



Getting Syria's children back to school in Lebanon
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Improving early learning outcomes in opposition-held Syria

The ongoing conflict in Syria has taken a devastating toll on the education system; the impact on infrastructure, personnel, resourcing and student attendance is well documented.¹ New DFID-funded research² focuses on children's learning and their exposure to trauma to build a picture of early primary education in opposition-held areas. In combining data on academic performance and wellbeing with insights from school staff, researchers suggest evidence-based steps to begin repairing the damage done to Syrian children's education

Missing the building blocks of learning

EGRA

- Of the children in Grade 3 who were assessed, most had not yet developed the reading fluency or comprehension skills expected at grade level. In particular, their decoding skills were not sufficient to support reading fluency and comprehension.
- Access to books at home was the factor most strongly linked to greater fluency, followed by head teachers regularly checking teachers' planning, children having access to a school library, and parents being aware of children's progress.



Research at a glance

Objective: Understanding the status of early primary education in opposition-held areas of Syria

Areas: Rural Damascus, Aleppo, Idlib

Data collection: April-May 2017.

Population: 1,500 Grade 3 pupils

Tools: Early grade reading and mathematics assessments (EGRA, EGMA), War Stressor Survey (understanding how children have internalised conflict and using data to design responses), and Snapshot of School Management and Effectiveness (SSME)

¹UNESCO Country Education Profile: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0026/002614/261410e.pdf>

²Implemented by Chemonics International under the Idarah project, which supported education through improved governance, access, and quality education in opposition held areas of Idlib, Aleppo, and Rural Damascus provinces. The project ended on 31 January 2018 and has been replaced by the new multi-year Manahel Project as part of the Syria Education Programme.

Missing the building blocks of learning (continued)

EGMA

- Similarly, in mathematics, children in Grade 3 who were assessed did not demonstrate the progress expected at grade level. They showed accuracy and fluency in simpler tasks, such as basic addition and subtraction and comparing numbers, but faced difficulties in applying this knowledge to more complex calculations.

SSME

- Over half the teachers surveyed had received no training in reading or mathematics pedagogy.
- While 58% of teachers were observed by a school leader at least once a month, only 40% received feedback specific to their teaching of reading or mathematics.
- Schools had serious shortages of reading materials, with 90% lacking reading books and only 40% of children having access to textbooks.
- Security and lack of transportation were the two most cited barriers to achievement across all the locations studied.

These findings show that children are missing building blocks crucial to their future learning. Gaps in teacher training and a lack of resources compound these problems. Many will therefore struggle to transition from learning to read to reading to learn, increasing the likelihood of dropout and leaving children without the literacy and numeracy skills necessary both to achievement at school and in their future lives.

Haunted by trauma

The War Stressor Survey revealed both the degree of children's exposure to conflict and the extent of the emotional repercussions of experiencing such trauma.

- More than 60% of children had experienced shelling or bombing, while over half had lost a family member as a result of the war. Nearly 20% had witnessed killings or massacres, 33% had their own home directly targeted and 6% had been wounded.
- Consequently, levels of emotional distress were very high, with more than 80% of children suffering constant anxiety. Girls were particularly likely to report being in fear of losing their lives (100% versus 41% for boys).

Statistical analysis found none of these factors specifically correlated to learning outcomes, possibly because the majority of children had been exposed to conflict and their ability to learn was thus equally affected. Over 70% of teachers and school principals agreed that emotional distress impacted children's learning. Interviews showed that staff were not equipped to deal either with pupils' complex psychosocial needs or with their own traumatic experiences. As a result, their management of this issue sometimes further impacted children's wellbeing, for example through the use of corporal punishment.



Repairing, healing and learning

Based on these findings, researchers made the following recommendations:

- Prioritise training in formative assessment and pedagogy specific to reading and maths. Emphasise the early teaching of reading and the acquisition of higher-level maths skills and concepts.
- Include school leaders in this training to build their capacity to support and mentor teachers.
- Provide reading materials to mitigate the shortages inflicted by the conflict, particularly graded readers that systematically develop decoding skills and broaden children's vocabulary.³
- Foster children's sense of school as a safe space. Support teachers and school leaders both to manage their own trauma and to offer psychosocial support to traumatised pupils, using and adapting existing toolkits.⁴
- Structure classes according to ability, as in examples from India and Zambia,⁵ to make remedial teaching more targeted.
- Understand and address gender inequality in education as an essential part of quality programming.
- Engage with parents and guardians, for whom education remains a high priority. High levels of literacy among the adult population mean families have the skills to support their children's learning and bolster the work schools are doing to provide an education in the most challenging of circumstances.

³For example, through the Norad-funded Global Digital Library: <https://digitallibrary.io/?hl=en>

⁴Such as from the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies: http://toolkit.ineesite.org/resources/ineecms/uploads/1127/IRC_Psychosocial_Teacher_Training_Guide.pdf

⁵Information from the Poverty Action Lab: www.povertyactionlab.org/scale-ups/remedial-education