



# Lessons from Syria for improving Education in Crisis and Conflict programming

## Introduction:

In 2018-19 Integrity conducted a ten-month education study<sup>1</sup> representing the first wide-scale research since the start of the Syrian conflict on how teacher practice and learning spaces influence child learning and wellbeing. The research was carried out within a context of shifting zones of active conflict, where few remnants of a functioning education system remain.

“ The purpose of the research is to better understand the teaching and learning environment in schools and non-formal learning spaces inside Syria and to identify examples of best practice to address some of the barriers to safe, quality, inclusive education. This research will improve our understanding of how schools can promote children’s learning and wellbeing in conflict contexts. ” –

**Quote from the DFID terms of reference**



## Context:

The conflict in Syria has been ongoing for nearly a decade and affects millions of citizens through economic hardship, displacement and human suffering. Within this context NGOs and UN agencies continue to work in very difficult conditions to provide education to children in Syria.

## Executive Summary:

The study presented some good news, identifying several positive practices upon which rapid improvements could be made. However, the study also presented challenging news, unsurprising given the context, regarding poor learning environments and teacher practices. More worryingly, the study found that poor standards and practices were failing to alleviate children’s wellbeing and learning challenges, and could even be contributing to their worsening. Of particular concern was the finding that children receive well below the recommended hours of learning a day (less than 3.3<sup>2</sup>), and that teacher abuse, both verbal and physical, may be contributing to lower learning opportunities and significant safety concerns. While there is a growing body of evidence on best practices for Education in Crisis and Conflict (EiCC) programming, and specifically on improving learning outcomes, the study demonstrated that such best practices are not systematically implemented in the context of the Syrian crisis.

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> This research was commissioned by the UK Department for International Development (DfID).

<sup>2</sup> 66% of the absolute minimum required learning according to the Opportunity to Learn index.

## Our novel approach to examining education and learning in Syria:

Building on the existing evidence base in Syria, the study employed a novel approach to gather new evidence on EiCC programming and to tackle existing information gaps in the context of ongoing conflict. This approach included the following features:

### 1. Assessing the quality of teaching and learning behaviours in conflict settings

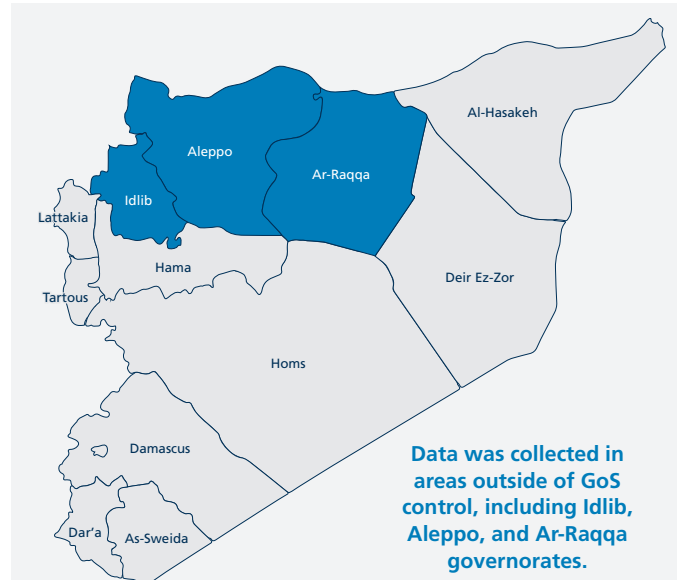
The study examined the learning environment for Grade 2 and Grade 3 children in areas not controlled by the Government of Syria (GoS). It sought to capture the voices of key sector actors to understand what was happening in practice. This included direct observations of both teacher practices and school learning spaces, as well as consultations with teachers, parents and children across three governorates.

### 2. Adopting rigorous methods for primary data collection

The study team consulted nearly 6,000 informants to gather a wealth of primary data. Too often, studies in fragile and conflict-affected states (FCAS) rely on secondary data and presume that because primary data collection is difficult, it needs to be overly simplified or avoided. The study proved that methods do exist to gather new evidence and representative data in conflict settings through non-biased sampling, even on difficult to measure topics, such as attitudes and behaviours in the classroom. A wealth of data was collected<sup>3</sup>, which is available for further analysis and disaggregation by geolocation, school, student grade, and even teacher and student gender.

### 3. Promoting broad stakeholder engagement and ownership of results

To ensure the study's findings were both meaningful and actionable, its methodology included a broad consultation process of over 250 sector stakeholders. This process sought to ensure findings were relevant and useful, and to guide adaptations and improvements in future programming in Syria, as well as EiCC programming in other contexts.



Our study team spoke with 5,580 informants made up of:



**2,195 Teachers**



**1,779 Children**



**1,195 Parents/Caregivers**



**411 Others**



#### Footnotes

<sup>3</sup> A new data set has been created with nearly 2,500 records being sourced across three governorates from 300 schools. Enumerators observed 284 lessons in 291 schools. 150 scholarly and programmatic documents were also reviewed as part of the study.

## Study Findings:

**The Good News:** Common teaching tools and positive teaching practices exist.

### Curriculum:

- Variations of the GoS' curriculum are in use across most of Syria's Zones of Control. A standardised/mainstreamed curriculum supports movement and reintegration of children, as well as certification of formal learning.

### Teacher Practices:

- Teachers have high self-efficacy rates<sup>4</sup> regarding their own abilities to promote equity, reading, maths and wellbeing.
- Basic teaching practices are in place, upon which improvements can be made:
  - Teacher performance assessments take place regularly. This could be used to increase teachers accountability to standards and to establish professional development support.
  - Teachers are open to using participatory methods. This could be leveraged to reach more children with greater ease.
  - Under observation, teachers model good practices that support child social and emotional wellbeing. This suggests that teachers know which practices are and are not appropriate.

**The Challenging News:** While best teaching practices are known they are not adopted or adhered to in practice. Teachers often revert to rote and didactic practices with limited differentiated support to children who struggle. Insecurity is being normalised and safety concerns, including threats and abuse by teachers, are left unaddressed. Learning spaces are often inaccessible for children with special needs.

### Classroom Time:

- Despite high levels of school attendance (92-93%), the average primary school student in non-GoS-held Syria receives only 3.3 hours of learning a day—way below the recommended minimum.

### Teacher Practices:

- Teachers are under-skilled, under-supported and under-resourced with limited supervision. The majority of teaching behaviours and practices are not conflict-sensitive.
- Poor teaching practices are common, including threats and abuse by teachers, and are likely to worsen children's wellbeing and learning opportunities<sup>5</sup>.
- Teaching practices are mainly rote and didactic, with limited use of formative assessment, complementary teaching and learning materials. Learning of students is also not properly tracked.
- Teachers display poor abilities to differentiate in their classrooms and an apparent lack of willingness to continue to work with children who appear to be struggling significantly.

### The Learning Environment:

- Learning spaces are getting safer, however children appear to have normalised relative insecurity.
- High levels of safety concerns were expressed by parents and children, from teacher abuse to airstrikes. Teacher abuse, both verbal and physical, is a common concern amongst students and teachers.
- The common inaccessibility of learning spaces suggests that equitable access to education is limited.
- The limited screening of children for special needs suggests that even those children who can access learning spaces are not getting the support they need within them.
- Limited to no peer networks and a lack of specialists trained in psychosocial support means that in most learning spaces, children are left without support.
- Very few school spaces support play, recreation, and specialised support for children's psychosocial or other special needs.

#### Footnotes

<sup>4</sup> Self-efficacy is an individual's belief in their innate ability to achieve goals.

<sup>5</sup> 41% of children reported that some or all teachers of school personnel hit children, 64% stated they shouted or threatened children

### Conclusion:

The evidence on what is needed to support children in conflict and crisis is clear. Safe, flexible and community based learning opportunities are required, with social and emotional learning support, and a focus on literacy and numeracy skill development. Added to this there needs to be support for teacher professional development and wellbeing, and partnerships between schools and homes to jointly promote learning and wellbeing.

For those interested in reading the full report, please email [info@integrityglobal.com](mailto:info@integrityglobal.com).

### Acknowledgements:

The Integrity team acknowledges and expresses deep appreciation and respect for the thousands of Syrian children, teachers, parents/caregivers, school administrators, Local Council members, (International) Non-governmental Organisation ((I)NGO) staff members, and education authority representatives who opened the doors to their schools, classrooms, and homes for this study.

Acknowledgment and thanks also go out to the enumerators who tirelessly collected hundreds of thousands of data points, and who were the true eyes and ears of the project on the ground in contexts of ongoing instability.

The team also thanks the hundreds of unnamed respondents outside of Syria who helped frame this study with careful consideration for the implications of shifting geopolitical interests, and without losing sight of both humanitarian principles and the standards to which we hold ourselves in crises and conflicts.

Finally, Integrity is most grateful to DFID, the funder of this study, for its thoughtful foresight to allocate resources to such a comparatively in-depth and unique look at a critically under-researched thematic.



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RECOMMEND**

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