

RAPID EVALUATIVE STUDY

Shelter Contribution to Learning Outcomes in Idlib

Use of Relief Housing Units (RHUs) as Classrooms in Southern Rural Idlib

Commissioned by	Better Shelter
Implementing partner	Basmeh & Zeitooneh (B&Z)
Geography	Southern Rural Idlib – Maarat al-Numan & Kafr Nabel Districts
Field visit dates	4–7 May 2026



Report 2026
@Better Shelter Evaluation Series

External Evaluation Report, conducted by: Mudar Saied, MEAL Expert, MSc in Assessment and Evaluation

Contents

Executive Summary	3
1. Introduction & Background	5
1.1 Context	5
1.2 The Intervention	5
1.3 Purpose of this Assessment	6
2. Methodology	7
2.1 Evaluation Criteria	7
2.2 Key Evaluation Questions	7
2.3 Sampling Strategy	8
2.4 Data Collection Methods	9
2.5 Ethical Considerations	10
2.6 Limitations & Bias	10
3. Findings	12
3.1 RHUs as a Response to Damaged or Insufficient Classroom Infrastructure	12
3.2 Contribution to students' motivation, wellbeing and sense of normality	13
3.3 Contribution to Teaching and Classroom Management	16
3.4 Relevance of RHUs as a Transitional Education Solution	17
3.5 Community Perceptions: Stability, Cohesion and Hope	18
3.6 Comparative Value of RHUs Compared with Other Available Structures	19
3.7 Operational and Implementation Learning	21
4. Analysis	22
4.1 Relevance of RHUs as Transitional Classrooms	22
4.2 Effectiveness in Supporting Learning Outcomes	22
4.3 Cross-cutting Themes	22
5. Learnings & Recommendations	24
5.1 Key Learnings for Better Shelter	24
5.2 Recommendations for future RHU programming	24
Annex A: Terms of Reference	26

Executive Summary

When families began returning to villages in Southern Rural Idlib after years of displacement, education quickly became one of the clearest signs that life could begin again. Many families had spent years in camps near the border, in other parts of northwest Syria, or in neighboring countries. Returning home meant facing damaged houses, disrupted services, limited livelihoods, and schools that were often destroyed, partially repaired, overcrowded, or not ready to receive children.

In this context, the reopening of schools carried meaning beyond education alone. For children, it meant a return to routine, friends, teachers and learning. For parents, it meant reassurance that their children would not lose another year. For communities, it meant movement in the streets again: children walking to class, teachers returning to work, parents rebuilding homes, and villages slowly becoming active after years of absence.

Against this background, **Better Shelter** provided 48 Relief Housing Units (RHUs) to serve as temporary classrooms across 14 schools in Southern Rural Idlib, specifically in the Maarat al-Numan and Kafr Nabel areas. The intervention was implemented by **Basmeh & Zeitooneh (B&Z)** with grant support from the **Chalhoub Group**.

This rapid evaluative study was commissioned by Better Shelter to understand what the RHUs meant in practice for students, teachers, caregivers and communities, beyond the physical installation of the units.

The study found that the RHUs were **highly relevant** as a temporary education solution. Their importance was clearest when compared with the actual alternatives available at the time: damaged classrooms, tents, overcrowded rooms, distant schools, or no classroom space at all. In several locations, RHUs helped schools continue teaching, admit more students, and avoid children missing part of the school year.

The RHUs were not experienced as perfect classrooms. However, for many children and teachers, they represented a major improvement. Basic features such as walls, a roof, doors, windows, warmth and quietness mattered deeply in villages where children had previously studied in exposed, damaged or improvised spaces. These features helped create a stronger sense of safety, privacy and classroom order. Teachers reported that students were more settled and easier to engage when lessons took place in an enclosed and protected space.

The assessment also found a **strong wellbeing dimension**. Children described school as a place to learn, see friends, feel free, become successful and think about the future. Caregivers said that when children had a safe place to study, parents felt more able to work, repair homes and rebuild daily life. Community members also described schools reopening as one of the signs that villages were “alive” again.

The main conclusions are:

- RHUs were **effective in restoring access to education** quickly, especially where schools were damaged, under rehabilitation or overcrowded.
- Their strongest contribution was to **continuity, safety, routine and motivation**, rather than to proven academic outcomes. Learning progress also depends on teachers, curriculum, family support and wider school conditions.
- RHUs worked best as **a bridge solution**, helping children return to school while permanent buildings were being repaired.
- The units were clearly **better than tents or damaged rooms**, but they should not be treated as a long-term substitute for proper classrooms.
- Technical limitations affected comfort and classroom quality, including small size, limited natural light, weak ventilation, summer heat, rain noise, occasional leakage, and lack of electricity for lights or fans.

For future education programming, Better Shelter and partners should consider RHUs as part of a broader temporary classroom package, rather than as empty structures alone. Key recommendations include:

- Define a realistic maximum number of students per RHU.
- Provide education-specific adaptations, including lighting, ventilation, fans or solar options, improved rain sealing, flooring, and better board placement.
- Plan furniture layouts before installation, especially where standard school desks are used.
- Improve weather adaptation for both summer and rainy conditions.
- Place RHUs on safe, well-drained sites close to WASH facilities.
- Establish simple school-level maintenance systems for leaks, windows, doors and ventilation.
- Link RHU deployment to clear school rehabilitation plans, so temporary classrooms support recovery without replacing long-term investment.

Overall, the RHUs helped restore something simple but essential: **a place where children could sit, learn, feel protected, and be with their classmates again**. In communities emerging from displacement and destruction, that contribution was not only educational. It was also part of the wider process of return, confidence and recovery.

1. Introduction & Background

1.1 Context

Southern Rural Idlib is still emerging from years of conflict, displacement and damage to basic services. The vast majority of families from the assessed villages had spent years away from their homes, either in camps near the border, in other parts of northwest Syria, or in neighbouring countries such as Türkiye and Lebanon. Returning home was therefore not only about going back to a village; it was about deciding whether life could start again.

Education was central to that decision. Families returned to villages where homes, streets and schools had been severely damaged or completely destroyed, and where some classrooms were missing walls, roofs, windows, doors or furniture. In several cases, children initially studied in unsafe or exposed rooms, or had no suitable classroom at all. Against this background, the reopening of schools became one of the clearest signs of recovery.

For parents, knowing that their children could attend school close to home gave reassurance and encouraged return. For children, school restored routine, safety and a sense of normal life. For the wider community, children walking to school again helped make the villages feel active and alive after years of displacement.

1.2 The Intervention

In response to the lack of safe and functional classroom space in Southern Rural Idlib, Better Shelter donated 48 Relief Housing Units (RHUs) to support the continuation of education in return communities. The donation was made possible through funding from the Chalhoub Group, following a needs assessment conducted by Basmeh & Zeitooneh (B&Z).

B&Z implemented the intervention in February and March 2026, installing the RHUs across 14 schools in 14 villages in the areas of Maarat al-Numan and Kafr Nabel Educational Complex. By the end of March 2026, all 48 units were in use as classrooms.

The RHUs were introduced at a time when many schools were still damaged, under rehabilitation, or unable to accommodate returning students. In several visited locations, they functioned as the temporary classroom space that allowed schools to reopen, admit more children, and in some cases operate additional cohorts. While not intended as a permanent replacement for formal school buildings, the RHUs provided an immediate and practical bridge between return and recovery, allowing children to resume learning while communities worked to rebuild their schools and homes.

1.3 Purpose of this Assessment

This rapid evaluative study was commissioned by Better Shelter to complement B&Z's post-implementation reporting, which focused mainly on physical outputs such as installed RHUs, classroom use and attendance.

The assessment looks at the outcomes of using RHUs as classrooms: how they affected children's sense of safety, wellbeing, motivation to learn, teachers' working conditions, and the wider confidence of families and communities returning after displacement. It is framed around the criteria of relevance and effectiveness.

2. Methodology

2.1 Evaluation Criteria

This assessment is guided by two main criteria: relevance and effectiveness, as set out in the Terms of Reference. Relevance looks at whether the RHUs were an appropriate response to the education needs in Southern Rural Idlib, especially in villages where school buildings were damaged, under rehabilitation, or unable to accommodate returning students.

Effectiveness looks at what the RHUs helped to achieve in practice: whether they supported children's access to school, improved the teaching and learning environment, strengthened students' sense of safety and motivation, and contributed to continuity of education. The assessment also considers whether these effects were linked specifically to the RHUs compared with other available options, such as tents, damaged classrooms, overcrowded rooms, or no classroom space at all.

Given the rapid and qualitative nature of the assessment, the analysis does not attempt to measure learning outcomes statistically. Instead, it focuses on the lived experiences of students, teachers, principals, caregivers and community members, and on what the RHUs meant for education access, wellbeing and recovery in the assessed communities.

2.2 Key Evaluation Questions

Table 1: Key evaluation questions by respondent level

Level	Key Evaluation Question
Student	<i>How have the classrooms contributed to students' motivation to come to school and to learn?</i>
Teacher	<i>Have the classrooms led to a better teaching and learning environment?</i>
School	<i>How relevant are the classrooms as a transitional solution for educational continuity?</i>
Community	<i>What role have the classrooms played in contributing to social stability, cohesion and hope?</i>

2.3 Sampling Strategy

The study used a purposive sampling approach, selecting 5 schools from the 14 schools where RHUs had been installed by Basmeh & Zeitooneh. The sample was not designed to be statistically representative, but to capture the main experiences of students, teachers, principals and communities across different school settings. Given the rapid timeframe, school calendar, examination period and logistical constraints, the ToR anticipated that a smaller sample would be sufficient to identify recurring themes and reach qualitative data saturation.

Table 2: Sampling considerations and rationale

Sampling consideration	How it was applied	Rationale
Number of schools	5 schools selected from 14 RHU-supported schools	Allowed the assessment to cover different locations while remaining feasible within the field visit timeframe.
Age groups	Schools included both younger children and older students where possible	Experiences may differ between lower grades and older students, especially around comfort, concentration and classroom size.
School size	Both smaller and larger schools were considered	Larger schools may face more pressure on classroom space, crowding and cohort arrangements.
Gender	Student interviews aimed to include both girls and boys	To capture whether girls and boys experienced the RHU classrooms differently.
Teacher profile	Teachers with different years of experience and grades taught were included where possible	Helped capture different perspectives on teaching conditions and classroom management.
Expected saturation	Repeated themes were expected across schools because the intervention and context were relatively similar	The purpose was to identify strong qualitative patterns, not to produce statistical estimates.

2.4 Data Collection Methods

The study used a qualitative, interview-based approach to understand how RHUs were experienced by students, teachers, principals, caregivers and nearby community members. The ToR proposed interviews with students, teachers, principals and caregivers, with approximately 10 students per level per school, gender-balanced where possible, 2–3 teachers per school, principals at each school, and 4–5 caregiver/household interviews overall.

For children, data was collected using Jotform on a tablet device, supported by a child-friendly five-point smiley scale to help younger students express how they felt about the classroom, learning, safety, motivation and concentration. For teachers, principals, caregivers and community members, the approach relied mainly on semi-structured interviews and note-taking, allowing respondents to describe their experience in their own words. The team also took photos of RHUs, classroom arrangements and school surroundings to document technical and contextual details such as lighting, ventilation, classroom size, furniture layout, leakage points, damaged school buildings and proximity to rehabilitation works.



Image 1 Locations of the schools visited

The analysis is therefore mainly thematic, not statistical. Student responses were used to identify broad patterns, while teacher, principal, caregiver and community interviews were used to understand the story behind those patterns: what changed, why it mattered, and what limitations remained.

Table 3: Sample reached by school and respondent group

School	Location / district	Age group covered	Boys	Girls	Teachers	Principal	Caregivers / households	Notes
Ahmad Miglag	Kafr Awaid / Kafr Nabel area	ages 9–12	6	7	3	2	1 caregiver + 1 community member	Morning and afternoon cohorts covered.
AlKamiliyah	Maaret Shamari	ages 8–11	11	10	4	2	1 caregiver	Covered both cohorts
Western Hass / Hass Gharbiya	Hass area	ages 6–13	5	15	4	1	1 caregiver + 1 community member	
Adnan AlFajer	Hass area	ages 7–10	4	6	1	1	1 caregiver	
Total	—	ages 6–13	26	38	12	6	4 caregivers + 2 community members	Total student sample: 64 students; total teacher/principal sample: 18 respondents.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

The assessment followed basic consent and child safeguarding procedures. For child interviews, consent was required from a parent, guardian or school and children were asked to participate only if they wished to do so. For children under 13, a trusted adult was kept nearby.

All interviews were voluntary and conducted in Arabic, which was spoken by all respondents. Data was anonymized in the analysis, with findings presented by location and respondent group rather than by individual names. Photos were used mainly for technical and contextual documentation, and any faces appearing in photos were either blurred or not visible.

2.6 Limitations & Bias

This rapid evaluative study was conducted as a rapid qualitative study, so the findings should be understood as indicative rather than statistically representative. The sample covered selected RHU-supported schools and respondents, not the full population across all 14 schools. The field schedule, logistical constraints and examination period also affected the number of schools and respondents that could be reached.

Another limitation is that students and teachers were comparing the RHUs against different previous learning spaces. For many, the RHUs represented a clear improvement because they had previously studied in tents, damaged rooms, or exposed classrooms. For others who had previously experienced standard school buildings, the RHUs could feel more limited in terms of size,

light, ventilation and comfort. This means that perceptions of the RHUs were shaped not only by the units themselves, but also by what respondents had experienced before.

Finally, the assessment was conducted during a limited field period and could not observe the RHUs across all seasonal conditions. Some reported issues, such as heat in summer, leakage during rain and darkness in afternoon shifts, are therefore based mainly on respondent experience rather than direct observation across seasons.

3. Findings

3.1 RHUs as a Response to Damaged or Insufficient Classroom Infrastructure

“It saved our education. Without it, we would not have had a classroom.”

— Student from western Hass

The RHUs filled an immediate classroom gap in the visited schools. They were not viewed as a replacement for permanent school buildings, but as a practical temporary solution at a time when schools were damaged, under rehabilitation, overcrowded, or unable to receive all returning students.

In Ahmad Miglag, teachers and principals described children studying in damaged rooms with missing walls, roofs, windows or doors before the RHUs were installed. In Western Hass, the RHUs helped the school continue operating while one school building was still under rehabilitation and classroom space was insufficient. Across locations, respondents said the RHUs helped schools admit more children, reduce pressure on existing classrooms, and avoid alternatives such as tents, exposed rooms, distant schools or children staying at home.

“It has four walls and a roof”

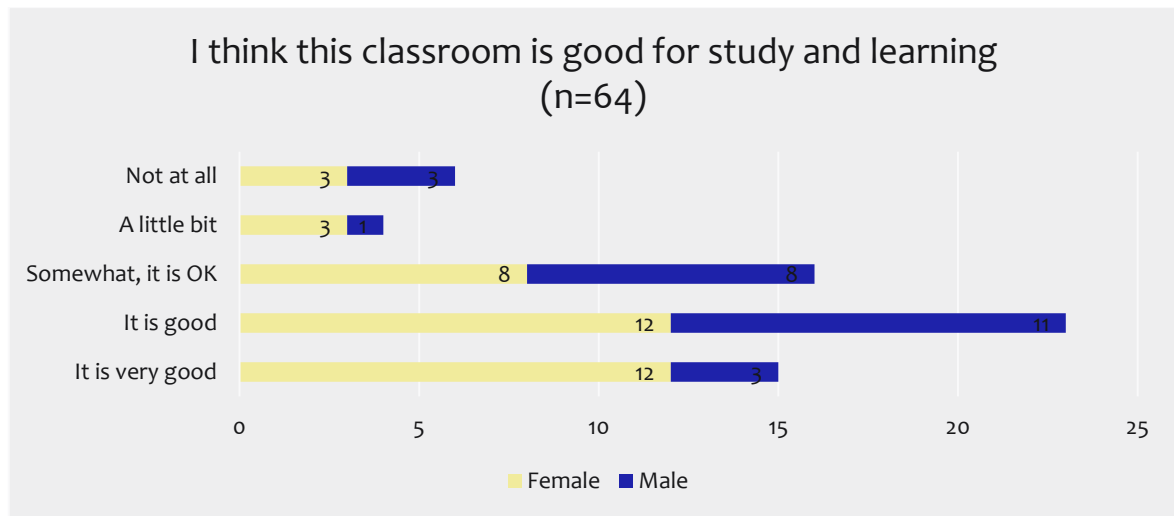
— Student from Ahmad Miglag



Photo 1 RHUs used as classrooms in a school under rehab

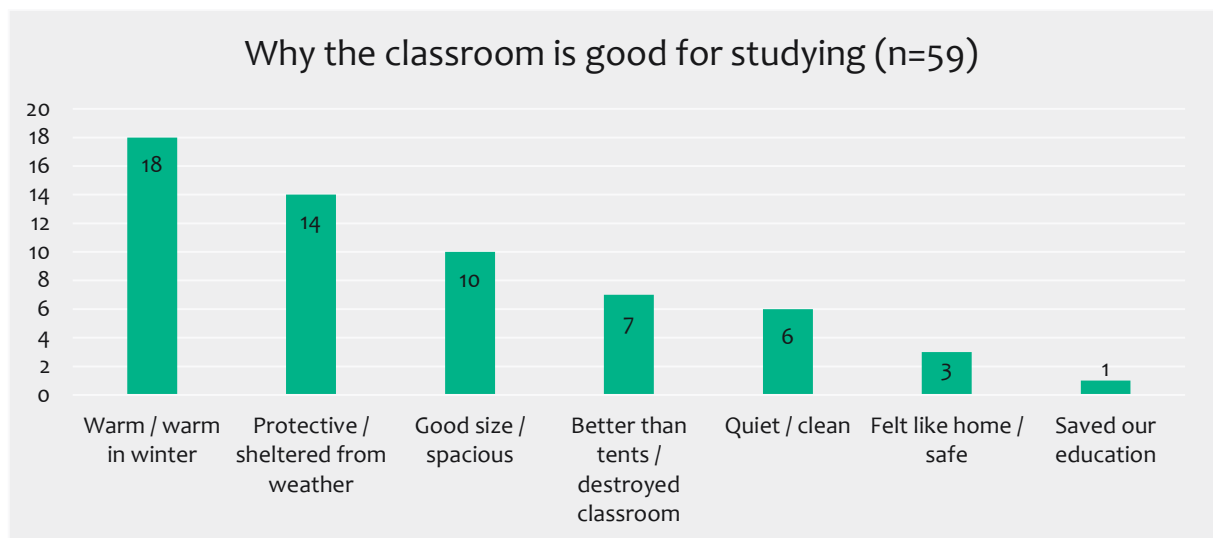
Students mainly experienced the RHUs as a safer and more dignified learning space, with 84% rating the classroom as at least acceptable for study and learning. Having walls, a roof, doors and windows gave the classroom a stronger sense of protection, privacy and order. Teachers also reported that students were less distracted than in tents or damaged rooms, especially because the RHUs were quieter and more enclosed. Caregivers and community members linked the reopening of schools to wider recovery: children returned to routine, parents felt more confident, and villages began to feel active again.

Figure 1: Students' rating of RHU classroom suitability for study and learning



The coded student responses show that children valued the RHUs mainly for practical and protective reasons

Figure 2: Students' feedback on why classroom is good



3.2 Contribution to students' motivation, wellbeing and sense of normality

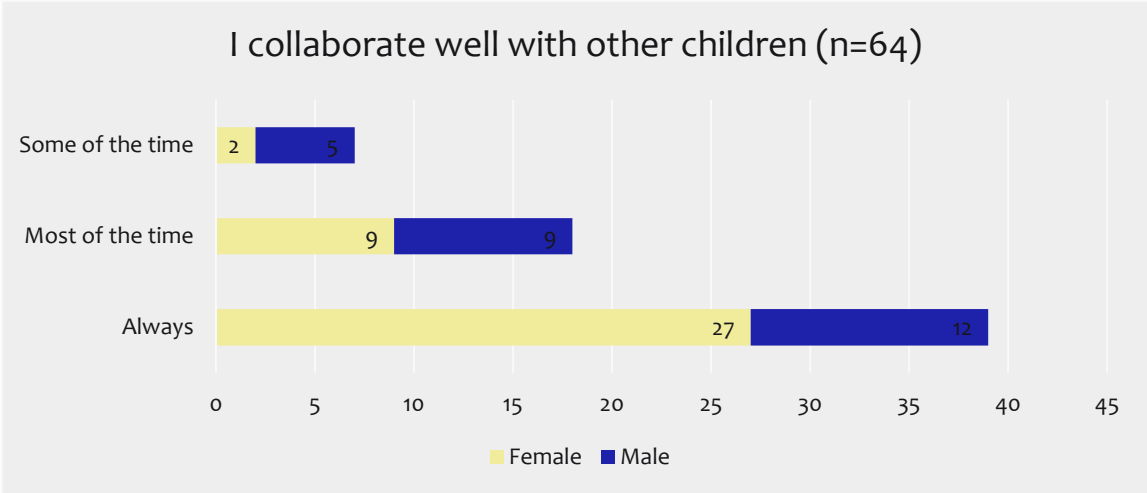
The RHUs contributed not only to physical access to schooling, but also to students' sense of routine, safety and motivation to learn, with 78% of students saying they like to learn new things always or most of the time. This directly reflects the assessment focus in the ToR, which asks how RHU classrooms

contributed to students’ psychosocial wellbeing and motivation to come to school and learn.

“School is like a second home and my friends are like siblings.”
— Secondary student, Western Hass

Across the student data, children repeatedly described school as a place to learn, meet friends, feel free, become successful, and work toward future dreams. This was visible across both boys and girls at primary level. The data does not suggest a strong gender difference in motivation to learn; rather, the main differences appeared to relate to location, previous classroom conditions, and the physical comfort of the RHU. Older students, particularly the secondary girls in Western Hass, were more likely to express school as a space of belonging, friendship and future aspiration.

Figure 3: Students’ rating on their engagement with peers

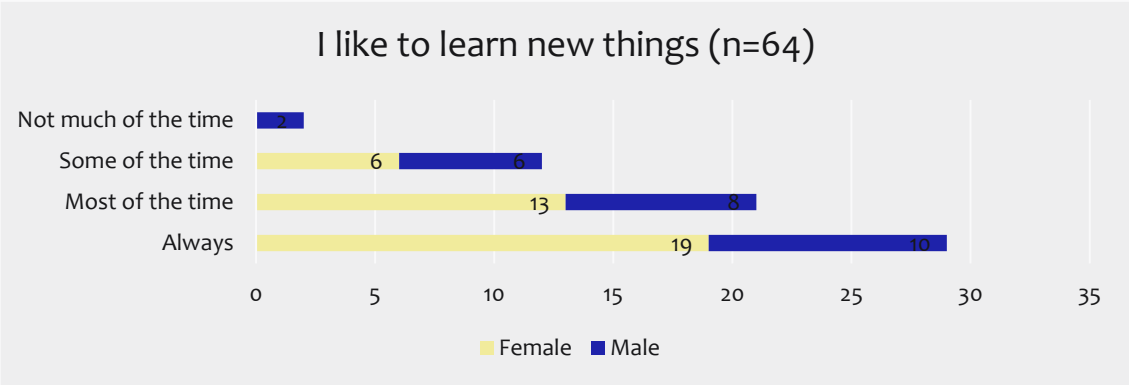


The responses suggest that the RHU classrooms supported not only individual learning, but also the social side of school. 75% of students reported that they collaborate well with other children always or most of the time, suggesting that the RHU classrooms supported not only individual learning, but also the social side of school. Teachers and principals also observed changes in students’ behavior after moving into the RHUs. They described children as more settled, more regular in attendance, and better able to focus because the RHUs provided warmth, quietness, enclosure and protection compared with tents or damaged classrooms. In Ahmad Miglag, staff linked the RHUs to improved attendance, concentration and participation, especially because children were no longer exposed to wind, rain or distractions from outside.

“For many of them, it felt like both a classroom and a shelter.”
— Teacher, Ahmad Miglag

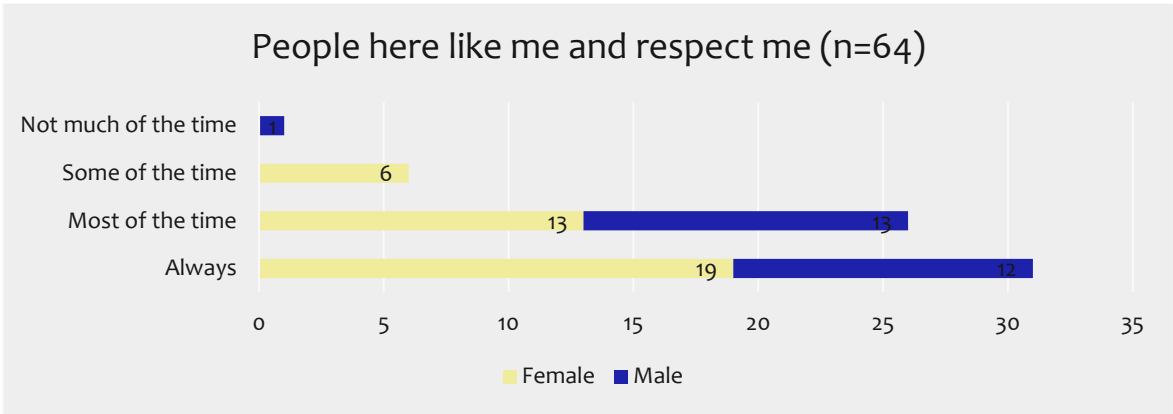
Caregiver and community feedback reinforced this finding. Parents linked school attendance to peace of mind, the ability to work or repair homes, and the feeling that children were returning to a normal daily rhythm. Community members also noted that schools reopening brought visible life back to the villages. This suggests that the wellbeing effect was not limited to students only, but extended to families and communities recovering from displacement.

Figure 4: Students’ motivation to learn, by gender



The scale responses support the wider finding that school was not only a place of instruction, but also a place where children felt recognized and socially connected, with 88% saying people at school like and respect them always or most of the time.

Figure 5: Students’ perception on acceptance



3 Contribution to Teaching and Classroom Management

Teachers and principals generally described the RHUs as a major improvement for lesson delivery and classroom management, especially when compared with the actual alternatives available at the start of the school year: damaged classrooms, tents, overcrowded rooms, or no classroom space. In Ahmad Miglag, staff explained that before the RHUs, lessons were taking place in exposed or damaged rooms where wind, rain, noise and movement outside constantly interrupted teaching. Once the RHUs were installed, teachers reported that students were more settled, more attentive and easier to manage because the space felt more like a real classroom.

“Before the RHUs, it did not really feel like a classroom. Students were distracted by wind, noise and people passing outside”.

— Teacher, Ahmad Miglag

In Western Hass, the RHUs also helped teachers continue lessons while part of the school was still under rehabilitation. Staff valued the fact that the units could be closed off from outside noise and movement, giving students more privacy and reducing distraction. Compared with tents, the RHUs were seen as stronger, warmer, quieter and more suitable for children. Principals also noted that they helped the school admit students who otherwise may not have had a place.



Photo 2 RHUs as solution to crowded classrooms

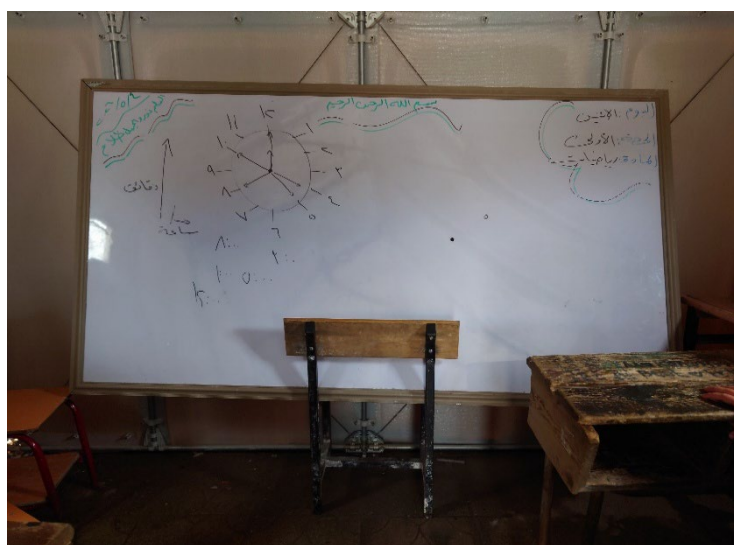


Photo 3 Whiteboard had no place on the wall

At the same time, teachers were clear that the RHUs are not equivalent to permanent classrooms. The main constraints were size, furniture layout, light, ventilation and seasonal comfort. Several teachers said the units are too small for standard Syrian school furniture, especially when classes are large. In Western Hass, one teacher estimated that

the RHU works better for around 20–22 students, not a standard class of 35–40. Staff also noted that board placement can be difficult, the ceiling is low, and the lack of electricity limits the use of lights or fans.

Heat and ventilation were recurring concerns. Teachers described the RHUs as warm and useful in winter, but hot or stuffy in summer and sometimes dark on cloudy days or during afternoon cohorts. Rain also created challenges in some locations, including leakage from windows or screws and loud noise when rain hit the roof, which could disturb lessons. These issues affected concentration and teacher comfort, even where the RHUs were still seen as much better than tents or damaged classrooms.

3.4 Relevance of RHUs as a Transitional Education Solution

“It gave us a shelter when we had nothing.”

—Secondary student, Western Hass

The RHUs were highly relevant as a rapid transitional education solution in the assessed locations. They were introduced into schools where buildings were damaged, under rehabilitation, overcrowded, or unable to absorb returning students.



Photo 4 Lesson in a damaged classroom before installing RHUs

Their relevance was strongest when compared with the realistic alternatives available at the time. In Ahmad Miglag, the alternative was to continue teaching in damaged classrooms, some of which lacked walls, roofs, doors or windows. In Western Hass, one school building was still under rehabilitation, and the RHUs allowed the school to admit children who otherwise may not have had a place. In

both cases, staff described the RHUs as the difference between continuing education and children missing days, months, or potentially a full semester.



The RHUs were also relevant for different student groups, though not always in the same way. For younger children, the main value was protection, warmth, familiarity and feeling safe inside a defined classroom. For older students, relevance was also linked to continuity, staying close to home, remaining with peers, and avoiding travel to unfamiliar or distant schools. The data did not show a strong gender difference in how students valued the RHUs, but perceptions were influenced by what students had experienced before. Those who had previously studied in tents or damaged rooms generally saw the RHUs as a clear improvement, while students comparing them with standard school buildings were more likely to notice their limitations.

Photo 5 Weak light on a cloudy day

At the same time, the RHUs should not be presented as a long-term substitute for rehabilitated school buildings. Teachers and principals consistently noted technical and practical constraints: limited classroom size, difficulty fitting standard Syrian school furniture, weak lighting, low ceilings, summer heat, limited ventilation, rain leakage, roof noise during rainfall, and lack of electricity for lights or fans. These issues affected comfort and sometimes concentration, especially during hot weather, rainy days, or afternoon cohorts.

“For a temporary solution, they were more than helpful.”

— Principal, Western Hass

Overall, the RHUs were most relevant as a bridge solution: better and safer than the available alternatives, but still temporary.

3.5 Community Perceptions: Stability, Cohesion and Hope

The RHUs contributed indirectly to community confidence by helping schools reopen at a time when many families were still deciding whether return to their villages was possible. This was not only an education issue. In the assessed

communities, functioning classrooms were seen as one of the first visible signs that daily life could restart after displacement, damaged homes and disrupted services.

Caregivers described access to school as a source of reassurance. When children had a nearby classroom, parents felt more able to work, repair homes and manage daily responsibilities. The RHUs also helped reduce the pressure of sending children to distant or unfamiliar schools. In Western Hass, staff noted that keeping children in their local school helped families feel connected to the area and supported a more normal daily routine.

“For children, school means safety, learning and routine. For parents, it brings relief because they know their children are not missing education.”

— Principal, Ahmad Miglag

The community effect was especially visible in villages where families had recently returned after years of displacement. Caregivers and community members described schools reopening as bringing movement back to the streets: children walking to class, parents passing by, teachers returning, and small businesses seeing more daily activity. The library shop owner near Ahmad Miglag school and the bakery owner in Hass both described the village as feeling more alive once schools were open again.

At the same time, the contribution to community stability should not be overstated. The RHUs did not create recovery on their own. Families returned because of a combination of factors: attachment to home, reconstruction efforts, livelihood needs, school reopening and community resilience. However, the RHUs played a meaningful enabling role by making school reopening possible sooner than full rehabilitation would have allowed.

“It helped families feel that returning to their hometown was possible. Parents were encouraged to send their children to school, and this supported the wider recovery of the community.”

— Principal, Western Hass

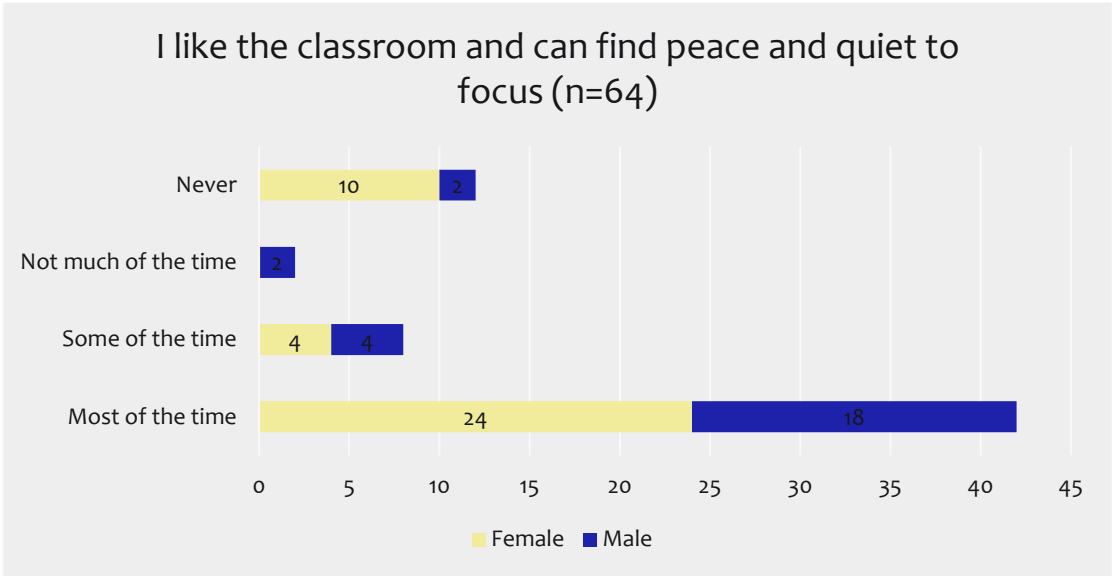
The RHUs helped restore one of the strongest symbols of normal life: children attending school in their own village.

3.6 Comparative Value of RHUs Compared with Other Available Structures

It is important to note that students compared the RHUs with different previous learning spaces, including tents, regular classrooms, caravans and damaged rooms. This helps explain why, despite generally positive views, 19% of students said they never found peace and quiet to focus during lessons because they

compared the RHUs experience with their previous regular well-established classrooms.

Figure 6: Students’ reported peace and quiet for focus, by gender



Compared with damaged classrooms, the RHUs offered protection, enclosure and a more recognisable learning environment. In Ahmad Miglag, teachers and principals described previous classrooms as cold, wet, exposed, or missing walls and roofs. Once the RHUs were installed, students had walls, doors, windows and a roof, which helped reduce distractions and gave children a stronger feeling of safety and privacy.

“For many of them, it felt like both a classroom and a shelter.”

— Teacher, Ahmad Miglag

Compared with tents, RHUs were seen as more durable, warmer in winter, quieter and easier to manage as classrooms. In Western Hass, staff said tents were used briefly but were damaged quickly and were not suitable for children. RHUs were also better at separating students from outside noise, including movement in the street or rehabilitation work nearby. This helped teachers maintain attention and manage lessons more effectively.

Compared with overcrowded classrooms or distant schools, the RHUs helped schools keep children close to home. This was especially important in Western Hass, where only one school building was rehabilitated while the second was still under construction. Without the RHUs, some children would likely have been sent to other schools, placed in overcrowded rooms, or left without access until more space became available. As one teacher put it:

“It is better than turning students away or sending them far away, but it is not like a proper classroom.”

— Teacher, Western Hass

However, the RHUs did not solve all classroom challenges. The most repeated constraints were small size, limited light and ventilation, summer heat, rain noise, occasional leakage, and poor fit with standard school furniture.

3.7 Operational and Implementation Learning

The field evidence shows that the RHUs worked best when understood as a rapid, movable and temporary classroom solution. Their main operational strength was speed: they could be installed and used while school buildings were still damaged or under rehabilitation. In Western Hass, for example, only one school building was ready, while the second was still under construction. The RHUs allowed the school to admit students who otherwise may not have had a classroom.

“The RHUs gave us a temporary solution that worked well until the school building could be completed.”

— Principal, Western Hass



Photo 6 Water leak on a rainy day

At the same time, the assessment identified several practical lessons for future programming. Site selection and classroom layout matter. RHUs need to be placed where students can access them safely, where drainage is adequate, and where they are not directly exposed to avoidable noise, mud or water accumulation.

Schools also need clear responsibility for daily management and minor maintenance, especially checking windows, screws, leakage points and classroom ventilation.

Furniture and classroom arrangement were repeated constraints. Future classroom use should include a basic layout plan, suitable desk size, board placement, and a realistic maximum number of students per RHU.

Weather adaptation is another key lesson. RHUs were appreciated in winter because they were warmer and more protective than tents or damaged rooms. However, staff reported heat in summer, limited ventilation, darkness in cloudy weather or afternoon shifts, rain noise on the roof, and occasional leakage from windows or screws. Future installations should consider electricity for lights and fans, better natural lighting, improved ventilation, shading, roof-noise reduction, and improved sealing against rain.

4. Analysis

4.1 Relevance of RHUs as Transitional Classrooms

The RHUs were highly relevant as a rapid transitional classroom solution in post-conflict Southern Rural Idlib. They responded to an urgent need in communities where students were returning while schools were still damaged, under rehabilitation, overcrowded, or not safe for regular teaching.

Their relevance was strongest when compared with the real alternatives available at the time: tents, damaged rooms, overcrowded classrooms, distant schools, or no school access. They were faster, safer, warmer, quieter and more practical than these alternatives.

However, the RHUs are not fully suitable as long-term classrooms without adaptation. Reported limitations included small classroom size, poor fit with standard school furniture, limited lighting, weak ventilation, heat in summer, rain noise and occasional leakage.

4.2 Effectiveness in Supporting Learning Outcomes

The RHUs were effective mainly as an enabling condition for education: they created usable classroom space where the alternatives were damaged rooms, tents, overcrowded classes, distant schools or no school access.

The outcomes most directly attributable to the RHUs are access, continuity, safety, privacy, warmth, quietness and improved classroom management.

Other outcomes, such as motivation, wellbeing and academic progress, should be framed as contributions, not direct proof of impact. These were also influenced by teachers, school leadership, curriculum, family stability, children's resilience and the wider return process. The RHUs improved the conditions in which learning could happen; they did not cause learning outcomes alone.

4.3 Cross-cutting Themes

Age differences were more visible than gender differences. Younger students tended to describe the RHUs in practical terms, such as warmth, protection, quietness, and having walls and a roof. Older students were more likely to connect school with belonging, future plans, and not losing another year of education.

A key pattern was the importance of the previous learning space. Students and teachers who had come from tents, damaged classrooms, or exposed rooms usually saw the RHUs as a clear improvement. Those comparing RHUs with

standard school buildings were more likely to notice limitations such as size, heat, lighting, ventilation, and furniture layout.

There was also some variation between schools. In Ahmad Miglag, the RHUs were mainly important because they replaced damaged and unsafe classrooms. In Western Hass, they were important because they added classroom capacity while part of the school was still under rehabilitation. In both cases, the outcome was similar: RHUs helped keep children in school.

5. Learnings & Recommendations

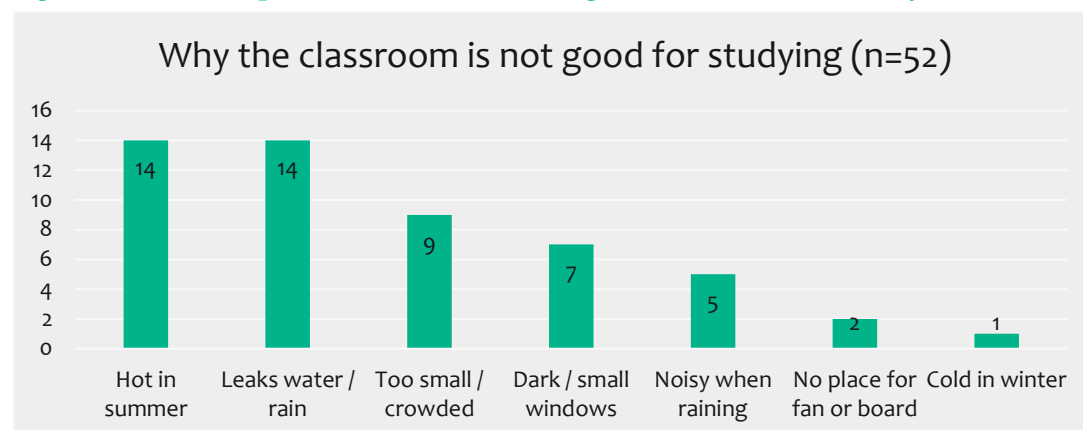
5.1 Key Learnings for Better Shelter

The main learning is that RHUs can work well as temporary classrooms in recovery settings, especially when the real alternatives are tents, damaged rooms, overcrowded classes, or children staying at home. In Idlib, the RHUs were not valued because they were perfect classrooms. They were valued because they arrived at the moment when schools needed a bridge between destruction and rehabilitation.

For Better Shelter, the evidence shows that the RHU's strongest education value is its ability to create a quick, enclosed and recognizable learning space. They helped children feel protected, helped teachers manage lessons, and gave parents confidence to send their children back.

RHUs can reopen learning quickly, but they need education-specific adaptations: better light, ventilation, summer heat protection, rain sealing, quieter roofing, electricity for lights and fans, suitable flooring, and furniture layouts that match realistic class sizes.

Figure 7: Student-reported constraints affecting RHU classroom suitability



5.2 Recommendations for future RHU programming

Some of these recommendations are only valid if Better Shelter are considering designing RHUs to be of specific use as classrooms, these will be marked as **optional**.

- Improve weather adaptation before installation. Partners should plan for summer heat, rainy days and low-light conditions. This may include shading, fans, electricity or solar lighting, improved sealing around

windows and screws, and roof-noise reduction where possible. Teachers in Western Hass repeatedly raised heat, leakage, rain noise, low ceiling height and lack of electricity as practical constraints.

- **Optional:** Procure RHUs as part of a classroom package, not as empty structures only. Where RHUs are used for education, procurement should include suitable flooring, lighting, boards, child-appropriate furniture, ventilation options, and basic teaching materials.
- **Optional:** Create a simple maintenance system. Each school should have a responsible focal point, a maintenance checklist, and access to small repair materials for leaks, window sealing, door issues, ventilation, floor damage and minor safety concerns.

ANNEX A: Terms of Reference

Terms of Reference

Rapid qualitative assessment of shelter contribution to learning environments: The use of RHU:s as classrooms in Idlib

1. Background

Following years of displacement in the wake of the Syrian civil war, large numbers of students are returning to school. In doing so, it became apparent that school and classroom infrastructure was destroyed or below par, unsuitable for teaching. The NGO Basmeh & Zeitooneh (B&Z) initiated a needs assessment and was donated 48 Relief Housing Units (RHU) from Swedish not-for-profit organisation Better Shelter. A grant from the Chaloub Group made this donation possible.

The 48 RHU:s were implemented and put up in February and March 2026 in Southern Rural Idlib, in the districts of Maarat al-Numan and Kafr Nabel Educational Complex. By the end of March 2026, they were all in use as classrooms.

B&Z have conducted a post implementation assessment, that has analysed number of units put up, how they function as classrooms, attendance levels, amongst other things. To complement B&Z own post implementation report, focusing on the outputs and physical results of the project, Better Shelter is seeking to conduct a qualitative assessment of outcomes.

This Terms of Reference sets out the scope of work for an externally contracted consultant to conduct a rapid qualitative assessment of how Better Shelter's RHU:S have contributed to learning environments in Southern Rural Idlib.

2. Objective and focus

Purpose and objective

The qualitative assessment will focus on how the access to the RHU:s as schools have changed the psychosocial wellbeing including motivation to learn for the students, as well as what it has meant teachers and for the communities.

The purpose of the assessment is to learn how relevant and effective RHU:s are as classrooms in transitional, post-conflict or post-disaster settings.

The objective is to understand the specific relevance and effectiveness aspects of the RHU:s in this context and to what extent this is due specifically to the RHU (as opposed to other structures).

The study also includes a minimal sample of more in-depth interviews specifically aimed at story telling. The purpose of these interviews are for communications and for Better Shelter's outreach.