Liberia with daily after-school small-group tutoring to accelerate their learning and equip them with valuable life skills. Through the program and the girls' hard work, girls are quickly and confidently advanced to more age-appropriate grades.

Each of 75 specially trained teachers receives a modest stipend to work closely with a group of five over-age girls over the course of the academic year. They focus on mastery of foundational literacy and numeracy skills and provide remedial support for learning in other subject areas as well. Given that participating girls tend to be 12 to 16 years old and in Grades 1 to 3 when they enter the program, inclusion of gender-specific topics such as menstrual hygiene management and gender equality are also a critical element of the program.

GALI was first piloted in five schools in 2017 at the behest of the WE-CARE Foundation. The high demand and exceptional potential were quickly recognized, and the following year, GALI was expanded to an additional 20 schools with support from the Montreal-based 60 million girls foundation.

Over the past four years, the program has been refined and adapted with feedback from teachers, students and other local stakeholders. Attendance challenges have been minimized through enhanced parental engagement and the introduction of snacks and sanitary pads. Professional development for GALI teachers, introduction of more girl-centric learning materials and mobile learning labs have created environments where girls are thriving.

In CODE's most recent GALI cohort, 77 per cent of girls were promoted two grade levels in a single year and 22 per cent were

tending school.

While primary education in public schools is free in Liberia, the costs of uniforms, school supplies and transportation can be prohibitive and force families to make difficult choices.

Perhaps traditional cultural norms would have dictated that one of Mary's brothers be given the opportunity, but seeing Mary's rapid promotion from Grade 2 (where she remained age 14) to Grade 4 over the course of one academic year has Mary's mother convinced that her education is worth supporting.



Every day after school, Ms. Kemokai works with a group of five over-age girls at Dominic Hena Primary School in Liberia to help them succeed academically and develop important life skills.

promoted one grade. The latter may not seem surprising, however many would have dropped out or been held back without the additional support. While statistics show a good measure of success, it's the stories and voices of participating girls that show the far-reaching impacts of this modest program. So, we are delighted to introduce you to three current GALI girls.

Mary, 15

Shifting the norm

"If you don't go to school, you will not eat..." threatens Mary's mother in a stern voice when Mary drags her heels in the morning.

This kind of parental "encouragement" for girls to attend school is often still the exception rather than the rule. As in much of the Global South, in Liberia, pervasive cultural norms diminish the perceived value of educating girls. Amongst her siblings, Mary is the only one currently at-

GALI demands significant awareness-raising among parents and community members, culminating in formal permission being granted for their daughters to participate in the after-school programs.

Without parental support and permission, attendance in after-school programs would be erratic or start off strong and then taper off as the year goes on. Girls are in high demand after school to help with chores and income generation, and allowing them to stay at school longer is no small commitment for these families.

An interesting and notable driver of parental interest in GALI has been the introduction of mobile learning labs into the program at select schools, which give the girls access to a carefully curated assortment of high-quality books, videos and games through a solar-powered RACHEL-Plus wireless server and tablets. The digital divide is significant in Liberia, and yet there is recognition amongst many parents

that familiarity with technology provides a significant advantage to their girls.

For Mary's part, she required no convincing to take part in GALI. She describes herself as "happy" for having been selected, and says that the program has helped her "feel good about herself."

The friendships she has made with the other four girls in her GALI pod are the sorts that are bound to last a lifetime. The girls open up during their lifeskills lessons about difficult subjects such as puberty and sexual health, and turn to each other for academic support.

begin the new academic year in November as a 7th-grader in junior high school. Sarah has come a very long way academically and, just as important, in her feelings of confidence and self-worth.

When Sarah first joined GALI in 2017, she was a 10-year-old sitting in a Grade 1 classroom. Having already repeated Grade 1 twice before, she was struggling to learn and to advance. With her parents not seeing the "return" on their decision to enrol Sarah in school, her days in the classroom were most likely numbered.

Through GALI's small-group tutoring,

that to include fluency, comprehension and critical thinking. The teachers CODE trains to facilitate GALI focus on developing the entire spectrum of literacy skills, thereby helping to nurture girls to become problem-solvers and eager learners.

With only 32 per cent of girls transitioning to junior high school in Liberia (and only 11 per cent from the poorest households), Sarah is already defying the odds. While GALI has helped to nurture her academic success, it's Sarah's intrinsic motivation, conscientious work ethic and light-hearted sense of humour that will get her further than she may ever have dared to hope.

Blessing, age 14

Determined to learn

Blessing grew up living with her mother "in the interior" — a rural area where she wasn't given the chance to go to school. At age 12, her father brought her to the city and enrolled her in school for the first time. Despite her late start, Blessing is determined to follow in the footsteps of her older sisters, both of whom are currently in high school.

Blessing was selected to participate in GALI one year ago, and has since advanced two grade levels. It hasn't been an easy road as schools in Liberia remained closed due to the pandemic between September and December 2020, and, upon reopening, introduced a condensed school year, including weekend classes.

It's well documented that girls are disproportionately impacted by large-scale disruptions to schooling, whether civil unrest or health-related emergencies. After the Ebola crisis in 2015, for instance, the percentage of out-of-school girls in Liberia rose from 8 per cent to 21 per cent. To help prevent learning loss, but also to maximize their chances of returning to school, CODE adapted the GALI program to encourage girls to keep on learning at home.

Between September and December 2020, CODE and WE-CARE Foundation distributed monthly at-home learning kits to GALI participants containing reading books, academic workbooks with grade-specific content for language arts, math, science and social studies, as well as stationery and hygiene supplies, including hand sanitizer and face masks.

Along with the kits, GALI teachers established contact, where possible, with the five girls in their respective GALI pods, and regularly checked in to provide help with self-study. Despite the additional supports, 19 per cent of GALI participants did not return when school reopened,



For Mary, learning to read with the support of the GALI has been a critical stepping stone in her academic journey. Now that she has learned to read, she can read to learn.

It's this camaraderie and the safe space that GALI creates that help the girls not only thrive in their studies, but also gain a sense of empowerment that helps them challenge norms and assert their rights now and well into the future.

Sarah, 14 Defying the odds

Sarah confidently strode out of the classroom where she had just concluded sitting for the Liberia Primary School Certificate Examination, which tests knowledge of science, language arts, social studies and mathematics.

The sun was shining brightly, reflecting her buoyant spirits. "I know I passed," she declared to Yvonne Weah, program director with the WE-CARE Foundation.

If Sarah's prediction is true, she will

Sarah's learning accelerated and double promotions over a two-year period got her comfortably into Grade 5. And although she exited the academic portion of the program at that time, making way for other over-age girls awaiting the opportunity, she continued to participate in Friday sessions focused on sexual health and lifeskills development.

Underlying Sarah's success was her mastery of foundational literacy skills, a gateway to learning in all other subject areas. Sarah explains in her own words: "I was very excited [to join GALI] because I knew that it was going to benefit me in the future. Knowing how to read and write... can further my understanding of lessons."

Literacy is about mastering the basics — ABCs, letter sounds, decoding and word recognition — but it goes well beyond

demonstrating just how significant the challenge is.

Although Blessing's parents are illiterate, she received support from her siblings in completing her at-home study activities, and returned to school without delay in January 2021. With the resumption of GALI, her grades improved dramatically – from failing in all subjects to meeting the 80 per cent minimum requirement for accelerated promotion. Midway through the year, she was promoted to Grade 3 and then to Grade 4 at year end.

In November, with the start of the new academic year, Blessing will find herself sitting proudly in a Grade 4 classroom. While she credits her GALI teacher Ms. Watson's careful explanations for much of her success in mastering fundamental literacy and numeracy skills over the past year, she notes it's the math games available on the mobile learning lab tablets that have injected a dose of fun and excitement into her learning.

Blessing will have an opportunity to continue diving into the wealth of interactive content available on the tablets, as well as benefit from Ms. Watson's tutelage over the coming year. We hope, for her sake and that of all students, that the

school year ahead will be far less tumultuous than last year's.

Hope for the future

In 1992, Lawrence Summers, then-chief economist at the World Bank, said, "Investment in girls' education may well be the highest return investment available in the developing world." Although much time has passed, this statement rings as true today as it did when it was first made.

Great strides have been taken globally in advancing girls' education, and the momentum continues to build. Earlier this year at the G7 in Cornwall, England, world leaders defined two new global goals for girls' education, one of which is "20 million more girls reading by age 10 or by the end of primary school by 2026."

Significant funding commitments followed from both donor and national governments through the Global Partnership for Education's Global Education Summit.

Meanwhile, within the framework for the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, and with careful consideration of national education priorities, organizations such as CODE and the WE-CARE Foundation continue to do their part.

Over the past three years, GALI has demonstrated that remedial lessons and lifeskills development opportunities for over-aged girls need not be difficult or expensive to make a positive impact.

For girls like Blessing, Sarah and Mary, GALI has been an educational lifeline that has set them on a solid track toward primary school completion and transition into higher grades. But beyond the immediate benefits, we know that investment in girls' education creates a virtuous circle over time: The children of literate mothers are more than twice as likely to go to school themselves. By supporting this generation of girls, we are also supporting the next, through compounding benefits in education, health and economic prosperity.

Claire Wanjiru Bolton joined CODE in 2012 and is presently a program manager. CODE (formerly the Canadian Organization for Development through Education) has been championing children's literacy as a foundational building block of quality education for more than 60 years. Our partnership with the Liberian WE-CARE Foundation spans more than a decade. www.code.ngo

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- c) Anything she wants

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