WhatsApp-Assisted Learning for Refugees

End of Sandbox Sprint 3

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About this document

Recommended citation. Boujikian, M., Carter, A., & Khalayleh, A. (2021). *WhatsApp-Assisted Learning for Refugees. End of Sandbox Sprint 3*. [Sandbox Sprint Review]. EdTech Hub . https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4783017. Available at https://docs.edtechhub.org/lib/89DPN3SP. Available under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International.

Notes

The story so far

Jusoor, a charity providing help to Syrian refugees, set up WhatsApp-based learning for refugee children in Lebanon in response to Covid-19 school closures.

In partnership with UNHCR, EdTech Hub joined Jusoor to run a Sandbox focused on delving deeper and gathering more evidence on the role of WhatsApp messaging in providing effective education to refugee children during the Covid-19 pandemic and on building evidence to scale this model to other out-of-school children.

How does a Sandbox work?

A Sandbox fast-tracks promising EdTech interventions by providing funding, tools, and access to evidence. It provides a space for partners to test and grow ideas in conditions of uncertainty.

We break Sandboxes up into short sprints, learning and iterating as we go. Each sprint helps to build confidence in our hypothesis and informs changes.

Sandbox hypothesis

If we provide lessons and assignments via WhatsApp to out-of-school refugee children at the primary level and engage their caregivers, the children will be able to continue learning and will have a greater chance of accessing formal education in the future.

End of Sandbox Sprint 3

In this presentation we share the findings from Sprint 3 of the Sandbox, captured as part of the Sprint Review process.

Sprint 3 focused on investigating the varied engagement levels of students and testing the best ways of removing the barriers to engagement identified in Sprint 1.

The Sprint Review is the most important touchpoint in the Sandbox journey, in which the team reflects on what we have learnt so far, and how it might affect what we do next.

This presentation includes:

Summary of Sprint 3
- What we did
- What we learnt

Details of each of the activities
- Activity 1: the information campaign
- Activity 2: the cash experiment

Summary of Sprint 3

Summary of Sprint 3: What we did

Activity 1: Information campaign

Jusoor designed tailored information to send to parents, giving them tips on practical things they could do to help children learn at home.

The campaign consisted of a series of weekly messages sent to parents over four weeks:

Week 1: How do I manage time on device?
Week 2: How do I manage learning?
Week 3: How can I help my children learn?
Week 4: How to set up a learning space.

The results were monitored through a feedback form and tracking attendance on WhatsApp, and in-depth interviews.

Activity 2: Cash experiment

In one camp, Jurahiya, we offered families simple no-strings grants of USD 25.

The money was theirs to spend however they wished, including the following options:
- Rental of a phone and a data card
- Rental of a phone only
- Data card only

The results were monitored through a feedback form, tracking attendance on WhatsApp and in-depth interviews.

Summary of Sprint 3: What we learnt

- **Information and data collection needed to be designed to suit the specific circumstances of the parents**; this included different delivery modes based on access to data and acknowledgment of survey fatigue.

- **Giving parents unconditional cash with an option to use this to access devices and data made a noticeable difference** in engagement while the information campaign did not.

- **While parents valued practical information** about how to help their children learn from home, this **didn't always translate into an increase in engagement**.

- When given the option, we saw that **parents chose to prioritise their child's education**. A majority of families (62%) decided to use the cash on a combination of a device and / or data rather than keeping it.

- **Combining both phone rental and data had the greatest impact** — it resulted in the highest increase in engagement (28%).

- The cash grants, and having the choice of access to devices and data, had the **biggest effect on the students who had previously had the lowest engagement.**

Details of our activities

Activity 1: The information campaign
Activity 2: The cash experiment

Activity 1: The information campaign

We wanted to test cheaper alternatives that might impact children's engagement. For example, evidence from work such as the Smart Buys paper suggests that information and positive messaging can be effective.

The Sandbox team were aware that refugees get a lot of information and advice from many sources, via WhatsApp and other communication apps on their smartphones. In some circumstances, families can feel overwhelmed by the amount of advice and information they receive, to the point where the advice can easily get overlooked or ignored, especially if it's generic. It was important to make sure the advice given was specific, actionable, and tailored to local circumstances.

The results were monitored through a feedback form, tracking attendance on WhatsApp, and in-depth interviews.

What we did:

1. Wrote scripts of the weekly messages based on best practice for distance learning.
2. Principals and teachers recorded themselves reading the scripts.
3. Teachers distributed videos and audio files to parents via their WhatsApp learning groups / classes.
4. A nudge was later sent during the week to remind parents of the message.
5. Teachers collected feedback from parents at the end of the week via a quick feedback form.

1.1 Different modes of delivery were needed to accommodate data access and preferences of parents

	Description	Rationale
Video	1–2 min video made by the principal on each topic + a call to action at the end of each video	Having information come from a trusted source
Voice note	1–2 min voice note by 12 teachers, with the same script as the video	For those not wanting to download / watch the video
Nudge	Short 1–2-line prompts sent from teachers via voice notes, emphasising the message sent	Light-touch way of cementing the information
Feedback	Short feedback requests sent to parents once during the course of the sprint. We divided the parents into four groups, targeting one each week	To receive qualitative feedback to contextualise any changes in engagement

1.2 Scheduling to avoid survey fatigue

To avoid survey fatigue, parents were divided into four groups and surveyed once during the campaign, in one of the four weeks.

Topic	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4
Time on device	Video on Sunday Prompt on Weds. Feedback from group 1			
Learning at home		Video on Sunday Prompt on Weds. Feedback from group 2		
Help my children learn			Video on Sunday Prompt on Weds. Feedback from group 3	
Learning space at home				Video on Sunday Prompt on Weds. Feedback from group 4

1.3 Parents tried to implement the advice but this didn't always translate into an increase in engagement

- An average of 76% of parents found the advice helpful and adjusted behaviour as a result.

- However, this did not translate into an increase in engagement with the WhatsApp-assisted learning programme.

- More research is needed to gauge if the quality of the children's learning has improved as a result despite the lack of increase in engagement.

We asked parents three questions:
1. Did you receive the message?
2. Did you try to implement the message's advice?
3. Was the advice useful?

What we found:
Beirut: 100% positive responses to all three questions

Jurahiya: ~ 80% positive responses to questions 1 and 2 and ~ 100% found the advice useful

Jeb Jannine: ~ 56% positive responses to questions 1 and 2 and ~ 86% found the advice useful

1.4 Parents valued practical information provided

- Parents said the information provided felt very relevant to their circumstances and experiences.

- The most helpful advice was about time management — setting a specific time for studying, including in the evening, and advice on how to reduce distractions.

- It took some time to institute a routine with the children, and parents felt the children tend to have less concentration and motivation compared to when they study at school.

- Some parents said that the advice and information videos and audio succeeded where they failed at convincing their children to follow a routine because of the influence of the teachers / principals.

The Jusoor team interviewing parents and children in Beirut and Jurahiya to better understand their responses to the surveys.

Link to the Interview Guide

1.5 Hearing directly from children about their experience

15 children (7 females and 8 males) were asked "In the last three months, how much did you feel...?"

	A little	Average	A lot
Focused	2	4	9
That you understood your lessons	1	7	7
Motivated	3	3	9
That you were helped by your parents / siblings	1	7	7
Sad	7	4	4
Anxious	6	4	5
Angry	7	7	1
Happy	3	3	9

These graphics were used as prompts with children.

Link to the full Children's Interactive Questionnaire

1.6 Some limitations and lessons learnt from this experiment

- The feedback from parents was collected by teachers, who are refugees themselves. The instructions on how to collect feedback were lost in the process of communication between principals and teachers, and this meant that the method for collecting feedback was not always followed properly by the teachers.

- More could have been done to convey the instructions directly to the teachers, along with some training to ensure the instructions are totally clear.

- The timing of the campaign was not convenient. Jusoor staff and teachers were under pressure and the timing of the campaign during the academic year meant that caregivers suffered from communication and call fatigue.

- The graphics were not easily understood by all the children (especially the younger ones), and the notions / questions needed further explanation.

- Some children were more comfortable with answering questions while others continued to feel shy inspite of the ice-breaking activities.

- Giving the parents the possibility of choosing between recording the interview as video or as audio allowed them to be comfortable and for the interview to proceed smoothly.

Activity 2: The cash experiment

In one camp, Jurahiya, we offered families simple, no-strings grants of USD 25.

The money was theirs to spend however they wished, including the option to:

- Keep the cash
- Rent a phone with a data card
- Rent a phone only
- Purchase a data card only

The results were monitored through tracking attendance on WhatsApp, a post-distribution survey, and in-depth interviews.

What we did:

1. The Jurahiya centre's principal announced the cash experiment by sending a video to the families.
2. Families were called by phone to ask which of the options they would like to choose.
3. Packages were purchased and prepared according to the results of the phone calls.
4. A distribution day and schedule was decided and communicated to parents.
5. Parents came to the centre on the distribution day to collect their packages.
6. Parents who rented a phone signed a receipt and rental voucher.

2.1 Many parents chose not to just keep the cash

	Cash	Phone + data card	Phone	Data card	Total
Total numbers	83	59	25	27	**194**
Distributed	78	58	25	25	**186**
Did not come	5	1	0	2	**8**

- 62% decided to use the cash on some combination of phone and / or data card rather than keeping it

Data card
13.9%

Phone
12.9%

Phone + data
30.4%

Money
42.8%
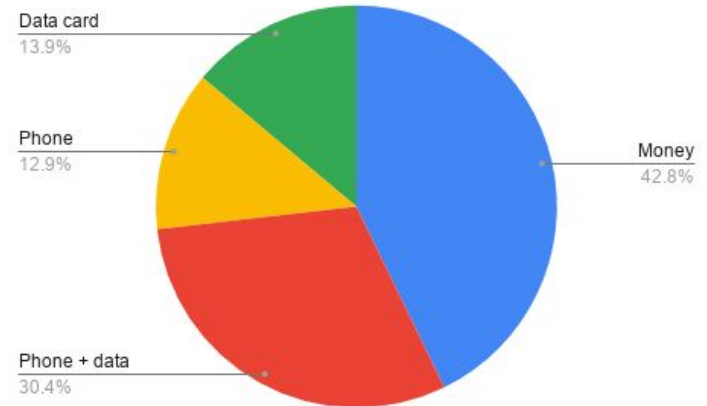
2.2 Cash grants and having the the choice of access to devices and data made a noticeable difference

- As a result of distributing the cash, engagement with WhatsApp learning increased by 16%.

- Combining both phone rental and data had the greatest impact — it resulted in the highest increase in engagement (28%)

- However, the cash only option only resulted in an 8% increase in engagement.

- The benefits were greater for the students who had the lowest levels of engagement prior to the experiment.

Parents' choice of how to spend cash	Engagement Weeks 1–18	Engagement Weeks 19–20
Cash only	48%	56%
Phone only	51%	70%
Data only	46%	57%
Phone & data	50%	78%
Total	**48%**	**64%**

Level of engagement before the experiment	Engagement Weeks 1–18	Engagement Weeks 19–20
Less than 30%	9%	33%
Between 30%–60%	49%	69%
Greater than 60%	77%	85%
Total	**48%**	**64%**

2.3 Most parents were satisfied with their choices

- Following the distribution, 89 out of the 186 families participated in a quick interview to tell us about their satisfaction with the chosen package.

- Combining both phone rental and data had the greatest impact, and all the families who chose this option were satisfied with it and didn't want to exchange it for another package.

- 27% of respondents wanted to change their package, 21% would have chosen the phone rental and data package instead.

- Only 4% rated their package as 'Not helpful'.

The survey consisted of five questions:

1. Why did you choose this particular package?

2. How did you use the package?

3. How do you rate the package?

4. If given the chance, would you have chosen another package?

5. If yes, which package would you have chosen?

2.4 Parents' reasons for choosing options and how they used them

Choice of how to spend cash	Reason for choosing this option	How they used it
Cash only (20 persons interviewed)	8 were concerned about phone rental. 6 needed to pay for an internet connection. 3 needed to recharge their phones.	9 bought recharge cards. 7 payed for an internet connection / subscription.
Phone only (23 persons interviewed)	12 chose this option because the available phone is often with the breadwinner — out of the house. 3 chose it for their children's learning (to resume learning / establish discipline).	18 used it for their children's learning (some mentioning that they paid their neighbour for internet connection or that they used the camp's wifi).
Data card only (22 persons interviewed)	7 needed to recharge their phone. 6 chose this option because they had no / weak internet connection. 5 were concerned about phone rental.	9 used it to recharge their phone and activate the internet bundle. 6 said they used the card. 4 used it for their children's learning.
Phone + data card (24 persons interviewed)	7 chose it to improve their children's learning (by easing the pressure on the only phone available). 5 chose it because the available phone is often with the breadwinner — out of the house. 4 chose it because they had only one phone at home. 2 chose it because they had no phone at home.	23 (all except the one person who said the phone did not work) used it for their children's learning.

N.B: Only the most prominent answers are featured in the table.

2.5 Parents prioritised their children's education

- We interviewed three caregivers who opted for three different packages (cash only; phone; phone + data card) to understand more about their motivations and experiences.

- The caregivers who opted for a package including the phone stated that the children were happy to have a phone dedicated for their own use.

- The phone was almost solely used for studying. The parents said that they sometimes allow the children to use it for playing, but only after having finished the lessons and homework.

- The parent who chose the cash explained that he did so because he was worried about financial consequences if his children broke or damaged the phone.

- All participants said they would choose the phone if the experiment was repeated as a phone is harder to secure.

"I will always pick education for my children. It is their way out and their weapon in this world."

Caregiver interviewed by the Jusoor team

2.6 Some limitations and lessons from this experiment

- The lockdown in Lebanon due to Covid-19 slowed the start of the experiment because of the limitations on physical movement. Delivering the packages to Jurahiya, then opening the centre for distribution required special permits, which delayed the process.

- There were a number of logistical complications with providing data and phones for use. For example, the SIM cards purchased require monthly recharging. They will probably be used for a maximum of two months by the beneficiaries, and then become non-functional. A more valid solution would have been to buy 'service' SIM cards, which can be recharged according to need.

- During the distribution day, many parents wanted to switch from phones / phones+data cards to money and vice-versa. The reason parents wanted to switch to receiving cash only was because they realised they would have to return the phones after the rental period was over and they were concerned about this.

- Some WhatsApp accounts (five that we know of) were blocked during the experiment. Although it took some time to re-activate the accounts, no serious consequences on attendance were noted.