



CLEAR Initiative

**COVID-19 Leadership Response
in Vulnerable Settings**

Photo credit: Anjal Alliance

Adapting social and emotional learning programs for refugee children during COVID-19

By Megan Mattes, with James Radner, Nathaniel Foote
and Jasjeet Ajimal

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TRUEPOINT

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This brief is part of a series of case summaries designed to spotlight and draw lessons from the extraordinary stories of local leaders working in low-resource settings to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, and to the economic and human effects of COVID-19 restrictions. The briefs have been developed through qualitative interviews with local leaders; they include accounts of specific responses along with reflections on their broader implications.

The case brief series is part of the CLEAR program, an initiative of the TruePoint Center. CLEAR collaborates with local leaders to document, extend and enhance effective responses to COVID-19 in low-resource settings. The CLEAR team believes these stories are powerful learning tools, exemplifying how local leaders are working with their communities to adapt and innovate amidst the crisis, in ways that sustain and extend human services, deliver continued and new benefits for individuals and families, and build community resilience. The preparation of this case brief series is supported by Grand Challenges Canada (funded in turn by the Government of Canada) and a lead private donor.

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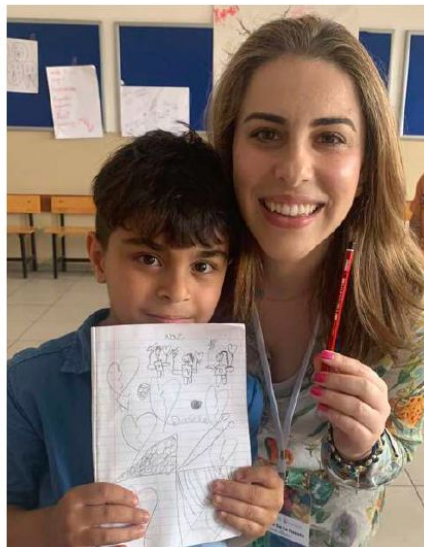


PART 1: BASICS

THE LEADER: DANIELLE DE LA FUENTE

Starting her career at the Department of Defence in the USA, Danielle De La Fuente worked on fostering relationships and cooperation between the USA and governments in the Middle East. Finding that so many of the conflicts she worked on were deep-rooted, Ms. De La Fuente found herself wondering: why does conflict resolution and peace building happen so late in a conflict's chain of events? Could some of this conflict be avoided by teaching principle of peace and conflict resolution much earlier in life? To explore these questions, Ms. De La Fuente went back to school for a Master's in Peace and Conflict Studies.

After completing her program, Ms. De La Fuente started to explore ways in which she could apply her knowledge. Deeply concerned about intergenerational trauma and the plight of child refugees face, and drawing on her experience teaching yoga classes for children, Ms. De La Fuente decided to launch a new organization with a mission to empower displaced children, and with yoga and mindfulness programs as starting points.



Danielle De La Fuente
Photo credit: Amal Alliance

THE ORGANIZATION: AMAL ALLIANCE

Ms. De La Fuente started working to build Amal Alliance in 2017. Initially, people were sceptical: yoga for refugees – aren't there more urgent needs to address? But based on her experience, Ms. De La Fuente saw the emotional and social challenges children from conflict settings face as central to their development and viewed yoga and mindfulness training as a building blocks towards a holistic program adapted for work with those children.

Ms. De La Fuente took her first step in building the Amal Alliance by traveling to Greece. While completing her yoga teacher training there, she spent time meeting children living in refugee camps on Greek islands. By speaking to hundreds of children and hearing their stories, Ms. De La Fuente refined the idea for her organization. The next step was to bring in expertise in areas she herself didn't specialize in – dance therapy and art therapy, for example. Though the budding organization was on a shoestring budget, Ms. De La Fuente was able to recruit specialists who were enthusiastic about the mission.

In 2018, the Amal Alliance launched its key program: the Rainbow of Education. The Rainbow of Education program seeks to help children develop foundational social skills and emotional competencies through programming that is always fun. Each color of the rainbow represents a different emotional competency – for example, green for compassion, blue for empathy. Each color is the focus of one month of the six-month course.

Each day begins with an energizer game to get kids excited – and to get their energy out. The group then sits down and children are given a chance to check in and share how they're feeling, which helps build the habit of identifying and sharing their emotions. Then comes the main activity: arts and crafts, dance, creative writing, or reading, for example. The five main activities repeat each week so that children can look forward to each activity on its assigned day of the week. Afterwards, the teacher discusses the values taught in the activity, allowing children to reflect on what they learned. The teacher then closes out the day by leading children in meditation.



Photo credit: Amal Alliance

Ms. De La Fuente and her team first launched an early version of their program in Greece, training representatives from local NGOs and women who resided in refugee camps themselves. This first cohort of nine individuals – including one man – went on to deliver the program to 350 children. The program’s mindfulness training didn’t just help the children – it also helped several of the program’s teachers to process and heal from trauma. One woman in this cohort shared with Ms. De La Fuente that the breath work and yoga training had helped her to sleep at night without nightmares for the first time in several years.

News of the program’s effectiveness spread, and Ms. De La Fuente soon received calls from colleagues in Lebanon requesting launch of the program there. Securing Rotary International as a funding partner to support the launch, Amal Alliance rolled out their Rainbow of Education program in Lebanon in October 2018, delivered in Arabic. The Lebanon cohort had 30 trainees who went on to deliver the program to 450 children.

From then on, the Amal Alliance’s model was solidified: they partnered with local organizations to train their members, sharing with them the curriculum and resources required to implement the program within their community. Amal Alliance then continues to stay involved to support implementation and ongoing operations through WhatsApp groups and Facebook groups. Through these communication channels, program instructors can seek support from the Amal team when something isn’t working as planned within their classroom. This has helped the Amal team to iterate and improve upon the original Rainbow of Education model, improving it significantly over time.



Video credit: Amal Alliance

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We trained women from the refugee camps themselves as well as the local NGOs. Then it just spread like wildfire because the program was really designed with the beneficiaries in mind and with local input.

Danielle De La Fuente

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PART 2: STORY

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

When the pandemic hit in March, all Rainbow of Education classes were shut down. Because the classes operated out of centres belonging to other organizations, Amal Alliance had no control over when they could be re-opened. More generally, the refugee camps and service centres were in effect closed down. Not wanting to abandon their mission, the small Amal Alliance team decided to try to create an alternative to the in-person classes – something that could be delivered straight to children in their homes.

ADAPTING TO COVID-19

Down to a team of three employees at Amal Alliance, Ms. De La Fuente reached out to a handful of organizations she admired to suggest they combine efforts. This led to the formation of a consortium of four organizations working together on helping children learn in times of crisis. They knew that refugee families were now trapped in confined settings, with no one able to come in or out, and anxiety riding high. As Ms. De la Fuente put it, after a week of intensive brainstorming, the team decided to “send them a voice note that provides them with coping mechanisms and activities that they can do in these small spaces with nothing else.” Working together, they quickly produced a [podcast](#) series of six audio files distributed through WhatsApp. Though not everyone in the target audience owned a phone, one phone could be shared between families to deliver the podcasts as many times as needed.



Photo credit: Amal Alliance

As an example, one podcast covers options for games and activities caregivers can play with children in small spaces, such as using sticks to create art in the dirt. After the consortium released the podcasts in English – voiced by Ms. De La Fuente herself – the Qatar Foundation approached the consortium offering to fund its translation into three more languages: Arabic, Spanish, and French. To distribute the podcast, the consortium shared it with 543 organizations; by the end of April 2020, the podcasts had reached 160,000 users.

Following the success of the podcasts, Ms. De La Fuente was contacted by Qatar-based Education Above All with a request for a new product: a learning program for parents so they could in turn teach social-emotional development to their children. This was inherently challenging – for example, Rainbow of Education teachers are trained for a full week by the Amal Alliance before they deliver the program to children – Ms. De La Fuente and the team at Amal Alliance created a program they called the Superhero Academy, the course consists of instructions for three hours' worth of learning material that parents can work through with their children over the course of several days to teach them major concepts of social and emotional learning – in a fun way. The course is available for three age levels – 4 to 7, 8 to 11, and 12 to 14 – each tailored to the age group's ability levels and learning styles. The content is adapted directly from the Rainbow of Education program curriculum and includes games and activities, breathing exercises, and yoga poses. Posted on the Education Above All website's resource bank, Superhero Academy has become one of its most popular resources, and has been downloaded 110,000 times.

With the podcasts and the Superhero Academy underway, Amal Alliance got to work on their third COVID-19 initiative: a proposal in response to the COVID-19 Challenge posed by the Humanitarian Education Accelerator of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Offering funding and support to innovative solutions that could deliver education to marginalized communities, the challenge received about 80 applications. Unsure how far they would get, Ms. De La Fuente and Amal Alliance's proposal advanced through competition in phases, first reaching the top 16, then the top 12, until they became one of the three projects selected for funding to build a prototype.








The new program the Amal Alliance team created through the Accelerator's COVID-19 Challenge is a learning management system called Colors of Kindness. The Alliance originally envisioned a ten-session program that parents could work through with their children, but early in the research and development phase - with Bangladesh as a target region - they realized this would not work, because only about 10% of parents had devices. Furthermore, Ms. De La Fuente discovered that households that did have devices tended to give boys priority. So they shifted gears and designed a program that a teacher – an adult from the refugee camps, often mothers – could deliver to a small group of about six children. The teachers are trained remotely through the Colors of Kindness smartphone and tablet application, and they deliver the ten weekly episodes using the app, with the children in person.

Like the Rainbow of Education program, each Colors of Kindness session teaches a new theme on social and emotional learning. When the teacher presses play on the day's lesson, an audio file starts to play; this audio file structures the lesson, both delivering material and instructing the teacher when to pause for an activity or class discussion. Instructions for each activity are included in the app. Near the end of each lesson, children are asked to self-evaluate how they feel by choosing where they are on the Emotions Thermometer. The audio then provides a take-home activity or task for the students to complete in the coming week.

Designed in three languages – English, Bangla and Rohingya – the prototype was piloted in Bangladesh, both in Dhaka and among Rohingya refugees, and has also attracted interest from the Ministry of Education.

Colors of Kindness: A Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Podcast

Self-Awareness	Ep.1: Identifying Your Emotions Ep.2: Recognizing Your Uniqueness	
Self-Management	Ep.3: Managing Your Emotions Ep.4: Feeling Empowered	
Responsible Decision Making	Ep.5: Setting Your Goals Ep.6: Making Responsible Decisions	
Relationship Building	Ep.7: Communicating Effectively Ep.8: Honoring Others	
Social Awareness	Ep.9: Empathy & Compassion Ep.10: Appreciating Diversity	

Emotions Thermometer

Each week, we check the student's emotional "temperature." The Emotions Thermometer (right) is included in the digital workbook.

- Ask each student, **"How do you feel today?"**
- Possible responses: sad, happy, okay, mad, and furious.
- Make sure to **record their answers** on a piece of paper.
- Submit **each student's** response in the Assignments section of the app after each class.

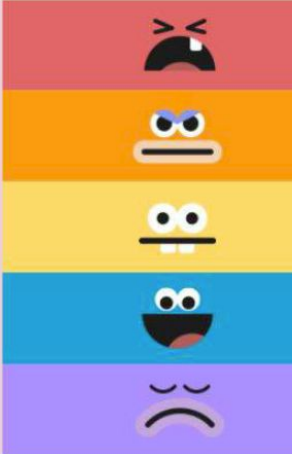


Photo credit: Amal Alliance

PART3: LESSONS

The Amal Alliance's COVID-19 interventions succeeded because the design team understood the highly constrained resources available to caregivers and children in refugee camps, and continually designed programming adapted to those constraints, with a consistent focus on their core objective of promoting social and emotional learning. For example, by delivering lessons through audio files accessed through WhatsApp rather than through worksheets which require paper and a printer to distribute, they were able to reach their audience in a medium they understood and could access.

Even with the new, remote-delivery models required by COVID-19, the program remained true to its core approach of delivering lessons based on exciting and engaging activities – as Ms. De La Fuente put it, “fun.” The new materials packaged social and emotional learning concepts into art, dance, and movement activities that children could connect with and enjoy.

Engaging parents and caregivers into the role of a teacher was another strategy through which the Amal Alliance team ensured that learning material continued to reach children through the height of lockdown. Modified from the Rainbow of Education curriculum, learning material in the podcast and Superhero Academy were redesigned specially for caregivers to deliver, providing children with a good temporary solution until a more robust program could be built.



Though unlikely to suffer direct health impacts from COVID-19, children are indirect victims of the pandemic through induced resource strain on governments. Programs such as Colors of Kindness, says Ms. De La Fuente, can help children handle the emotional challenges of their lives as refugees and as children living through a pandemic, helping children to grow into emotionally healthy adults.



This brief is part of a series from the CLEAR initiative – CCOVID-19 Leadership Response in Vulnerable Settings. To learn more about the CLEAR initiative, visit the TruePoint Center.

<https://www.truepoint.com/truepoint-center>

CLEAR's work has been made possible by:



<https://www.truepoint.com/truepoint-center>



<https://www.grandchallenges.ca>



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Amal Alliance

<https://www.amalalliance.org/>