

Smart Start



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Aim of Our Project and its Impact :

Our project aimed to tackle the lack of a fundamental education for Syrian refugee children in Lebanon--specifically children up to the age of 16 who do not currently attend school or have any formal education. We hoped to provide the children with a Basic Literacy and Numeracy program that would cover English, Arabic, Math, and Sciences. Our second aim was to also provide homework support to Syrian refugee children who currently attend public school, but struggle in Math, Science, and English. The Smart Start Center would also provide the children with opportunities to access recreational activities as well as a quiet place to work and study. Our final aim was to raise awareness about the Syrian refugee crisis through the presentation of *Capernaum*, a film directed by humanitarian activist, Nadine Labaki.

Our proposed project would have a long lasting impact on both Lebanese and Syrian children as our homework support and Basic Literacy and Numeracy programs would target a large population of vulnerable children who lack quality education. Education is the base of development and one of the main assets to develop a society as a whole. In the long term, students who properly continue their studies will have a brighter future and a higher chance of overcoming the reality and challenges they face as refugees. The education of these vulnerable children will also have a positive impact on Lebanon, since the level of illiteratism would decrease and facilitate a smoother social integration into the Lebanese society.

Highlights from our experiences/ Skills and Knowledge gained:

- The implementation and preparation of our project has nourished our knowledge and perception of the Syrian Refugee crisis and their lack of a strong education. To begin with, the process of organizing the fundraiser taught us how communication and reaching out to community members and leaders, like Mrs. Nadine Labaki, is vital for any project.
- Moreover, our multiple visits and interviews with the refugee parents, gave us a deeper insight into what their lives were like and the impact our project would have on their family's lives.
- The process of spreading awareness about our project in the IC community and the students' support and volunteering made our experience a very pleasant one because it tackled our goal of spreading more awareness about the importance of education. So, receiving all the volunteering requests and enthusiasm helped shape our implementation and impact and was also a huge highlight of the project!

- A lot of our organizing and planning skills have improved, such as following deadlines, breaking large tasks into smaller ones, or even organizing events for our projects. For example, we planned a fundraiser in order to use the money gained to help implement our project. At first, most of us did not know how to organize one, but with each other's help and some hard work, we managed to plan a successful fundraiser!
- At first, we did not know how to advertise our own project and so, we learned how to design and create a poster and effectively communicate our project to the International College community.
- This project has not only helped us develop our interpersonal skills but also skills used in teamwork, such as reliance, trust, and collaboration. These skills are a result of every meeting held, every discussion made and our reliance on each other.

The Good and The Bad:

- One challenge our project faced was finding an available space to host our project sessions. We first turned to our own school, International College, to see if we would be granted permission to host our project on campus. After a lengthy discussion with our school principal, president, and advisory board, the school concluded that it would not grant us the access we needed.
- We then turned to the local public school where most of the Syrian refugee children (living in the building next to our school and our future beneficiaries) attend. Once again, the school would not grant us access for the entire community of refugee children living in the building and so we had to search for another location.
- We found a third location, a walk-in cafe in the proximity of both our school and the building, but the renting cost was too high and so this was again, not a viable option.
- Our team also faced several extraneous challenges including the Lebanese Revolution that engulfed our country starting from mid-October till the end of February as well as the COVID-19 outbreak right after that. As a result of the quarantine and lockdown, we were unable to meet as a team, unable to visit the refugee building to conduct further questionnaires, and most importantly it completely hindered our ability to open the center.
- Even with all these challenges, our team managed to have several successes! With the help of the AUB-Beirut Neighborhood Initiative, we were able to identify the building housing the Syrian refugee families. This was a milestone for the project's development, as the children we would later target and teach are solely from that building.
- The fundraising event with Nadine Labaki's movie, *Capernaum*, and the following Q&A session with her (to raise awareness) was another major step forward for the group, as around 960GBP were raised! Because the movie showcased the conditions the uneducated in Lebanon face, the fundraising event also raised awareness throughout the community.
- The group's most recent and proud accomplishment is the location of a learning space for the Syrian refugees we will be educating. This space is a center that was opened by a

currently inactive NGO that has granted us permission to use the space after hearing of our project!

What now?

Although we were sadly unable to implement our project this year, we were, however, able to convince our school to adopt this project! As a result, this project and the opening of the 'Smart Start Center' will run next year!