DESCRIPTION OF CRISIS-SPECIFIC CHALLENGE

Ensuring high-quality formal schooling at scale is difficult under the best of circumstances. In the case of Lebanon, a country dealing with a large influx of refugee children affected by violence and conflict - resulting in the doubling of the student population within four years - such a task presents a near-insurmountable challenge.

In response to this unprecedented influx of refugees, billions of dollars and hundreds of international humanitarian agencies and NGOs have flowed in to Lebanon. While many beneficial programs have been implemented within the education sector, efficiency in providing quality education has suffered from fragmented coordination both within and across agencies. In addition, many NGOs’ solution of utilizing pre-packaged, trademarked curricular packages—optimized to implement quickly, under crisis conditions—hinders programs’ integration into the existing educational frameworks in more protracted crises.

The education in emergencies field, where there are great needs for efficient and rapid provision of effective services, needs to move from fragmented service provision of pre-packaged, inflexible curricula to evidence-based “essential ingredients” of educational interventions that can be easily adapted and integrated into multiple contexts. Our study investigates a teacher and coach professional development approach that is flexible, easily integrated into existing school curricula, and agnostic with regard to curricular approach.

BRIEF OVERVIEW

Actors, partners, context, target population:

In the 2019-2020 school year, the Lebanese Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE), with the support of the World Bank (WB) and TIES/NYU, will mount a randomized field experiment to test the impact of their new teacher professional development program on Syrian refugee and vulnerable Lebanese students. Specifically, partners will work with first-shift, middle-grades (4-8), English, Science, and French subject coaches in the Department of Scholastic and Pedagogical Guidance (DOPS).

All English, French, and Science (Biology) coaches who work with teachers in grades four through eight will participate in the study, pending consent. Within each subject area, coaches will be randomized to the treatment or control condition. Coaches assigned to the control condition will continue their “business as usual” coaching practices. Coaches assigned to the treatment condition will undergo training in the focal core practices and coaching strategies described in the program section below.

Methodology, approach and duration:

In most countries, there is no coherent infrastructure for teacher professional development, but rather a “patchwork of opportunities—formal and informal, mandatory and voluntary, serendipitous and planned” (Wilson & Berne 1999, 174). Such a patchwork often provides conflicting signals to teachers about priority classroom instruction and goals while limiting opportunities to practice and apply content and pedagogical skills. This is particularly relevant in Lebanon, where there are both historically autonomous departments within the education system and a multitude of international actors providing professional development services outside of it.

In addition to the fragmented approach, lack of attention to teacher professional development presents a major challenge in providing quality education. Typical program delivery models often operate with an assumption that teachers are
equipped with competence in core teaching practices to implement a new concept or curriculum. However, it is often the case that teachers in crisis settings lack basic training and skills, impeding their ability to successfully implement interventions. For example, we found in our multi-country initiative (inclusive of Lebanon) designed to test the effectiveness of low-cost, targeted social-emotional learning activities that a critical part of the intervention’s theory of change was either omitted entirely or poorly-performed by teachers across all country contexts due to lack of teacher comfort with core instructional practices such as conducting classroom conversations (3EA, 2018). Utilizing a flexible and adaptable approach—one that can endure as curricular approaches shift and change—this study seeks to find educational solutions to crisis contexts that can integrate at scale.

The program
We focus our study on the development of a set core teacher practices: high-leverage practices that (1) occur with high frequency in teaching, (2) cut across different curricula or instructional approaches, (3) are research-based, and (4) have the potential to improve student achievement (McDonald, Kazemi, & Kavanaugh, 2013).

In Lebanon, a set of pilot teacher practices (Instructional Dialogue, Critical Thinking, and Metacognition) were derived from the existing Lebanese Teacher Competency Framework by a subset of DOPS Coaches and Coordinators. The working group then utilized video captured from Lebanese classrooms to create a quality spectrum (i.e., an observation tool) of each pilot focal practice, to be used as the foundation of classroom observations and feedback for the duration of the study. The utilization of this DOPS-developed tool is both to create a shared vision and language of teacher instruction within DOPS as well as to encourage a more coherent and standardized professional development experience for teachers across content areas and grade levels.

Existing DOPS coaches within the eligible grade levels and subject areas in the treatment condition will attend a total of seven days of training on the use of the DOPS observation tool and pedagogical/coaching strategies for each focal practice. Trainings are co-constructed and co-facilitated by DOPS subject area coordinators, in order to increase institutional ownership, contextual fit, and sustainability of the program. Trained coaches will hold monthly coaching sessions with teachers, focusing on the pilot core practices and utilizing the newly-developed observation tool.

EVIDENCE AND OUTCOMES
In the U.S. and other developed contexts, research has demonstrated that teachers’ instruction is responsive to professional development on core practices (Cohen et al. 2016) and that teachers who perform core practices at higher levels increase student gains on rigorous assessments (Grossman et al. 2014). However, to our knowledge, there has been little to no research on whether these effects extend to emergency or LMIC contexts.

The current study focuses on experimentally assessing the impact of a core-practice based professional development approach at the coach and teacher level, given: (1) coaches’ pivotal role in supporting teachers; (2) the dearth of research on how to support effective coaching; and (3) the challenges coaches face in providing quality services to teachers, particularly when coaching services are scaled to the systems level (Kraft et al. 2018).

Primarily, the research will test the causal impact of an improved teacher professional development coaching system based on contextualized, flexible core practices compared to the business-as-usual condition. Specific outcomes include coach satisfaction and content knowledge, observed teacher instructional practice, and student perceptions of teacher quality. Two observation tools will be utilized in the study to understand the critical role of classroom processes: the validated Protocol for Language Arts Teaching Observations (Grossman et al. 2013), as well as the newly-developed DOPS-created tool. Utilizing both data sets together will allow us to investigate the psychometric properties of the DOPS tool.

Data on coach attendance at trainings, frequency of teacher coaching sessions, and utilization of core-practice based activities/strategies will be collected to understand the critical importance of implementation quality and quantity, including its potential downstream effects on impacts. In addition to this quantitative data collection, focal groups will be held with coaches and teachers to better understand participants’ experience with the new coaching system, inclusive of its affordances and constraints.
LIMITATIONS, CHALLENGES, AND/OR LESSONS LEARNED

One challenge has been the historical separation of mandates within the government of Lebanon. In-service teachers’ trainings are led by the Center for Educational Research and Development (CERD). However, CERD does not have the mandate to provide follow-up support to teachers in schools; that is in the mandate of counsellors from the DOPS. Thus, coaches are often not aware of the content of trainings and do not have access to resources to reinforce the goals thereof. This creates considerable misalignment within the teacher professional development system.

A second challenge has been the sheer quantity and competing interests of multiple agencies working with the MEHE. In the absence of planning and coordination within the sector, teachers and coaches are over-extended, unclear about priority practices, and struggle to find the time and space to implement them with quality. These competing priorities have reduced the availability of DOPS coaches and subject coordinators for trainings and workshops as well as the intervention period as a whole. Though research indicates that teachers require approximately 50 hours of professional development to acquire new practices (Yoon et al. 2007), the combined hours of training, practice, and supported implementation will likely fall short of that threshold in this intervention.

REFERENCES


