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**Building an evidence base on school-based strategies to promote the learning and development of children in conflict-affected countries: What works and why?**

**Presenting Author**

J. Lawrence Aber

**Affiliation**

Global TIES for Children, New York University

**Country of residence**

United States of America

**Objectives/aims**

Twenty-two per cent of the world’s children live in conflict-affected countries. How can the international humanitarian sector and the research community collaborate to design and rigorously test strategies that promote children’s academic learning and social-emotional development in such settings? The aim of this presentation is to introduce participants to the progress to date of an ambitious multiyear program of impact evaluations and related research that test both whole school strategies and low-cost targeted strategies. I will describe (1) how a school-cluster randomized trial of one such such intervention in the eastern DR Congo led to new policy, practice and research questions about adapted interventions, (2) recent results of two new impact evaluations in Lebanon and Niger which directly follow up the questions raised by the trial in the DR Congo, and (3) lessons learned from the work to date about the opportunities and challenges to understanding what works, how and for whom in school-based interventions in conflict-affected countries.

**Methods**

The basic research methodologies used in all three countries are school-randomized trials of ”Learning in Healing Classrooms” (LHC), an innovative approach to teacher training and coaching to implement a new curriculum in literacy and numeracy that is infused with strategies to promote children’s social and emotional learning. In the DRC, 140 schools were randomly assigned to roll out the intervention staring in 2011, 2012 or 2013. This wait-list, cluster randomized design enabled us to implement a scientifically rigorous study in an ethically sound and community sensitive way. The subsequent trials in Niger and Lebanon use similar field experimental methods but are adapted to test new critical features of the program’s theory of change. Specifically, we collect much more data on quality of implementation and on contextual and developmental processes hypothesized to mediate the impact of the intervention on children’s academic and social-emotional learning.

**Main findings**

After one year of intervention, Learning in Healing Classrooms (1) improved children’s perceptions of how safe and supportive their school environments are, (2) improved children’s reading skills by 3-4 months and math skills by 9-10 months of growth, but (3) did not improve children’s mental health problems or experiences of peer victimization. Unfortunately, after two years, all these gains faded out. These findings in DR Congo set the stage for the new trials in Niger and Lebanon. In this new work, we focus on whether (a) the impacts of LHC on children’s reading and math scores can be replicated in two new countries/contexts, (b) low-cost targeted interventions added to Learning in Healing Classrooms improves children’s mental health and peer victimization, and (c) whether quality of implementation can help explain heterogeneity of impacts. The answers to questions a, b and c will be available by summer 2018.