

Educational programs that focus on emotional intelligence can provide young people with the tools to chart a new course for their lives.

# TRANSFORMING LIVES OF INDIGENOUS YOUTH:

Roselia Toj and  
Isabel de La Cruz  
MAIA

## Social-emotional learning in Guatemala



Girl Pioneer  
studying from  
home during the  
pandemic.

Guatemala faces many challenges to its development that contribute to an underperforming education system with outdated methodologies and student engagement techniques, resulting in missed opportunities for today's youth. This is especially true for Indigenous girls, who experience disproportionate effects of marginalization in Guatemala, which has the worst gender-equity gaps in the Americas.<sup>1</sup> Only 2% of Indigenous women enter university<sup>2</sup>; by the time they turn 20, they are five times more likely to be a mother than to be a high school graduate.<sup>3</sup>

Yoselin, a Girl  
Pioneer, and her  
mother. Photo by  
Ana Watts.



**W**e know that almost all development indices improve exponentially when more women receive a quality education and actively participate in society. Countries with educated women are more prosperous, safer, healthier, and more sustainable. Changing students' trajectories requires them and their families to blaze a bold new path. That is why at MAIA ([www.maiaimpact.org](http://www.maiaimpact.org)), an organization committed to unlocking and maximizing the potential of young women to lead transformational change, we apply a holistic approach to academic and socioemotional development through our work with Girl Pioneers. We work with young women and families who have the emotional tools to change the status quo by applying critical thinking and resilience to their day-to-day lives. We call our students "Girl Pioneers." These bold and resilient trailblazers are often the first in their family to get an education and the first to speak three languages.

### The Importance of Socioemotional Learning

To create systemic and comprehensive change, MAIA applies socioemotional learning tools to alter the realities of Indigenous youth in rural communities.



Many rural Indigenous communities do not have easy access to such tools. In Guatemala, where over 22 Indigenous languages are spoken,<sup>4</sup> our communities often do not even have the vocabulary to name emotions, much less the



tools to control them. In the region where we work, the most spoken language is Kakchiquel, which has words for three emotions: *Yib'ison* (I am sad), *noyowal* (I am angry), and *yikikot* or *ki 'nuk'u'x* (I am happy). This minimal emotional vocabulary plays a limiting role. Yet, it is important to develop emotional intelligence tools in order to process emotions and develop

healthy communication within the family unit.

With emotional intelligence, we can develop skills to improve our interpersonal relationships and reduce behaviors that generate emotional instability. Attaining emotional intelligence means we know how to react to various situations, have skills to control our emotions, can understand



From left to right.

Aura, a Girl Pioneer, and her family. Photo by Livvy Runyon.

Girl Pioneers in front of the MAIA Impact School building. Photo by Ana Watts.

Mentorship activity where families set common goals conducted by Mayra, a MAIA Mentor, during a home visit. Photo by Ana Watts.

the emotions of others, and can make decisions for ourselves.

Management of emotions leads to better family communication and stronger interpersonal relationships, and we firmly believe that it paves the way to academic success. While many factors contribute to academic outcomes, we find that emotional control and support systems are key pillars in the academic development of our Girl Pioneers. Extensive research<sup>5</sup> proves that socioemotional learning leads to higher academic achievement, and improved collaboration and interactions in external settings as well.

All Girl Pioneers come from homes below the poverty line, and their living conditions and support systems play an important role in their academic outcomes. Conflict, stress, and unpleasant emotions will negatively impact their academic performance.<sup>6</sup> Also, if students work part-time jobs and have additional responsibilities in their homes, such as child care, performance is affected because it is a challenge to find time to do their homework and fulfill their academic activities. They can become frustrated with school if they are unable to commit time to their schoolwork. It is important to have the necessary resources so families can function as a supportive team that can handle difficult situations with healthy communication and emotional control.

### The MAIA Model

MAIA runs the only school in Central America that is designed for Indigenous girls and led by Indigenous women. A pillar of our holistic approach to

education is socioemotional development. In addition to offering a bold and demanding academic curriculum, we have a team of 10 mentors from the same communities as the students who support their emotional needs and lead classes on unconventional topics that strengthen students' emotional intelligence and communication skills.

MAIA has designed a socioemotional development program for Girl Pioneers and their families with the aim of promoting and strengthening the family support network and developing emotional intelligence among them. The program is based on MAIA's four institutional goals:

- **Economic Autonomy:** The average annual income in Guatemala is \$4,000 USD. Our goal is that each MAIA graduate will be employed with annual earnings that exceed this amount. All Girl Pioneers live below the poverty line (defined as roughly \$1,000/year or less per person) when they join the MAIA program.
- **A Family on Her Terms:** Fifty-seven percent of young Indigenous women are married or have become mothers by the time they are 18. Our goal is that MAIA graduates will delay marriage and pregnancy until they average 25 years old and are in a stable position to support a family.
- **Lifelong Learning:** The average Indigenous adult in Guatemala has 3.5 years of schooling. Our goal is that MAIA graduates achieve 15 years of schooling. We know that each Girl Pioneer



Girl Pioneer studying from home during the pandemic. ....

has different ambitions, so we work with them to find formal and informal programs that meet their unique needs after graduating from high school.

- **Unlocking Leadership Potential:** Guatemala has the lowest level of female political participation in the hemisphere. We are working to change that by increasing women's leadership at all levels of society. Through our mentorship curriculum, peer-to-peer support network, and monthly family home visits, Girl Pioneers develop the internal strength, skills, and emotional intelligence they need to be leaders. They are empowered to empower.

To achieve these four goals, the following strategies are implemented:

- **Family Support:** Mentors conduct home visits once a month with the goal of teaching families to manage their emotions by strengthening family dialogue and creating physical and emotional safe spaces for full family development through a variety of play-based activities. During





visits, families are encouraged to communicate their needs to the mentor and to each other, and MAIA mentors analyze and look for solutions to their concerns or conflicts.

- **School for Parents:** Every two months, MAIA families come together to attend a school for parents in which sexual education, protection of children and teenagers, emotional education, and other themes are addressed. It is a space in which each family can share their own experiences and support one another. It also becomes a space for where families and the mentors can connect.
- **Individual Support:** Each Girl Pioneer receives individual sessions with her mentor once or twice a month. Each student receives individualized support to establish her own goals, strengthen her socioemotional skills, identify her support network, and work toward her personal growth. This space is confidential, and the Girl Pioneer can use it for emotional learning, to communicate concerns, request academic advice, and develop skills such as resilience, innovation, and critical thinking that will help her overcome any obstacles to her goals.

- **Academic Support:** Mentors receive progress reports and design individualized sessions to support Girl Pioneers' academic needs by motivating students, encouraging parents to get involved, or designing a study schedule. This is an important example of how parents can become involved with their daughters' education and implement the lessons they learned through home visits and MAIA's School for Parents.
- **Mentorship:** In addition to their academic classes, MAIA's Girl Pioneers receive mentorship classes to develop new skills according to the topics they are learning, helping them strengthen their knowledge. In mentorship classes, Girl Pioneers apply critical thinking and draw their own conclusions through debate and analysis of issues. One of the topics is integral health, focusing specifically on emotional intelligence. Girl Pioneers understand how emotions work and why they cause strong reactions, and they are taught tools to manage and control their emotions. Through emotional stability, Girl Pioneers and their network of support can then generate a healthier and safer environment.

Girl Pioneers conducting vocal empowerment exercises at the MAIA Impact School, an activity they learn in Mentorship class. Photo by Livvy Runyon.

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### Applying the MAIA Model During the Pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, MAIA has dedicated more time and resources to caring for Girl Pioneers and their families. The pandemic offered an opportunity to strengthen the emotional tools applied by Girl Pioneers and their families and seek strategic ways to care for their unique needs during these difficult

times. At the beginning of the pandemic, the highly trained socioemotional development team was able to support Girl Pioneers and their families through the use of technology for distance learning and communication. Here are some examples of how technology continues to be employed during the pandemic:

- **Providing contextualized and accurate COVID-19 information through Facebook and radio stations:** Understanding the demand for accurate and contextualized information by the population we serve, MAIA created (and continues to create) short informational content<sup>7</sup> related to the virus in the primary native languages of Kaqchikel, K'iche, and Tz'utujil. This content has reached over 100,000 people in rural Guatemala, and our model is being replicated by organizations in other parts of the country
- **Leveraging WhatsApp for group communication:** MAIA employs an "emotional thermometer" as a tool to assess control over emotions. If you are in green, you have control over your emotions; if you are in red, you have lost control. Each morning, mentorship groups of 25 students send their peers and mentor a WhatsApp message stating their emotional thermometer level. This helps mentors oversee students who may need additional support for the day and employ strategies to manage emotions that may be out of control (such as breathing exercises for rage or frustration).
- **Scheduling video calls with students and families:** In response to the increased need



Mentorship Activity at the MAIA Impact School. Photo by Ana Watts.

Mayra, a MAIA Mentor, conducting a mentorship activity during a home visit. Photo by Ana Watts.

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for socioemotional support during the pandemic, mentors have semi-monthly calls with families and weekly individual calls with students, which differs from the monthly home visits conducted prior to the pandemic. Videoconferencing apps like Zoom and Google Meet are used for family meetings, which allows mentors to adequately assess complex family situations and employ strategies to alleviate any challenges faced. For example, if a family is facing increased economic strain due to unemployment, the mentor will hold a family meeting to make a family budget and income opportunity plan. Or if a family is feeling tense from being closed in for too long due to quarantine, the mentor will conduct an activity, such as exercise, to improve their well-being. Each intervention is personalized.

### Evaluating Impact

Girl Pioneers and their families learn to use dialogue as a means to resolve conflicts. In some cases, Girl Pioneers themselves request support from their mentors to create the safe space in which to talk about difficult topics with their parents. Likewise, they develop a more extensive emotional language beyond the words that exist in their mother tongue. During the socioemotional development sessions, the Girl Pioneers and their families explore their various feelings, begin to name them,

and identify activities that help manage them in a healthy way. We also have found that by obtaining parental support, the Girl Pioneers achieve better academic performance and take important steps toward fulfilling their dreams.

Through strategies implemented in the socioemotional development program, 95% of the Girl Pioneers complete middle school—a stark contrast to the 20% of Indigenous women who continue to study in the traditional education model.<sup>8</sup> At MAIA, we understand that socioemotional development tools are key to the Girl Pioneers' academic success, which is why we work with families to create a safe environment for each student to achieve her goals. We encourage other teachers and academic institutions to work toward holistic wellness so that their students can follow their dreams and positively impact their communities.

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/803494/latin-america-gender-gap-index-country/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/guatemala/informes/%C2%A1m%C3%ADrame>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.guttmacher.org/sites/default/files/report\\_pdf/rib-guatemala.pdf](https://www.guttmacher.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/rib-guatemala.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.spanishmarks.com/blog/languages-in-guatemala/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/PDF-4-the-positive-impact-of-social-and-emotional-learning-for-kindergarten-to-eighth-grade-students-executive-summary.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <https://academicjournals.org/journal/ERR/article-full-text-pdf/67F7B684042>

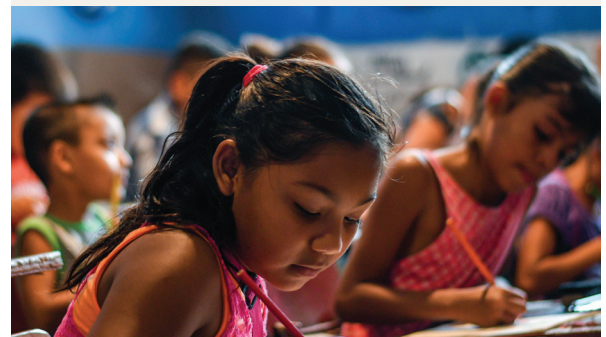
<sup>7</sup> <https://www.maiaimpact.org/informational-videos>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/guatemala/informes/%C2%A1m%C3%ADrame>

Rural villages in Sololá are often characterized by rigid customs governing the role of young women. Traditionally, they are expected to marry young, move in with the husband's family, and reproduce early and often. As such, many families aim to equip daughters only with the most rudimentary schooling (read and write at a basic level) before they marry. With puberty, conservative norms limit a young woman's mobility, girls are expected to manage chores or generate small levels of income outside the home, and the pressure to marry begins. Mayan women average just four years of schooling in Sololá and half are mothers by age 18.

Most of the few young women who do manage to enroll in secondary school access a substandard education system designed for a different era. In 2018, just 6% of high school graduates in Sololá were considered "proficient" in math and just 25% in reading. Only 7% of graduates from high school in Guatemala receive any type of job-specific training. The gap between girls' talents and 21st century opportunities is glaring and explains why Guatemala continues to have the highest levels of gender inequity in the hemisphere.

Lack of adequate educational technology remains a problem, especially in the mountainous, rural areas. Absence of funding, limited technical access, and lack of operator expertise prevent all schools from being equipped with state-of-the-art computers and distance learning technology.



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