



3EA

EDUCATION IN EMERGENCIES
EVIDENCE FOR ACTION



POLICY BRIEF

Improving Outcomes for Syrian Refugee Children: Lessons from Social-Emotional Learning Tutoring Programs in Lebanon

Key Takeaways

- *Tutoring in a Healing Classroom* is a remedial program in which teachers incorporate social-emotional learning (SEL)-based classroom practices. This program establishes a safe, nurturing learning environment and provides students additional support to learn foundational academic and social-emotional skills.
- The IRC implemented *Tutoring in a Healing Classroom* in Lebanon for Syrian refugee students enrolled in Lebanese public schools over the course of two years. NYU/TIES rigorously evaluated the impact of *Tutoring in a Healing Classroom* (referred to subsequently in this brief as HCT) and the potential benefit of adding different skill-targeted SEL interventions: 1) Mindfulness activities, 2) Brain Game activities and 3) a 5-component SEL curriculum. In this policy brief, we report impacts of HCT and HCT + Mindfulness. (In subsequent policy briefs, we will report impacts of HCT + Brain Games and HCT + 5-component SEL.)
- A half year of HCT, when compared to just public school, had positive impacts on students' perception of their public schools and behavioral regulation skills.
- A half year of HCT + Mindfulness, when compared to just public school, showed positive impacts on a range of students' academic and social-emotional outcomes. These positive impacts included improvement in literacy and numeracy skills, behavior regulation skills, and positive perceptions of their public school environment, amongst other SEL outcomes.
- Overall, the combination of HCT + Mindfulness had the greatest impact on improving Syrian refugee children's academic and SEL outcomes.

THE BACKGROUND

Across the globe, an estimated 7.1 million refugees are school-aged children.¹ Many of these children have experienced severe and prolonged adversity that can have long-lasting impacts on their learning and development.

As the numbers of refugees worldwide continues to grow, the typical duration of their displacements has also worsened and the challenges involved with meeting their needs are mounting. Unlike in previous eras, refugee children and their families are now increasingly likely to stay in their host countries for protracted periods. A growing number are also more likely to live in established cities and towns instead of isolated and separate camps or settlements.

These trends within this growing crisis have meant that over the past decade, the global community has shifted away from policies that emphasize education for near-term return home and toward policies that urge programs conducive to remaining in and integrating into their new host community. This has entailed a stronger emphasis on setting refugee children up for success within established host community

systems while supporting public schools to absorb the influx of refugee children.

Many public schools in refugee hosting countries are overburdened and were in need of greater investment even before the massive influx of refugee children arrived. The need to provide these systems with more resources and evidence-based solutions that make these systems work better for all children, including the refugee students within them, has never been more urgent.

Research-practice partnerships are an important way to meet this challenge. The collaboration between the IRC and NYU TIES is a long-standing example of one. These partnerships bring academic researchers into direct collaboration with those engaged in the daily work of educating students in crisis contexts. Research-practice partnerships gather and analyze the evidence needed to understand what works, how, for whom, under what conditions and at what cost. Without the insights provided by these partnerships, we risk investing scarce resources in ways that fail children and entire societies.

EDUCATING REFUGEE CHILDREN IN LEBANON

Few societies worldwide have been as directly impacted by the global surge in displacement as Lebanon. Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war nearly a decade ago, Lebanon's refugee population has soared. An estimated one in 14 people now in Lebanon is a school-aged Syrian refugee.²

Policymakers have made great strides getting these students through school doors as a direct result of the Lebanese Ministry of Education's Reach All Children through Education (RACE) initiative. The second phase of this initiative, which began in 2017 (RACE II), seeks to integrate and retain refugee children into the Lebanese education system through the opening of more than 300 "second shift" schools. These schools offer classes in the afternoon for refugee students.

However, many Lebanese public schools were already stretched thin in their efforts to provide a quality learning environment for Lebanese students. While the creation of a second shift in Lebanese public schools led to an uptick in enrollment, we know very little about whether these children are attending school regularly, how much they are learning and the rate at which they are remaining in and completing school. Syrian refugee students have unique needs and challenges. Simply getting them into the classroom is not enough. While maintaining efforts to improve access, policymakers and practitioners must also ensure that children are learning, thriving and remaining in school.

To generate the evidence needed to understand, improve and share what works to help refugee children learn and succeed in school, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and NYU Global TIES for Children (TIES/NYU) established a strategic partnership. Dubai Cares was one of the first donors to invest in this partnership, and the first to invest in rigorous research on school-based SEL interventions. The Spencer Foundation, the US Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration and the Porticus Foundation also provided the support needed for this partnership to design and implement the Evidence for Action: Education in Emergencies (3EA) initiative, bringing together programs and rigorous research about children in crisis.

In Lebanon, this program was designed and delivered to complement the Lebanese public education system and enhance learning and retention of Syrian refugee children through remedial tutoring programs infused with SEL principles and practices. Based on research findings so far, this brief will reflect on where our program in Lebanon achieved improvements in

academic and SEL outcomes for children, where it failed to reach those outcomes, what we learned, and which next steps may produce improvements. We will update the reflections on this brief based on findings from future analyses.



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Healing Classrooms

For decades, the IRC has been a leader in designing and implementing education programs for children in crisis contexts. Our foundational *Healing Classrooms* approach was informed by our experiences hearing from teachers that their students dealing with the consequences of conflict and displacement were struggling to focus, manage their emotions and learn. It was clear that simply providing academic instruction would not be enough and that a focus on promoting students' well-being and SEL, alongside building traditional academic skills, was necessary to help them recover from their experiences, learn and thrive in school.

Healing Classrooms is focused on developing and providing the resources and professional development support that practitioners, teachers and caregivers in crisis need to establish safe, nurturing and predictable environments in which children who have experienced adversity are best-positioned to heal, learn and grow.

3EA IN LEBANON

3EA in Lebanon focused on HCT and different skill-targeted SEL interventions that aim to help Syrian refugee children enrolled in Lebanese public school achieve academic and SEL outcomes that promote their retention and success in school.

This approach is guided by a strong evidence base on the potential for small-group tutoring to support children's academic outcomes in stable contexts, though we do not have the evidence about whether this holds true in refugee settings.³ There was also strong demand for tutoring in the communities the IRC was serving; parents knew their children needed additional academic support. SEL, while a concept less familiar to many of the communities being served, has a significant body of evidence from more stable contexts that strengthened social-emotional skills improve academic outcomes.⁴



PHOTO CREDIT: KULSOOM RIZVI / THE IRC

PROGRAM DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

HCT targeted an estimated 5000 Syrian refugee children enrolled in Lebanese public schools and about 170 teachers working with them. These students attended 2.5-hour-long tutoring sessions three times a week, with each session consisting of three lessons (Arabic, French/English, mathematics) and each lesson lasting between 30 to 40 minutes. Each class averaged about 29 students. This program was designed to run over the course of a 32-week school year and divided into two 16-week cycles. In HCT, teachers incorporated instructional techniques and classroom management approaches based on SEL principles. These approaches included setting daily routines to promote predictability and a sense of control and practicing full class questioning to create a sense of belonging.

Teachers involved in this program received significant support for their professional development. At the beginning of Year 1, they went through a five-day training focused on the *Healing Classrooms* model, as well as specifics of classroom instruction for literacy, numeracy and learning a new language. That five-day training was paired with a two-day training focused on skill-targeted SEL instruction. Halfway through the school year, these teachers went through a follow-up training focused on refreshing their skills, which was also paired with a two-day training focused on a different skill-targeted SEL program.

Communities received one of two curricular packages. The first package consisted of HCT. The second curricular package added activities or curricula that aimed to build specific SEL skills (skill-targeted SEL). In the first half of the first year of programming in Lebanon, a Mindfulness program was implemented. HCT teachers set aside quiet time at three 10-minute intervals throughout the day's tutoring session to practice Mindfulness activities. This amounted to a cumulative 30 minutes per day or 90 minutes per week in which these students were encouraged to focus their thoughts, engage in deep-breathing exercises and draw their attention to present sensations and thoughts.




In Year 2, we implemented and tested a 5-component SEL curriculum, which consisted of lessons to strengthen five core SEL skills: brain building, emotional regulation, positive social skills, conflict resolution skills and perseverance. The 5-component program's content was developed through a partnership between the IRC's education experts and Lebanon country team and external, professional content developers. The lessons were implemented daily during subject matter transitions.

RESEARCH DESIGN

We used a series of cluster randomized control trials over the course of two years to evaluate the effectiveness of our SEL programming on Syrian refugee children enrolled in Lebanese public schools. To ascertain how SEL programming impacts both academic and social-emotional outcomes, we evaluated:

In year 1:

- The impact of access to half a year of **HCT** when compared to access to **public school alone**.
- The impact of access to half a year of **HCT + Mindfulness** when compared to access to **public school alone**.
- The added impact of access to half a year of **HCT + Mindfulness** when compared to **HCT alone**. 

In year 2:

- The impact of access to **HCT + the 5-component SEL curriculum** when compared to **HCT alone**.

More details on the research design can be found in Appendix 1.




PHOTO CREDIT: KULSOOM RIZVI / THE IRC


THE STUDY'S FINDINGS

Impact of half a year of HCT and HCT + Mindfulness (vs. public school alone)

When compared to students with access to public school alone, students who received a half a year of HCT without Mindfulness showed significant improvements in their positive perceptions of the public school environment, a finding that aligns with our research in DR Congo.⁵ These students found their public school teachers more caring and supportive, and the school climate more engaging, motivating and respectful, than students who were not enrolled in HCT. In addition, students in HCT showed improved behavioral regulations skills. While more research is needed to determine the longer-term outcomes of these impacts, we could hypothesize that more positive perceptions and better regulation of their own behaviors could lead to more regular attendance and more positive classroom behavior and as a result, greater learning within schools.

When compared to students with access to public school alone, students who received a half year of the combined package of HCT + Mindfulness improved on a wide range of academic and social-emotional outcomes. The addition of Mindfulness alongside HCT improved children's basic literacy and numeracy skills (e.g., ability to recognize letters and letter sounds, identifying numbers, solving simple subtraction problems). It also improved their perception of the supportiveness of their school and had marginally significant, positive impacts on a range of SEL outcomes. These SEL outcomes included behavior regulation, anger dysregulation, sadness dysregulation and hostile attribution bias (i.e., tendency to perceive others' actions as hostile in intent). These students also experienced an increase in school stress. More research is needed to determine how or why, and whether this increase in school stress was more attributable to students being more aware of their feelings, caring more about their school performance or feeling negative stress and anxiety. 

Added impact of skill-targeted SEL interventions (vs. HCT alone)

Despite the positive impacts of HCT + Mindfulness programming when compared to access to public school alone, the addition of skill-targeted SEL interventions (Mindfulness in Year 1, and 5-component SEL curriculum in year 2) had no discernible impact on students' academic skills when compared to children who received HCT alone. One reason for this lack of 

impact may be the small treatment contrast between the HCT and the HCT + Mindfulness interventions. It is more difficult to detect incremental differences between these contrasts than to detect such differences between treatment and no-treatment control groups.

Discussion

Our study has shown that HCT can improve outcomes for crisis-affected children, particularly when coupled with Mindfulness. Both HCT and HCT + Mindfulness hold promise to improve certain SEL outcomes, namely behavior regulation and positive perceptions of their schools.

While clear academic and SEL gains emerged from the model that included HCT with Mindfulness, further adjustments in other forms of skill-targeted SEL programming are needed to make similar gains. In this analysis, more research is needed to determine why HCT alone or skill-targeted SEL activities and curricula that were designed to complement HCT were not more impactful. Two likely reasons for why the skill-targeted activities had no significant impacts alone are problems with dosage and teacher implementation of SEL in the classroom.

In regards to dosage, it is possible that student attendance was too infrequent (averaging 48% to 55%) such that students did not receive the intended dosage of HCT. It is also possible that the program duration was structured with insufficient time and may have been too short. We know that learning and development outcomes do not change quickly and it is possible that higher dosages and longer duration of HCT are required to see impact. Going forward, the IRC will test and implement strategies to improve student attendance and gauge varying dosages and durations of students' exposure to specific SEL skills.

We also hypothesize that teachers struggled to implement the SEL activities and curricula and that this would be improved with more experience for the teachers in learning how to implement the SEL activities and with further contextualization of the content for Syrian refugee children in Lebanese public schools. We know that SEL is culturally dependent and challenging for teachers to grasp and apply in a short timeframe. Co-creating our materials with teachers and communities to align with their values and priorities would better equip teachers to implement activities. Going forward, the IRC will refine its design to include co-creation and iterative testing of teaching and learning materials with key end-users such as school directors, teachers and students. Additionally, the IRC will refine its teacher support approach to ensure that teachers improve their SEL knowledge and skills, and will also collect qualitative and implementation data to accurately identify the degree to which activities are culturally relevant and implemented as intended.

Finally, SEL skills and impacts are challenging to measure and do not change quickly so it is also possible that the tools we used were not sensitive enough to capture growth and impact in students' SEL during the duration of short interventions. The IRC will continue to develop and find evidence of validity and reliability of performance-based measures to capture children's SEL development and the impact of programs in conflict-affected settings.

These hypotheses show the ways in which our research should be the beginning and not the end of the endeavor to shed light on what works, how, for whom and under what conditions. This effort produced useful and encouraging evidence while also revealing some program shortcomings. Several key questions remain, whose answers could guide the continued growth and improvement of the education in emergencies field.



Enumerator conducting the RACER test with a child in Bireh-Akkar, Lebanon.
PHOTO CREDIT: THE IRC

RECOMMENDATIONS

Remedial support and SEL programming ultimately help governments achieve their goals by supporting refugee students in their public schools to learn, which in turn can support and strengthen entire school systems. This approach should be seen as complementing rather than competing with public schools. It should be supported by donors, host governments and trusted implementing partners.

Decisionmakers need evidence on the best ways to deliver complementary programs that improve academic and SEL outcomes for crisis-affected children. To be truly impactful, education research in crisis contexts must be given the funding required to both answer immediately urgent questions and support a longer-term big picture understanding of the field. The COVID-19 pandemic has created a global situation in which educators and funders must make decisions in the most informed manner possible, often both quickly while also planning for long-term recovery. The pandemic has also disrupted learning in a way that could cause serious long-term damage to students. Effective SEL-based tutoring programs hold the potential to reverse that remedial damage and get these students back on track. But short-term research efforts that fixate on cut and dry answers can often drive researchers and funders toward overly-narrow or mistaken conclusions. Researchers, practitioners, donors and governments must commit themselves to rigorous research in crisis contexts and generate the time they need to build and share evidence with the thoroughness required to push the entire humanitarian field toward a more informed approach.



PHOTO CREDIT: KULSOOM RIZVI / THE IRC

We offer the following series of recommendations.

For hosting governments: Open the doors of public schools to refugee children and include them in education sector plans, ensuring their access, learning and retention. To do so:

- Support complementary programs such as remedial tutoring focused on both academic and SEL instruction and implemented by trusted partners that can promote learning and retention. To help these programs succeed:
 - **Put teachers at the center to ensure meaningful localization.** Ensure teachers co-create SEL content to ensure cultural relevance and ease of implementation. Ensure teachers are involved in all stages, including design, testing and iteration of this content.
 - **Eyes on attendance.** Access should be measured not only by enrollment in complementary programs but also participation. Put in place strategies to support and monitor attendance.
 - **Collaboration is key.** Allow trusted researchers and practitioners access to student data in public schools to better learn which kinds of complementary programs are most effective and where there are gaps in learning.
 - Over time, consider **including remedial support and Mindfulness within formal schools** to support those who are at risk of not learning or dropping out.

For donors: Fund research as part of education programs in refugee contexts. Create a culture of learning and improving by funding education in crises quickly and over multiple years.

- **Invest for impact and improvement.** To meaningfully spur innovation, commit to multi-year funding that goes towards design, implementation and the full gamut of research, including qualitative, quantitative, evaluation, measurement and cost research.
- **Dosage impacts delivery:** It takes time for teachers to get comfortable delivering SEL content, whether explicit or comprehensive, and for children to build the right skills. Dosage impacts outcomes. Invest in programs and measurement over longer periods of time to more effectively gauge whether something works.

- **Measurement matters.** We know that SEL is very difficult to measure. Invest in measurement research to ensure the use of valid and reliable instruments that will yield trustworthy data about SEL and other outcomes. Make sure what is measured is sensitive to change in the amount of time given for results.
- **Commit to costing.** Cost should be included in every stage of programming and research. Costing as part of design can identify scalable solutions to later be piloted and rigorously tested. Cost efficiency analysis during implementation sheds light on what it costs to achieve outputs and cost effectiveness research during evaluations can give the information needed to better understand how to scale interventions.
- **Prepare to partner.** Invest in research-practice partnerships and become a part of these partnerships when feasible. Lean into innovation, incentivize learning and improving and use your position and voice to bring others along.
- **Ask all the questions.** Research should not only focus on what works but how, for whom, under what conditions and at what cost.



PHOTO CREDIT: KULSOOM RIZVI / THE IRC

For more information, please contact:

Jamie Weiss-Yagoda

Senior Education Policy Advisor, IRC
jamie.weissyagoda@rescue.org

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATORS:

J. Lawrence Aber

Willner Family Professor of Psychology and Public Policy
 and University Professor
 Global TIES for Children, NYU
lawrence.aber@nyu.edu

Jeannie Annan

Chief Research & Innovation Officer
 Research & Innovation, IRC
jeannie.annan@rescue.org

ENDNOTES

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APPENDIX 1: RESEARCH DESIGN

The first year of the study was divided into two sequential 16-week cycles, the first of which is reported in this brief. For year 1 cycle 1, the study was conducted in 87 school sites across the Akkar and Bekaa regions of Lebanon. These school sites first were stratified by region and then randomized within region into one of three treatment arms: 21 waitlist control sites (i.e., no tutoring), 33 HCT sites, and 33 sites where students had access to HCT and Mindfulness activities.

For year 2, the study included 57 sites across the Akkar and Bekaa regions of Lebanon and assigned to one of two conditions: 28 sites with access to HCT and 27 sites with HCT plus the 5-component SEL lessons.

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Dubai Cares is a flagship partner of the 3EA initiative, a five-year program enabling global education actors to ensure that children in crisis-affected settings attend safe and predictable schools and gain the reading, math and social-emotional skills they need to thrive and succeed in school and life. Since its inception, Dubai Cares, part of Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Global Initiatives, has been working towards providing children and youth in developing countries with equitable access to quality education and learning opportunities through the design and funding of programs that aim to be integrated, impactful, sustainable and scalable. As a result, the UAE-based global philanthropic organization has successfully launched education programs reaching over 20 million beneficiaries in 60 developing countries.

Dubai Cares is playing a key role in helping achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, which aims to ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning by 2030, by supporting programs in early childhood development, access to quality primary and secondary education, technical and vocational education and training for youth as well as a particular focus on education in emergencies and protracted crises. Dubai Cares also funds research-oriented programs and establishes pilot initiatives that provide meaningful and valuable evidence for governments, policymakers, and civil society, to support them in defining an educational framework for the future.