

Comprehensive Social Emotional Learning Intervention with Syrian Refugee Children: Impact Variation by Pre- and Post-Migration Conflict Experiences

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Background

Refugee children undergo profound social-emotional and cognitive challenges while dealing with memory of war violence and navigating unpredictable and conflict-prone family, school, and community settings¹. Quality education with social-emotional learning (SEL) support has been shown to have measurable effects on improving children's social-emotional outcomes in the US², and is now enthusiastically embraced by the global humanitarian sector as a solution for supporting refugee children's psychosocial development and adaptation³. However, limited evidence is available to understand which and how SEL programming works in crisis settings. In addition, there are varying levels of adversity and sources of conflict-related experience that refugee children face and therefore, common "one-size-fits-all" SEL programs may have differential impacts on children with different levels of vulnerability. This study reports the impacts of classroom-based SEL programs designed to provide comprehensive social-emotional support for Syrian refugee children in Lebanon, and explores the variations in impacts by children's pre- and post-migration conflict experiences: exposure to war violence, school victimization, and family conflict.

Research questions

- (1) Does the comprehensive SEL intervention improve children's social-emotional outcomes?
- (2) Do impacts of the comprehensive SEL intervention vary by children's conflict-related experiences: war experience, school victimization, and family conflict?

Setting and participants

Across the Akkar and Bekaa regions of Lebanon, 57 refugee community sites were recruited, and retention support programs were run in 169 classrooms. The data are derived from the intent-to-treat sample of the evaluation study (N=3,661). Participants were children aged 5 to 16 ($M=9.38$, $SD=2.27$) who were identified as currently attending Lebanese public schools in grades one to seven ($M=2.85$, $SD=1.61$).

¹ Lawson, 2012; Reed, Fazel, Jones, Panter-Brick, & Stein, 2012

² Durlak et al., 2011

³ Lawson, 2012

Intervention

During the 2017-2018 school year, the IRC delivered Learning in a Healing Classroom (HC) retention support programming to Syrian refugee children eight hours a week. *Healing Classrooms* integrates classroom SEL principles and practices — such as classroom management, critical thinking, and positive pedagogy — into Arabic literary, numeracy, and second language instruction. To provide ongoing support, all teachers received regular mentoring visits and attended monthly peer-support groups. In addition, IRC also developed and delivered a comprehensive SEL program (HC SEL) which targeted five core social-emotional skills: brain building, emotion regulation, positive social skills, conflict resolution, and perseverance. The program consists of 30-minute daily, explicit lessons focused on improving the five target skills added onto the HC Basic programming. Teachers in the treatment sites received additional five-day training and coaching and peer-support on the HC SEL program delivery.

Research Design

Programming was delivered from November 2017 to May 2018, during which time two versions of Healing Classrooms were tested using a large cluster-randomized controlled trial (CRCT). Of 57 sites, 28 sites were randomly assigned to receive the HC Basic and 29 sites were randomly assigned to receive the HC SEL program.

Data Collection

Students were individually assessed through verbal interviews by trained local assessors twice across the academic year (November and May). Data were collected on children's: (1) executive function (teacher report⁴, performance-based assessment⁵), (2) emotion identification⁶, and knowledge⁷ (scenario-based assessments), (3) social problems and positive classroom behaviors (teacher report⁸) (4) conflict-resolution skills including hostile attribution bias, emotional orientation and dysregulation, and interpersonal negotiation strategies (scenario-based assessment⁹), (5) behavioral regulation (assessor report¹⁰), (6) mental health outcomes including internalizing symptoms¹¹ and affect¹² (self-report), and (7) conflict experience: perceived public school victimization, war experience, and family conflict (self-report).

Analysis

Analyses were conducted using a series of structural equation models including a longitudinally-invariant measurement model of each measure for baseline and endline. Nested structure of the data was accounted for by adjusting standard errors for classroom clustering and missing data

⁴ Brain Games Executive Function Teacher Survey (BGEF): Jones, unpublished manuscript

⁵ Rapid Assessment of Cognitive and Emotional Regulation (RACER): Ford et al., 2018

⁶ Feelings and Bodies Questionnaire [tentative title]: Kim, 2019

⁷ Assessment of Children's Emotional Skills (ACES): Schultz et al., 2004

⁸ Teacher observation of Classroom Adaptation – Checklist (TOCA-C): Koth et al., 2009

⁹ Social Emotional Response and Information Scenarios (SERAIS): Kim & Dolan, 2019

¹⁰ Preschool Self-regulation Assessment—Assessor Report (PSRA-AR): Smith-Donald et al., 2007

¹¹ Arabic Moods & Feelings Questionnaire (MFQ): Tavitian et al., 2014

¹² WHO-5 Well-being index: Topp et al., 2015

were pairwise deleted to preserve the full sample¹³. Various site and child characteristics were included in the models as covariates. Impact variation models were tested using interaction terms between the treatment variable and the conflict experiences.

Results

Impact analyses suggested significant positive impacts of the HC SEL program on Syrian refugee children's social-emotional skills. Specifically, children with access to the SEL programs were better able to identify physical manifestations of emotions (Effect Size (ES)=.14, $p<.05$) as well as identify and report negative emotions in social conflict situation (ES=.14, $p<.001$) while reporting no difference in expression of dysregulated emotion (ES=.04, $p=.52$) nor use of aggression (ES=-.07, $p=.27$), compared to control group children. In addition, HC SEL group children endorsed higher level of use of conflict-resolution strategies than HC Basic group (ES=.14, $p<.05$). However, we found no differences in children's cognitive skills nor mental health outcomes between treatment and control group.

Findings from impact variation analysis suggests that, while all three conflict experiences significantly predicted most of the children's social-emotional outcomes, the HC SEL program impacts are consistent across all Syrian refugee children regardless of their conflict experiences. One exception to these findings was such that children who experienced higher level of family conflict showed higher level of positive classroom behaviors, when compared to the children who reported lower level of family conflict ($b=.08$, $p<.05$, Figure 1).

Conclusions

The findings suggest that the HC SEL program have positive impacts on children's knowledge and awareness of emotions and conflict resolution strategies but not on other targeted social emotional skills—including cognitive and behavioral regulation skills. The results also reveal that the program impacts are largely consistent across all Syrian refugee children regardless of their conflict experiences. These findings will be used to inform adaptation of programs and practice to best support all Syrian refugee children's holistic development

¹³ Asparouhov & Muthén, 2010

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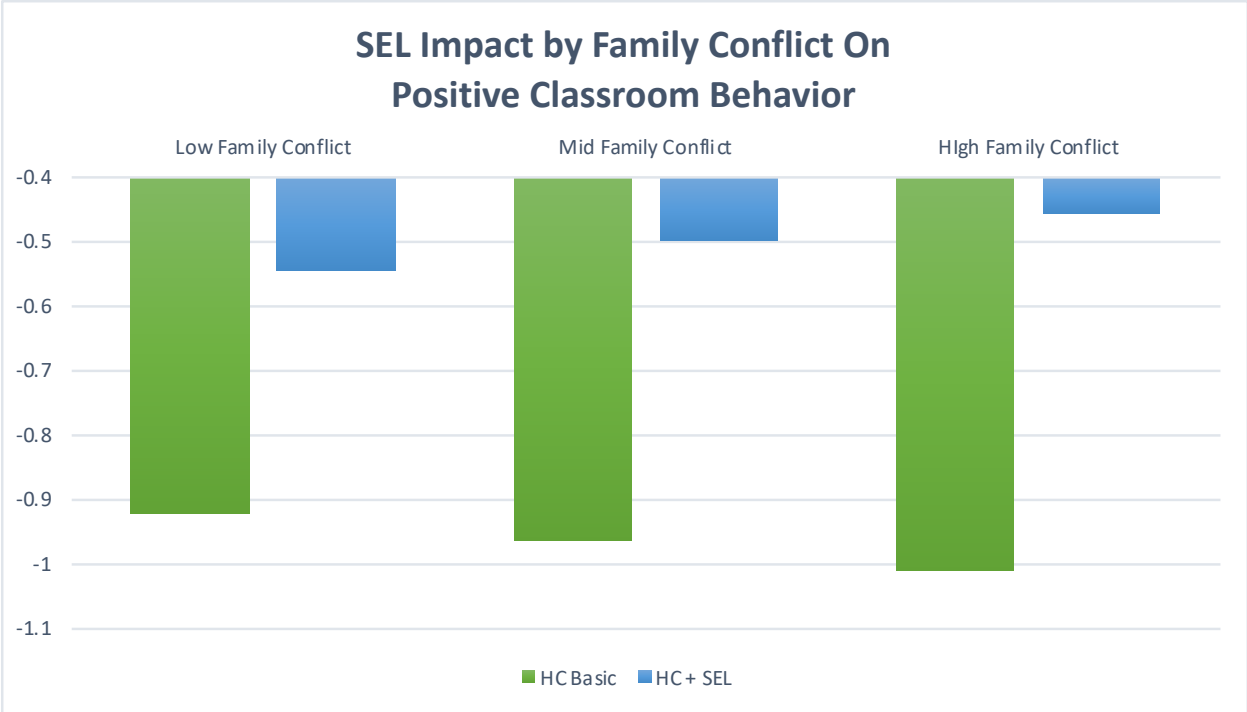


Figure 1. SEL program impact on teacher-reported of positive classroom behavior varied by the level of family conflict experience by children.

