3EA | EDUCATION IN EMERGENCIES
EVIDENCE FOR ACTION

POLICY BRIEF

Improving Outcomes for Crisis-Affected Children: Lessons from Social-Emotional Learning Tutoring Programs in Niger

Key Takeaways

- *Tutoring in a Healing Classroom* (HCT) is a remedial program into 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 HCT for Nigerian refugee and Nigerien internally displaced (IDPs) and host community students living in the Diffa region of southeastern Niger. This program was implemented over the course of the 2016-17 and 2017-18 academic years.

- NYU/TIES rigorously evaluated the impact of HCT and the potential benefit of adding different skill-targeted interventions to HCT. These interventions included Mindfulness and Brain Games.

- In this policy brief, we explore the impacts of HCT as a standalone program and when packaged with skill-targeted SEL activities (Mindfulness and Brain Games) for students enrolled in Nigerien public schools.

- Main findings include:

    » Both one year of HCT and one year of HCT + skill-targeted SEL activities helped students improve their literacy and numeracy skills compared to students enrolled in public school alone.

    » The combination of HCT and skill-targeted SEL activities improved students' grades when compared to those who had access to HCT alone.

    » HCT + Mindfulness significantly improved students' ability to manage expressions of sadness and marginally reduced aggressive reaction in social conflict situations compared to students receiving HCT alone, but we found no other impacts of this HCT + Mindfulness combination on social-emotional 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 of refugees are also more likely to live in established cities and towns instead of isolated camps or settlements.

Many public schools in refugee hosting countries are overburdened and needed greater investment even before the massive influx of refugee children arrived. The need to provide these school systems with more resources and evidence-based solutions that make these systems work better for all children, including but not limited to the refugee students within them, has never been more urgent. 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 support 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 strengthening public schools so they are best-positioned to absorb an influx of refugee children.

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.

THE NIGERIEN CONTEXT

Niger is one of the most fragile contexts in the world. The scale of the challenges facing Niger is staggering: the country consistently ranks at or near the very bottom of human development measures and in recent years has experienced spiraling crises including but not limited to high levels of displacement and education system breakdown.[2]

As of late 2019, there were an estimated 191,902 IDPs and 180,006 refugees living in the country.[3] In the months leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic, about 3 million people in Niger required humanitarian assistance: more than half of this group are children.[4]

These challenges facing children in Niger are painfully evident in the country's education system. More than half of children and youth in Niger are out-of-school (OOS).[5] Recent survey data in the country showed a learning crisis on top of a school access crisis: more than half of boys and nearly 70 percent of girls aged 15-24 were illiterate.[6]

The displacement crisis in Niger is concentrated in the Diffa region, with much of it driven by the Boko Haram insurgency in neighboring Nigeria. That campaign of violence and intimidation has killed more than 36,000 people over the past decade and specifically targeted the educational infrastructure of the region.[7]

To generate the evidence needed to understand, improve and share what works to help refugee and other vulnerable children learn and succeed in school, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and NYU Global TIES for Children (TIES/NYU) established a strategic partnership and embarked on the Education in Emergencies: Evidence for Action (3EA) initiative. Funded by Dubai Cares, 3EA in Niger was designed and delivered to help strengthen the public education system in Niger and to serve refugee, IDP and host community children in the hard-hit Diffa region. It strove to achieve this through a remedial tutoring program infused with SEL principles and practices. This brief will reflect on where this program in Niger achieved improvements in academic and SEL outcomes for children, where it did not, and what we learned about how these programs can be best-positioned to have a positive impact.

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 feel secure, focus their attention, 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 SEL skills, was necessary to help them recover from their experiences and then 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.

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3EA IN NIGER

3EA in Niger focused on HCT and the two different skill-targeted SEL activities Mindfulness and Brain Games. Both of these SEL activities aim to build explicit social-emotional skills.

Mindfulness focuses on stress and emotion management and regulation. Participants engage in guided mind-body activities such as deep-breathing, body scan, mindful movement and other physical and mental exercises focused on easing tension and enhancing mind-body awareness. Mindfulness activities last for three to five minutes at a time and are conducted three times throughout the tutoring session.

Based on a program originally developed at the Harvard EASEL Lab, Brain Games uses games focused on the development of cognitive skills. Teachers lead their classrooms through these games to help children develop their executive function skills which include focus, memory, self-control and developing positive

social relationships. Brain Games activities typically last between five to 10 minutes and, as with Mindfulness, take place at natural stopping points throughout the tutoring session.

This approach combining the HCT style of remedial tutoring with activities focused on the development of specific SEL skills is guided by a strong evidence base about the potential for tutoring to support children's academic outcomes in stable contexts. But we do not yet have evidence about whether this holds true in settings with large numbers of conflict-affected students.[8] There was also strong demand for tutoring in communities the IRC was serving, in which parents knew their children need additional academic support. SEL has a significant body of evidence from more stable contexts that strengthened social-emotional skills improve academic outcomes but it remains a less familiar concept in many of the communities where the IRC works.[9]

Program Design and Implementation

3EA in Niger was designed to be implemented with 1800 students in second to fourth grades attending 30 Nigerien public schools across Diffa. Ninety tutors were enlisted to serve this group with each tutoring class averaging about 20 students. During Year 2, the program lost one school due to security challenges in the region.

These tutors were all former teachers specifically selected by the school directors or Ministry of Education officials supervising the program. Criteria for their selection focused on qualities including active interest in the position, a professional reputation for effectiveness and creativity, and residency in or near the community where their school was situated.

This program ran for two school years: In Year 1, HCT ran for 22 weeks and these 22 weeks were divided into two 11-week cycles. In Year 2, HCT was implemented for a 21-week long period. Each week during both years, the students received six hours of HCT support.

During Year 1's first 11-week cycle, students selected by lottery for the HCT + SEL intervention were provided the Mindfulness program. During Year 1's second 11-week cycle, these students and schools received the skill-targeted Brain Games program. In Year 2, new group of students in the same HCT schools received Brain Games for the entirety of the year; Mindfulness was not offered during the Brain Games period. Both skill-targeted SEL interventions and all tutoring were conducted in French, the Nigerien language of instruction.

Teacher professional development for the 90 HCT tutors was a pillar of the program. It was provided by a partnership established between the Nigerien Ministry of Education and IRC staff. The IRC trained 18 Ministry of Education Pedagogical Advisors (PAs) who could in turn coach HCT tutors on literacy and numeracy instruction and the skill-targeted SEL activities.

The training was iterated across the two years of program implementation and so it was possible to improve it over time. For example, the pre-service trainings for academic instruction were extended from two days to three days following the first school year after it became clear that two days of training for literacy and numeracy each was insufficient.

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RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND DESIGN

The present study aimed to build the evidence base about the impact of HCT and of the skill-targeted SEL activities of Brain Games and Mindfulness on students' academic and SEL outcomes. Specifically, the study aimed to answer the following research questions:

Does access to complementary, non-formal HCT positively impact children's academic outcomes (literacy, numeracy, school grades and school engagement) compared to children attending formal school? (HCT vs. control)

- Does access to complementary, non-formal HCT + SEL skill-targeted activities impact children's academic outcomes when compared to children attending formal schools (HCT + SEL vs. control)?

- Does access to HCT + skill-targeted SEL activities positively impact children's learning and SEL, when compared to children with access to HCT only?

  » What is the impact of 11 weeks Mindfulness on children's learning and SEL? (Year 1-Cycle 1 vs. HCT)

  » What is the impact of 11 weeks of Mindfulness + 11 weeks of Brain Games? (Full Year 1 vs. HCT)

  » What is the impact of 21 weeks of Brain Games? (Year 2 vs. HCT)

All human subjects research in this study was conducted with approval from NYU and IRC IRBs. For this study, researchers used matched-sample cluster-randomized controlled trial (MCRCT) to evaluate HCT and skill-targeted SEL activities across two years of program implementation. Specifically, we first matched the 30 schools into 15 pairs based on characteristics that were structural (e.g., location, school size) and student-focused (% refugee children, student academic skills, language/ethnic composition).

For more detailed information about the research design, see Appendix I.

PHOTO CREDIT: THE IRC

THE STUDY'S FINDINGS

Impact of HCT and HCT + SEL on Academic Outcomes (vs control group)

- Across each year, HCT and HCT + SEL improved students' literacy and numeracy skills compared to students with access to public school alone. Gains in literacy were marginally significant in Year 2, during which HCT + Brain Games was offered.

Impact of skill-targeted SEL activities (Mindfulness and Brain Games) on academic outcomes (HCT + SEL vs. HCT)

- Adding Mindfulness and Brain Games to HCT did not lead to improved literacy and numeracy skills, but it did lead to improved school grades, which capture a combination of academic progress and classroom behavior, in both Year 1 and Year 2.

- In Year 1, students who only received HCT did not receive better school grades than students with access to public school alone. Students who received HCT + SEL (Mindfulness and Brain Games) did receive better school grades than students with access to public schools alone.

Impact of SEL skill-targeted activities (Mindfulness and Brain Games) on SEL (HCT + SEL vs HCT)

- Impact of 11 weeks of Mindfulness (Year 1 Cycle 1 of HCT + SEL vs HCT): After one cycle of implementation in the first year, Mindfulness improved students' ability to manage their expression of sad feelings when compared to students with access to HCT alone. HCT + Mindfulness also had a marginally significant impact in reducing children's aggressive reaction in social conflict situations. However, HCT + Mindfulness had no discernible impact on other SEL outcomes.

- Impact of HCT + 11 weeks of Mindfulness & 11 weeks of Brain Games (Full Year 1 HCT + SEL vs. HCT): After a full-year (two cycles) of implementation

in Year 1, Mindfulness and Brain Games did not have any impact on any measured SEL skills when compared to students enrolled in HCT alone. The initial impact of HCT + Mindfulness on sadness dysregulation and aggression faded out after Mindfulness was discontinued and replaced by Brain Games.

- Impact of 21 weeks of Brain Games (Full Year 2 HCT + SEL vs HCT): Brain Games, after a full year of implementation in Year 2, did not have any impact on any measured SEL skills when compared to students enrolled in HCT alone.

Discussion

The HCT model has now shown that it can have positive impacts on student literacy and numeracy outcomes across contexts as distinct as Niger and Lebanon. After rigorous analysis, these impacts are evident when HCT stands alone and when it is packaged with the skill-targeted SEL programs Mindfulness and Brain Games, with Mindfulness appearing to provide an added boost with a wider range of impacts.

The fact that access to both HCT and HCT + skill-targeted SEL improved students' literacy and numeracy speaks to the fact that complementary remedial programs can help students in public schools learn. It also illustrates the potential for programs that incorporate principles and practices of SEL to support foundational academic skills either as infused within program approaches or as explicit, stand-alone activities added to educational programming.

It is also noteworthy that the addition of both Mindfulness and Brain Games in Year 1 and a full year of Brain Games in Year 2 improved school grades for students when compared to students with access to HCT alone. This suggests that the combined package of HCT + skill-targeted SEL may have positive impacts beyond their tutoring classrooms and can support student learning and comportment in their public schools in ways that are not otherwise captured by measures of specific academic outcomes like literacy or numeracy.

Between the two skill-targeted SEL activities included in this brief, Mindfulness has shown more evidence that it is an effective program component. It has shown promising signs and significant impacts on students' social-emotional skills across two different contexts (Niger and Lebanon) and for different, specific SEL skills. In Niger, this significant improvement involved lower sadness dysregulation, an important skill in helping students manage their negative feelings in social settings. Mindfulness also showed that it could lead to improvement in aggressive reactions to social conflict,

though this finding may be due to chance. In Lebanon, students with access to Mindfulness showed statistically marginal higher behavior regulation, as well as more positive perceptions of the safety and supportiveness of their school environments.

At the same time, our skill-targeted SEL activities did not improve some of the students' social-emotional skills that these programs were designed to target. Mindfulness did not demonstrate a positive impact on other SEL skills it was intended to improve, namely stress and behavioral regulation. Brain Games showed no impact on the executive function skills it targeted (e.g., working memory) or for any other measured SEL skills of students with access to it.

Adapting the HCT model and the Mindfulness and Brain Games program components so they fit well for a Nigerien context was a significant challenge. Teachers in Niger and other contexts in West Africa have reported a lack of familiarity with SEL as a formalized concept. To further complicate matters there was resistance within the local community to Mindfulness because the translation of the program happened to share a name with a Christian radio show broadcast in the area. As a result, some parents and other community members expressed concern that this secular program might entail proselytizing for non-Muslim religions.

Given the many challenges of program implementation, this lack of impact may also be due to factors specific to fragile contexts like Niger, including:

- Low dosage: the program duration may have been too short, and student attendance too low or inconsistent to achieve impact.

- Sequencing: it is possible that in crisis contexts like Niger, children's emotional regulation skills and psychosocial wellbeing must be attended to and show improvement before any program focusing more on executive function skills can have any impact. Were this to be true, the sequencing of 3EA Niger and specifically the way it was implemented in Year 2 (without Mindfulness preceding Brain Games) may have limited the ability of Brain Games to have an impact on students with access to it.

- Lack of adequate contextual and cultural adaptation: teachers struggled to implement SEL in the classroom, due in part to the lack of collaboration with teachers themselves to ensure SEL content and concepts were rooted in contextually and culturally relevant principles and beliefs (described above).

- Finally, there were challenges with inconsistent recordkeeping for students at the school level and the ways this hampered efforts to account for enrollment, attendance and demographic data, as well as high levels of program staff turnover and security incidents that complicated efforts to visit participating schools regularly.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Remedial support and SEL programming help governments strengthen their school systems for vulnerable communities, including refugee and IDP students. These results suggest that remedial models like HCT should be supported by donors, host governments and trusted implementing partners.

Education policymakers and other key stakeholders need evidence on the most impactful ways to deliver complementary programs that improve academic and SEL outcomes for crisis-affected children. Education research in crisis contexts must receive the funding necessary to answer immediately urgent questions about day to day needs within these school systems and to develop the longer-term, big picture understanding of the education in emergencies field.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a global situation in which educators and funders must make decisions in the most informed and timely manner possible, all while also planning strategically for long-term recovery. The pandemic has also disrupted learning in a way that could cause serious long-term damage to students without access to evidence-based remedial programs. Effective SEL-based tutoring programs hold the potential to reverse the damage students around the world have absorbed over the past year due to the pandemic and over many years due to conflict. In short, remedial programs like HCT can help get these young people back on track.

Short-term research efforts that fixate on simple, cut and dry answers can often steer researchers and funders toward overly-narrow or erroneous conclusions. Researchers, practitioners, donors and governments must each commit themselves to rigorous research in crisis contexts and create the time these research efforts need to build and share evidence with the thoroughness required. This is the approach that has the potential to push the entire humanitarian field to a more informed, effective place.

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We offer the following series of recommendations.

FOR HOSTING GOVERNMENTS: Open the doors of public schools to refugee and IDP children and include them in education sector plans, ensuring their enrollment, attendance, learning and retention. To ensure they succeed in schools:

- **Support complementary programs such as remedial tutoring** focused on both academic and SEL instruction (specifically Mindfulness) and implemented by trusted partners that can promote learning and retention.

  » Over time, consider including remedial tutoring and the Mindfulness program within a broader network of schools so that more students benefit from these programs' demonstrated impacts, especially on academic learning outcomes.

- **Put teachers at the center**. Teachers must be involved in education planning and programming to ensure processes are contextually and culturally adapted. Teachers are well-positioned to ensure that content is both straightforward to teach in the classroom and will be culturally relevant for them and their students. When teachers are sent to work with curricular content that aligns with their values, priorities and skill-levels, they are more likely to teach it well. This dynamic should help shape curricular planning and adaptation and teacher professional development.

- **Collect quality data**. Develop and ensure all education stakeholders use education management information systems to generate data that can help improve the quality of education services and learning.

  » **Communicate and collaborate**. Allow trusted researchers and practitioners to access public school student data so they can better understand which complementary programs are most necessary or could be most effective to improve children's learning outcomes.

  » **Eyes on attendance**. Do not stop at enrollment when measuring student access to these programs but instead put in place strategies that facilitate stronger attendance and that monitor and address attendance problems throughout each school term.

FOR DONORS: Fund research as part of education programs in contexts with large numbers of refugees and IDPs and with other broad and profound systemic breakdowns. Create and sustain a culture of learning and improving by funding education in crises quickly and for mult-year periods.

PHOTO CREDIT: THE IRC

- **Invest for impact and improvement**. To meaningfully spur innovation, commit to multi-year funding that supports design, implementation and the full gamut of research, including qualitative, quantitative, evaluation, measurement and cost research.

  » **Ask all the questions**. Research should not only focus on what works but how, for whom, under what conditions and at what cost.

» **Dosage impacts delivery**. It takes time for teachers to become adept at delivering SEL content, whether explicit or comprehensive, and for children to develop the right skills. Invest in programs and measurement over longer periods of time so they have a better opportunity to more effectively gauge whether something works.

» **Measurement matters**. SEL is 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 help 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 and 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.

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APPENDIX I

Within each of the 15 pairs, we randomized each school to one of two group: (1) Tutoring in a Healing Classroom (HCT); (2) HCT programming with skill-targeted social-emotional learning (SEL) activities: In Year 1, Mindfulness (Cycle 1) and Brain Games (Cycle 2). In Niger Year 2, this initial randomization of schools to treatment conditions was preserved. However, because a previously participating school dropped from the study due to the security threats, the school paired with this school was also excluded from the study to maintain the integrity of randomization. As a result, the Year 2 research sample consists of 28 schools, 14 in each condition (HCT versus HCT + Brain Games).

Within each school, we identified all second through fourth grade students eligible to participate in remedial programming based on low scores (2 or lower, "emerging literacy/numeracy") on both ASER French and ASER math screening tests (Year 1: N= 4,994; Year 2: N=5,915). Qualifying students were randomly assigned to access to the tutoring condition (HCT or HCT + SEL depending on the condition of the school: Year 1: N = 1,800; Year 2: N = 2,022). Eligible students who were not assigned to the tutoring programming conditions had access to their public school services only and served as the business-as-usual control condition for testing the impacts of HCT on academic outcomes. Students who were assigned to tutoring condition (HCT or HCT + SEL) participated in more extensive research data collection, which included a comprehensive set of SEL outcomes.

TABLE 1. Treatment contrast for different treatment arms

	CONTROL GROUP	HCT	HCT Y1 CYCLE 1	HCT + SEL FULL YEAR 1	HCT + SEL YEAR 2
Public School	X	X	X	X	X
HCT		X	X	X	X
Mindfulness			11 weeks	11 weeks	
Brain Games				11 weeks	21 weeks

Table 1 describes the treatment arms, but does not describe the treatment contrasts (comparison of arm) per se.
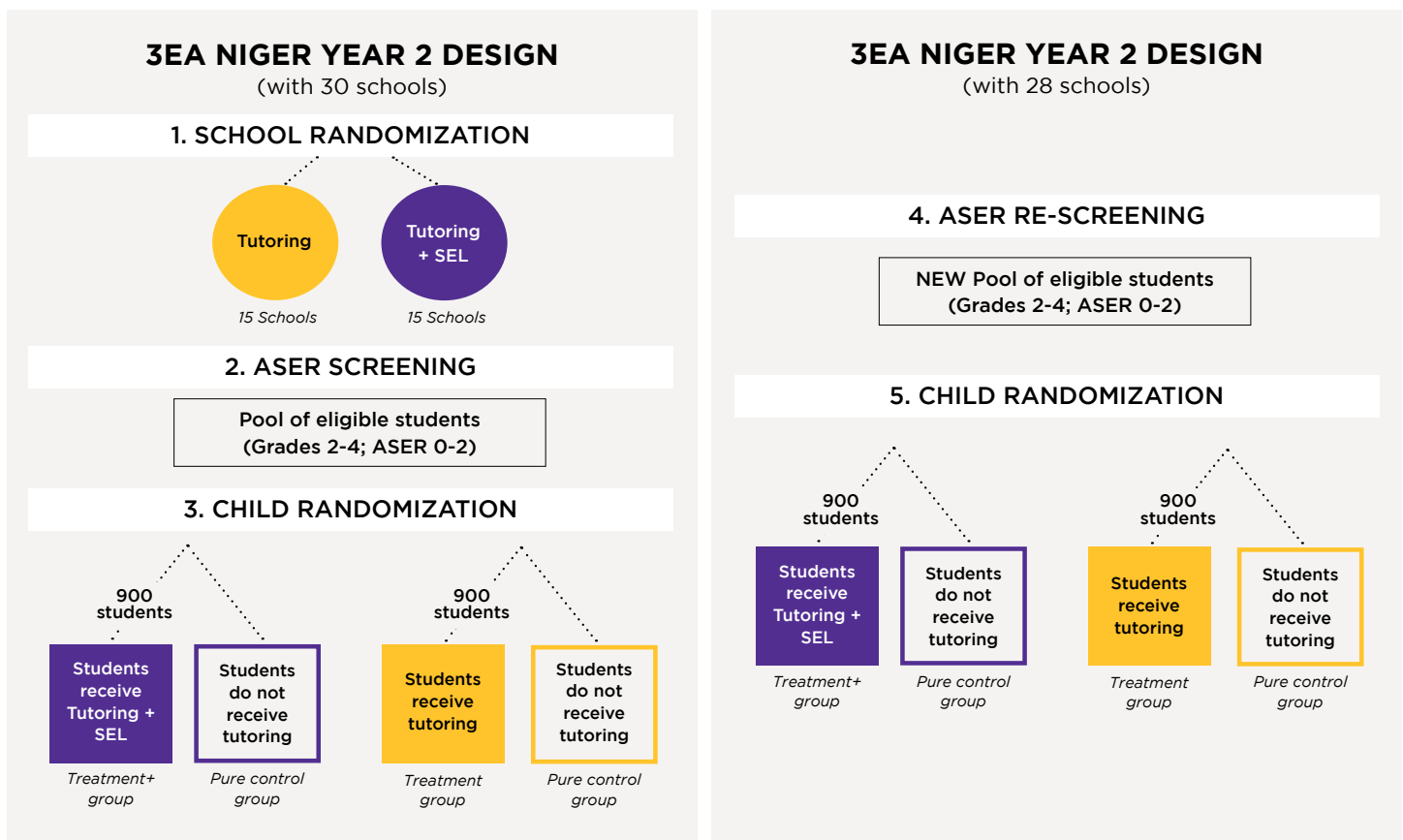
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Dubai Cares is a flagship partner of the 3EA initiative, a five-year program enabling global education actors to ensure that children in crisis-affected settings attend safe and predictable schools and gain the reading, math and social-emotional skills 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.