3EA | EDUCATION IN EMERGENCIES
EVIDENCE FOR ACTION

INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE

NYU GLOBAL TIES FOR CHILDREN

دبي العطاء
Dubai **Cares**

RESEARCH BRIEF

Supporting Teachers in Crisis Contexts: Implementation Research in Sierra Leone

INTRODUCTION

The IRC has supported emergency operations and relief programs in Sierra Leone since the peak of that country's civil war, which devastated the country from 1991 through 2002. Since its arrival to Sierra Leone in 1999, the IRC has reached an estimated two million beneficiaries across that country with an emphasis on the implementation of programs focused on health and education.

Although the people of Sierra Leone have made tremendous progress in rebuilding their country since the end of the civil war, the challenges they face remain daunting. Sierra Leone was buffeted by the 2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa, which claimed nearly 4,000 lives across the country and shuttered a school system that was already struggling in the face of limited resources.[1] The more entrenched crises facing the Sierra Leonean education system are reflected in alarmingly low literacy rates, with more than half of the adult population deemed illiterate.[2]

The population that the IRC and its partners serve in Sierra Leone is distinct from those they serve elsewhere in several important ways. Chief among these differences is that there is not a large population of refugee and internally displaced children currently living in Sierra Leone. At the same time, the core challenge of strengthening an education system that serves a traumatized and impoverished population with severely limited resources mirrors the experience of the IRC and its partners in other crisis contexts in West Africa and throughout the world.

As part of its efforts to meet the education needs of children in Sierra Leone and bring about a more evidence-based approach to education in emergency settings globally, the IRC and NYU Global TIES for Children conducted an implementation study to evaluate its programming in that country during the 2017-18 school year. Several key lessons learned from that research, specifically as they relate to the importance of and challenges around teacher professional development, are the focus of this brief.

PHOTO CREDIT: THE IRC

3EA IN SIERRA LEONE

The education programming explored in this brief was launched as part of the Education in Emergencies, Evidence for Action (3EA) research-practice partnership between the IRC and NYU Global TIES for Children (NYU TIES). In addition to Sierra Leone the partnership has also implemented and evaluated education programming in Niger and Lebanon.

Across each of these contexts 3EA has endeavored to improve learning outcomes for children and strengthen education systems more broadly while gathering and analyzing evidence about what works, how, for whom, under what conditions and at what cost. In recent years, these efforts have resulted in research and impact studies about the partnership's work in Lebanon and Niger. Researchers with 3EA also evaluated the implementation of the Learn Safe in Bo program in Sierra Leone. Working with about 5,700 students and 241 teachers at 24 primary schools across the Bo district of Sierra Leone, Learn Safe sought to strengthen teacher instructional practices around literacy and social-emotional learning. Researchers then collected quantitative and qualitative data to better understand what factors promote and/or impede implementation of programs like Learn Safe in resource-constrained contexts and what insights may be of use to the wider education in emergencies field.

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RESEARCH DESIGN

This research conducted in Sierra Leone focused on implementation of Learn Safe programming. By focusing on the ways that the key actors of Learning Coaches, Head Teachers and Teachers perceive contextual and implementation challenges for a program like Learn Safe, 3EA researchers gained several valuable insights.

The research conducted by 3EA Sierra Leone aimed to answer the following questions:

- How does a teacher classroom observation tool function in the Sierra Leonean context?

- What factors enable or constrain the implementation of teacher professional development competencies in Sierra Leone?

The IRC's teacher observation tools, the TCO, was selected as a focal point of this research because observation protocols aligned with key program components present a potentially powerful method for capturing data about the quality of program implementation. Fifty teachers and eight learning coaches were interviewed about factors related to program implementation, including their usage of the classroom observation tool. Learning Coaches logged monthly observation data of teachers using the observation tool and teachers recorded information about their implementation activities, such as the number and type of SEL activities they used with students and student attendance.

WHAT WE LEARNED

- **Professional development is essential.** Clear and ongoing support for teachers and other school officials are powerful factors in driving faithful implementation and positive program outcomes. Among those surveyed, Learning Coaches, Head Teachers and Teachers all expressed a keen desire for additional training to support the professional development of teachers and reach improved academic and SEL outcomes for students. Teachers and Learning Coaches specifically stated their desire for more time in the trainings, which would allow them additional opportunities to digest the concepts—some of which, like SEL, were new—and to practice them. Observation data also suggested that teachers would benefit from additional support implementing interactive instructional strategies, such as conducting classroom talk. While Learning Coaches in the region were able to cite these areas for improvement in interviews, data suggested that they were more likely to focus on small, discrete skills in their observation debriefs, such as spelling and writing legibly on the chalk board. This suggests that teacher development goes beyond their own learning; coach skills such as being able to prioritize and address high-leverage skills for student learning is also important.

  While the importance of high quality teacher training was clear throughout, several complicating factors did emerge. High rates of teacher turnover, due in part to a lack of government salaries for some teachers in the region, limited the reach of investments in teacher training. Additionally, while ongoing professional development supports like coaching and Teacher Learning Circles were found to be helpful as troubleshooting mechanisms, they were not especially effective substitutes for more foundational training focused on instructional practice, such as building subject matter expertise for teachers.

  Interviews with Teachers and Learning Coaches also suggest that specific contextual challenges and practices should be accounted for when designing professional development packages. For example, it was not standard for teachers to be paid for the time they spent in all-day trainings. Conditions like this can have a significant impact on participation in and attitudes toward trainings in contexts like Sierra Leone in which teachers are often community volunteers or paid very little and are compelled to decide between attending an all-day training for which they are not directly compensated or engaging in more immediately beneficial work opportunities.

PHOTO CREDIT: THE IRC

- **Measurement tools that observe teachers can strengthen implementation quality.** Developing and using measurement tools aligned with key program components that accurately and reliably observe how teachers are performing in the classroom are a powerful way to measure how program components are being implemented. The data produced by these observations can then be used as the basis for teacher feedback. Observation tools that are specifically aligned to gauging high quality program implementation are valuable because they help separate ineffective program design from ineffective implementation, as well as provide insight as to where teachers may need additional support.

- **Attendance matters.** The students involved in this research attended only 60 percent of the intended school days for the program. Both student and teacher absenteeism are challenges in any educational system and occur at higher rates in fragile, low-resource contexts. Absenteeism at the level observed in Sierra Leone impacts the amount or "dosage" of the program that students receive and can impede and can therefore reduce the intended benefits of the program. Low attendance should be accounted for in the program design phase and program implementers should incorporate approaches focused on limiting how much high rates of absenteeism can shape key outcomes.

- **Digitize data in real time and throughout the life of a program.** The intense limits on resources in contexts like Sierra Leone also applies to the collection of program information. Due to limits on technology, utilities like electricity and internet, and the remoteness of program sites, information about the program was often collected analog and manually digitized. This consumed a significant amount of valuable time and introduced opportunities for error. Due to these challenges, data collected were not used in a timely manner to either course-correct or provide on-site technical support as effectively as possible. Ensuring key data is collected in a manner that allows for quick digitization and analysis when possible is a small but valuable step that would help ensure programmatic data is used to diagnose, monitor and improve programming.

WHAT NEXT?

Much of the data gathered and analyzed for Sierra Leone can help improve education in emergencies programming in other fragile contexts. For example, the idea of "contextualization" in these discussions is often assumed to be focused on the thematic details of instructional content and the language of instruction. But the findings in Sierra Leone are a reminder that another key element of any educational context is the professional development levels of its teachers and how it is important that programs be designed to account for a range of teacher skill and training levels. This has ramifications for the type of personnel hired for any program and the different packages of professional development support made available to participating schools.

This study also served as a reminder of how the collection of quantitative data around dosage and qualitative data around factors enabling or hindering program implementation are both essential for the faithful implementation of programs and the broader strengthening of the education in emergencies field. Data that provides a clear and accurate picture of what components of the program teachers are implementing, how often, and at what quality levels must be a part of education in emergencies project. Without that information and clarity, it becomes impossible to effectively monitor and improve these interventions in real time.

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ENDNOTES

1   Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2019). 2014-2016 *Ebola Outbreak in West Africa.*
    https://www.cdc.gov/vhf/ebola/history/2014-2016-outbreak/index.html
2   The World Bank. (2020). *Literacy rate, adult total (% of people ages 15 and above) – Sierra Leone.*
    https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.LITR.ZS?locations=SL