

Refugee children from Syria in Ramtha, northern Jordan
 © Russell Watkins/DFID



Researching education during conflict: a case study from Syria

The brutal conflict in Syria has caused a sharp reversal in education progress. A recent DFID-funded study brings a rigorous approach to collecting evidence on the nature of this reversal, focusing on the status of early primary education. The research demonstrates that collecting robust data in conflict-affected contexts such as Syria is not only possible but necessary to designing future interventions, as well as ensuring operational interventions are achieving their objectives. An evidence-based response is the most reliable way to approach the formidable challenges facing Syria's education system, particularly ensuring that children not only have access to education but that they are learning while in the classroom.



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

Which tools were used?

The study employed four tools to collect data, each adapted to the context in collaboration with Syrian staff from the Idarah project¹ and experts from Syrian education authorities.

- **Early Grade Reading Assessment/Early Grade Mathematics Assessment (EGRA/EGMA):** assessing children's acquisition of the basic literacy and numeracy skills fundamental to progress in education.
- **Snapshot of School Management and Effectiveness:** gaining an overview of conditions in schools, staff training and qualifications, and staff perceptions of children's progress and wellbeing.
- **War Stressor Survey:** interviewing children to gather data on their exposure to war and violence at environmental, family and individual level, and on the trauma caused by such experiences.

¹Idarah was a multi-donor-funded platform implemented by Chemonics International that 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 The project ended on 31 January 2018 and has been replaced by the new multi-year Manahel Project as part of the Syria Education Programme.



How did the team adapt to meet these challenges?

- Videos of training were disseminated via Skype and/or WhatsApp when live conversations were not possible.
- The same set of sample responses to the tools was used to train all enumerators, helping to ensure that data collection was implemented consistently across locations.
- The version of the War Stressor Survey employed had previously been used in Syria and was reviewed and adapted by experts specifically for this study. The order in which tests were given was carefully structured so that children did not end their interaction with the enumerator by answering emotionally sensitive questions. Enumerators discussed any children posing a concern with teachers afterwards.
- Researchers were able to draw on existing networks of Syrian staff – from the Idarah programme and SIG's Assistance Coordination Unit – to organise and facilitate training, to manage security concerns, to communicate and liaise with schools, and to monitor enumerators.

What were the major challenges?

- In the research design, the lack of an independent variable – either Syrian children not affected by conflict or any previous EGRA/EGMA studies conducted in Syria – meant there could be no baseline or control group for comparing data.
- The training of enumerators inside Syria had to be carried out remotely via Skype from the Idarah office in Gazientep, Turkey. Relying on this technology proved problematic due to issues in the field with connectivity, sound equipment and power cuts.
- Particular attention had to be paid to safeguarding due to the sensitive nature of the War Stressor Survey, and to the fact of children being asked to recall traumatic events.
- Security concerns prevented researchers from supervising enumerators in the field, making it much more difficult to ensure the quality and consistency of data collection.
- The volatile, unpredictable nature of working in a conflict zone was a constant challenge, with school visits frequently cancelled, shortened or shifted in response to security concerns.
- The use of paper questionnaires, due to the lack of reliable internet and electricity access, increased the potential for inaccuracies in data entry.

What limitations did this place on the data?

- Some correlations were identified, but the lack of a control or baseline meant causation was much more challenging to establish.
- This also means the findings, while useful in understanding the current Syrian context, have limited generalisability.
- Reliance on self-reported data, from school staff for example, created the potential for bias, even when data was triangulated.



What lessons can be learnt from the experience?

- Allowances need to be made in the budget for dedicated staff to support organisation and logistics.
- Ideally, the technology to be used should be tested in advance to minimise issues with connectivity and sound equipment.
- Where possible, administering the tools electronically, using tablets for example, would facilitate monitoring and accurate data entry.
- Enumerators reported that many children welcomed the opportunity to discuss their experiences, despite the associated trauma, finding a kind of outlet in answering the questions. Enumerators with psychosocial training should be used wherever possible.
- There was a need for a creative and flexible approach to challenges throughout, and a readiness to adapt to the rapidly shifting dynamics of the Syrian context.
- Collaborating with Syrians already working in the field was likewise essential; their presence on the ground, their knowledge and their commitment were integral to the process.