Childhood Education International

CENTER FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Guidance Notes for Establishing and Sustaining (Virtual) Communities of Practice in Education in Displacement Contexts

Sketch by William Kiarie Muchugia in Nairobi, Kenya rendering ideas shared by colleagues across diverse settings including Lebanon, Niger, the U.S., and Kenya during a QHL Project community of practice meeting.

Written by Julie Kasper, Director of Teacher Learning & Leadership
with ideas, insights, and recommendations from QHL Project Fellows, Consultants, and Staff

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

Introduction

Communities of Practice are social learning spaces that promote knowledge sharing, professional growth, and connection. They have been theorized and articulated fully by many people over the years, in particular Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner, experts in social learning and in developing and sustaining communities of practice across many sectors and organizations. They define a communities of practice as:

> **groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.**

There are additional definitions in circulation, including these conceptualizations of communities of practice:

- a group of people who learn together over time as they work in areas of shared passion or concern. The goal of a Community of Practice is to identify and address shared challenges. By doing so, the community seeks not only to help individual members advance their own work, but also contribute to the larger field (Harvard's Center on the Developing Child).

- a learning partnership among people who find it useful to learn from and with each other about a particular domain. They use each other's experience of practice as a learning resource. And they join forces in making sense of and addressing challenges they face individually or collectively (Wenger, Traynor, and de Laat, 2011).

- … a small group of people who've worked together over a period of time…They are Peers in the execution of 'real work'. What holds them together is a common sense of purpose and a real need to know what each other knows. (Brown & Gray, 1995)

The Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) hosts a digital community of practice which they describe as: "an online platform that facilitates peer-to-peer communication and moderated discussions on the full range of education in emergencies topics in many languages. The platform intends to cultivate collaborative relationships and meaningful exchanges - both synchronous and asynchronous - for sharing knowledge and local wisdom, amplifying voices, developing resources, informing policy, building capacity, undertaking joint advocacy, and identifying content worthy of wider dissemination."

Additional examples of communities of practice in the emergency response/humanitarian sectors can be found in these communities of practice hosted by the Global Shelter Cluster and in these "Building Communities of Practice for Urban Refugees" initiatives led by UNHCR in Asia and in Europe.

Communities of practice are woven into our professional lives and can take a variety of forms, including teacher learning circles, professional learning communities, critical inquiry groups, and more. The Teachers in Crisis Contexts (TiCC) Working Group incorporates teacher learning circles, for example, in their peer coaching training design. Professional learning communities are central to the Refugee Educator Academy hosted by the Center for Professional Learning at Childhood Education International. And critical inquiry is at the heart of efforts like the School Reform Initiative, now at the Center for Educational Leadership and Equity.

In a way, communities of practice (CoPs) are **part of the "air" we breathe** in much of our work as educators. Due to this, however, the mechanisms that help CoPs grow and thrive are sometimes taken for granted or rendered invisible as we look to build communities of practice in new contexts, such as in education in displacement and lower resourced settings.

In thinking about establishing and sustaining communities of practice in displacement, refugee, crisis, and lower resourced contexts, **it is important to take an intentional and informed approach.** This brief shares key recommendations and offers words of advice from participants in the Quality Holistic Learning Project's core community of practice which has been in continual existence since the start of the project in early 2021, through many ups and downs globally, nationally, locally, professionally, and personally.
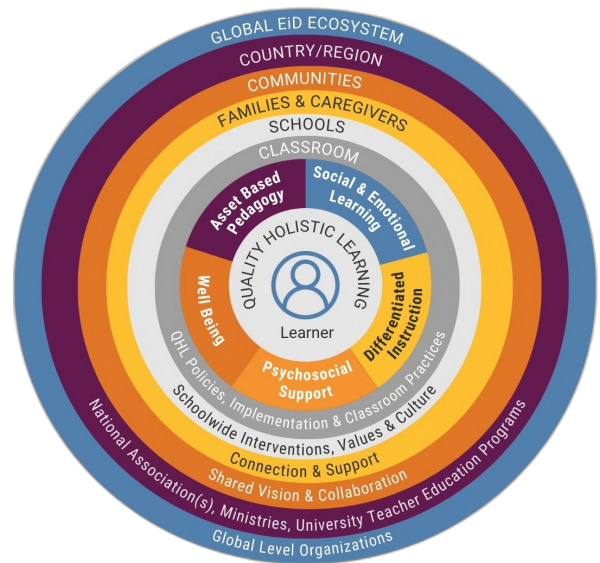
The Quality Holistic Learning Project community of practice has endured because it adds value for all involved, growing our professional and pedagogical practice, supporting our psychosocial well-being, and contributing to our connectedness and motivation as transnational educators with hope and passion to achieve SDG4: **inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all**.

CoP Components:
A community of practice consists of **three core components**: a domain (the why or the purpose), community (the who), and practice (the what, when, where, and how). On the following pages, QHL Project Fellows reflect on these CoP aspects, sharing their experiences and the value of communities of practice in their work lives and in their education in displacement communities.
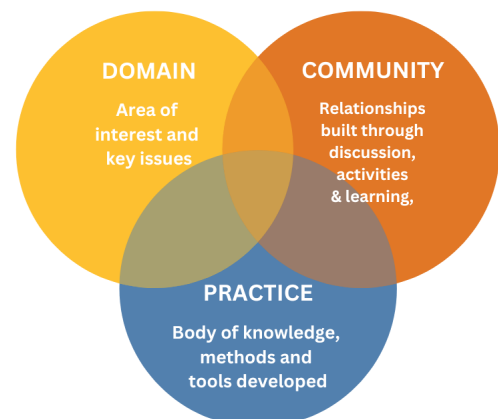
QHL Project Fellows' Reflections on the QHL Community of Practice

> *In my opinion, experience **sharing on classroom practices** is very important in a virtual community of practice for teachers in displacement contexts.*
>
> — Hadizatou Amou Ali, Educator in Niamey, Niger & QHL Senior Project Fellow

> *I believe sharing…classroom experiences and successful scenarios are the most important things that teachers need in the context of displacement…**Sharing our experiences and building our materials based on our understanding of the context in which we work** with and testing the courses that we designed by community workers and in the context of displacement…[Furthermore] **cooperation between us and the sharing of each member of the team with the assets he or she has is the secret of our success**.*
>
> — Jehad Khisania, Educator in Bekaa, Lebanon & QHL Senior Project Fellow

> *I believe that sharing experiences and **using simple digital techniques** or easily accessible resources were so helpful in my context of displacement. Besides, QHL provided us with variety of **skills and new concepts**, like Asset Based or Differentiation ones, **to apply with our learners** and make use…even with colleagues. QHL also paved better ways to know our learners and their backgrounds , and communicate with our surrounding (teachers, families…) so as to facilitate the social and emotional learning which in turn achieved better academic goals.Thus, **collaborative teamwork spirit, readiness to learn and the belief in our voices were best appreciated for my part in our community of practice**.*
>
> — Yanal Moussa, Educator in Saida, Lebanon & QHL Senior Project Fellow

> *In my opinion, it's important to spread awareness between teachers through more workshops titled: **Social Learning**. Moreover, it is important to help teachers create a peaceful mood and spread it in their classes…Workshops for teachers and **sharing experience can build healthier schools**…I believe that many supportive steps helped us climbing the mountain:*
>
> - *Team performance, organized tasks and missions to meet every goal set*
> - ***Appreciation, motivation, believing and trusting us as society support teachers***
> - *The open platform for discussion in different ways through writing, drawing, zoom, emails, questionnaire, cpl.cmnty, journal…*
>
> — Farah Farroukh, Educator in Saida, Lebanon & QHL Project Fellow

*To me, what stands out as the most important element in our community is our **members' passion for the work**. They are zealous even when tasks are daunting…Members of a virtual community of practice need to have loads of resilience because some things don't work out and it takes toughness to hang on …We have managed to remain afloat doing big feats like co-writing a handbook or co-designing a graphic on QHL, by playing [as a] team. We do everything together and it's fun. **We keep a joyful attitude and we are unafraid.** Anybody who wants to start and sustain a virtual community of practice has to have the following:*

- *A resilient spirit & a team spirit*
- *Patient leadership*
- *Good internet connectivity & good gadgets*
- *A teachable attitude…a hunger, a craving for new knowledge.*

- William Kiarie Muchugia, Educator in Nairobi, Kenya & QHL Senior Project Fellow

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*Our community managed to stay together because of **efficient communication and readiness to cooperate**; no matter what happens there's always someone to help. The only challenge we faced was our internet connectivity problem but because we used many channels to communicate, such as email and WhatsApp, we were able to overcome this issue…The value of community in practice from my perspective lies in the **cooperation and collaboration**, knowledge sharing as I **learned a lot from everyone** around, **personal wellbeing and support**, **resilience and social connections**.*

- Jihan Sondos, Educator in Saida, Lebanon & QHL Senior Project Fellow

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***The most important thing is that teachers come together** regardless of their educational backgrounds and statuses to learn and share their experiences and skills. Though not physically real, the community of practice differs much from information contained in a book or film because **educators interact, use and react instantly, emotionally or affectionately** to the non-verbal communication…Our community of practice has managed to stay together thanks to the creativity of our leading team, their smart use of soft skills, the continuous communication through monthly meetings, community tasks, different roles, **freedom to choose any easy way of communicating** be it Whatsapp, email and [so] on. Many ways got used like webinars, journals, financial support, flexibility and humility but **above all, EMPATHY!** …Community of practice boosts unity and bonding amongst teachers, engages them in new updates or complements to their prior training, creates awareness of soft skills and strategies unique to **bring learners back to studies**.*

- Vianney Mpitabavuma, Educator in Kakuma, Kenya & QHL Senior Project Fellow

Top Ten Recommendations for Establishing and Sustaining Virtual Communities of Practice (CoPs) in Education in Displacement Contexts

|	Recommendation	Starting Point(s)	Additional notes, tips, or resources
1	**Take an asset based approach**, identifying and building upon the experience, expertise, and passions of the CoP members.	***Beginning with asset mapping exercises can help to surface the talent in your community.*** Shared decision making around vision or purpose, roles, division or assignment of tasks, and accountability is critically important in CoPs and is easier to do if you know the expertise, skills, resources, and passions everyone is bringing to the table.	Too often, in displacement settings, educators are viewed as lacking and in need. While there are needs and there is always room for learning and growth, an asset orientation encourages a different perspective that recognizes the value of each member of the community to the success of that community. Learn more about asset based pedagogies in CE International's OER Library.
2	**Identify your CoP's passion and purpose together**, as a CoP.	***Define your vision and mission as a community.*** While there may be external directives or guidance that are the impetus for setting up a community of practice in the displacement context in which one is working (from a grant logic model, a ministry priority, a national curricular shift, etc.), it is imperative that the members of the CoP collaboratively define the specific purpose of the CoP based on their shared passion and vision.	This includes establishing goals around any processes, products, activities, or events that are aligned with the CoP purpose (and harmonized or complementary of any larger, external initiatives, pressures, or aspirations). It also includes building trust and collective identity toward shared goals and clarifying expectations around what the CoP will do, how, when, why, with whom, etc. Learn more about setting up CoPs via the resources listed at the end of this document.
3	**Distribute leadership** (and other roles) among CoP members.	***Don't have one leader. Build a shared or collective leadership team.*** As noted briefly above, sharing leadership and various responsibilities and roles among members of the CoP not only reflects an asset based orientation but also makes for a more agile and enduring community of practice. Sustainability requires collective leadership.	Learn more about practices that support democratic engagement and distributed leadership in the Sustainable Learning Framework by Dr. Diana Woolis, an organizing framework for the QHL Project's CoPs (described above by Fellows).

	Recommendation	Starting Point(s)	Additional notes, tips, or resources
4	**Remember people participate differently**; some are active and outgoing, some are lurkers or watchers, many are in a middle group: participatory but not stepping into the limelight or onto the stage often.	***Design for varied modes and levels of engagement from CoP members.*** Think about the easy but meaningful ways everyone can engage. Plan for more involved participation for some members. While designing and planning for CoP participation, think about equity of voice and representation. Ensure that those with less digital fluency, online connectivity, time, and/or resources also have opportunities to lead, co-create agendas and activities, build resources or innovate, and contribute to evaluation and impact reflections.	Offer multiple pathways for different but equitable participation, including in online, offline, and blended formats and both asynchronously and synchronously. Some people will be more able to contribute at their own pace and on their own schedule given connectivity limitations or life/work demands. Other CoP members may prefer synchronous, live events with direct and immediate interaction. When possible, include face-to-face gatherings in person or online to strengthen community connections, deepening trust and collaboration. For all planning, be intentional and mindful of the contexts in which CoP members are living, working, and joining the CoP events.
5	**Know local infrastructure and identify digital technologies in use**; think creatively about how to leverage those for your community of practice.	***Resource asset mapping is critically important.*** A quick survey of existing electricity, wifi/connectivity, available devices, and favorite technology tools, sites, and apps can help the CoP identify available resources as well as resource constraints.	WhatsApp is ubiquitous and very intuitive. It provided a great support for the QHL Project CoP and was a digital space the community returned to frequently. Understanding who had what type of device and where they might find power and data when needed, was also important for the QHL Project CoP. Knowing when electricity was scarce or when connectivity was a challenge helped the QHL Project CoP shift workflows, priorities, and processes. The team made use of simple, available, low-bandwidth technologies regularly.
6	**Introduce new digital tools thoughtfully** and with sufficient **time** to support all CoP members **to learn** how best to use them.	***Identify essential technologies, assess competencies among CoP members, and set up tutorials, workshops, and/or peer-to-peer support systems.*** Here again, asset mapping can be helpful. Who knows what and who can help support colleagues newer to the technology tools selected by the CoP?	Google Drive and Microsoft Sharepoint are growing in use globally, including in displacement contexts. Given limits in infrastructure that support online practice, however, many educators need time and support to learn how to use these tools (and many others) well. Find some free tutorials here: ● GCF Global Tech Basics ● GCF Global Sharepoint & Google Tutorials Many tool-specific tutorials are available on YouTube.

	Recommendation	Starting Point(s)	Additional notes, tips, or resources
7	**Provide devices, data bundles, and or wifi access** if possible.	***Mobilize resources specifically for the costs of working, learning, and gathering online.*** When available, allocate budgetary resources from grants and contracts to cover these costs. Additionally, look for partnerships with organizations and companies to offset costs or share resources.	Connecting and staying connected online is difficult and very costly in displacement and refugee settings. Planning for this through project budgets or via creative partnerships that provide access to computer settings, wifi hotspots, and otherwise are important aspects of establishing and maintaining a strong and inclusive community of practice.
8	**Think about accessibility and engagement**, beyond digital access and fluency.	***Use universal design for learning (UDL) principles.*** Think about the why, the what, and the how of learning and being in the CoP. Be responsive to CoP members' needs and creative in engagement and learning strategies. Stay connected to your members, as their preferences, needs, and desires shift. Learn more about UDL in this IDA paper.	Consider how participants can engage not only through forum chats and video conference calls, but also through audio posts and discussions, drawing, and other artistic and multimedia representations, and in varied ways that support each member in being as involved as they want and are able to be. Also, think about time and tasks as context-specific; build in flexibility and room for delays in project work at individual, collective, and systems levels.
9	**Center learning and growth** for the CoP, as a whole *and* for all members.	***Set up systems to document learning and growth.*** This may happen in formal ways, as part of a grant-funded or research project, or it may be less formal via discussion and brainstorming sessions. ***The key is to track the process and the journey, not only the product or end point.***	Beginning with the end in mind is a common and often helpful motivational and success strategy. Within displacement contexts, however, this focus on product over process risks losing important insights and overlooking opportunities to recognize and congratulate CoP members on their brilliance, resilience, contributions, and care. There are many twists and turns in displacement and along a CoPs journey. Tracking the learning and growth along that journey gives all involved a sense of accomplishment and pride.
10	**Celebrate successes** and create opportunities to cultivate joy. Attend, also, to the stressors and losses that are part of life.	***Take a holistic approach and put the well-being of community members at the heart of your CoP.*** Holistic connections exercise and strengthen the heart of your community of practice and fuel the vitality of its members.	There are many challenges for educators working within displacement and refugee education contexts. Intentionally building opportunities for celebration of achievements and for mourning of losses is not only part of shared human experience but also vital to taking care of ourselves and of each other, in community.

Appendix A: Workshops Hosted in Local and Regional Contexts, Supported by their QHL Project Community of Practice

Quality Holistic Learning (QHL) Project Fellows hosted workshops in a variety of formats in spring of 2022 and spring of 2023 to share, test, evaluate, receive feedback on, and learn from their colleagues during a piloting and revision phase of their instructional design co-creation process within the QHL Community of Practice. The following are images from some of the CoPs and workshops that came out of this QHL CoP led work. Note that while QHL Project Fellows were all active members of a virtual project CoP, many chose to lead offline workshops, some with online WhatsApp groups, to best reach and teach their colleagues about holistic learning pedagogies.

Online Teacher Learning Communities (TLCs) in Kenya
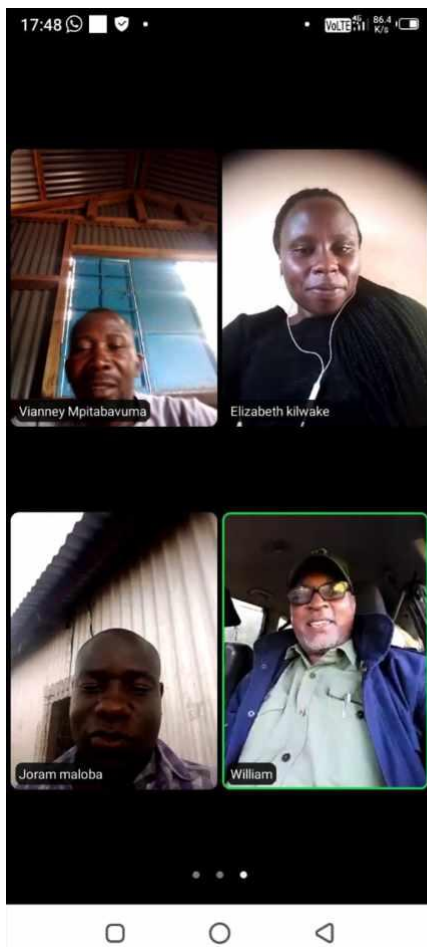
Offline Workshops in Kenya

Above: Workshop in Kakuma, Kenya
To the left: Workshop in Kilifi County, Kenya
Below: Workshop in Jamhuri Estate, Nairobi, Kenya

Offline Workshops in Niger (Supported by a WhatsApp Community of Practice)

Online, Offline, & Blended Workshops in Lebanon
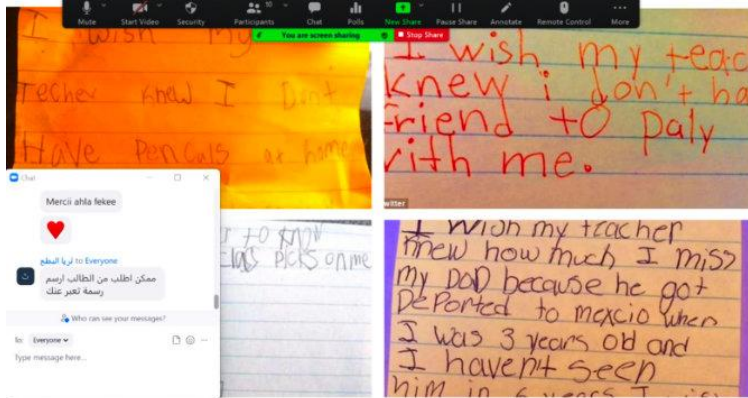
Workshop images above from Saida, Lebanon and from online regional workshops in Lebanon.

Workshop images below are from Bekaa, Lebanon in partnership with Sawa for Development.

Workshop images below are from Bekaa, Lebanon in partnership with Jusoor.
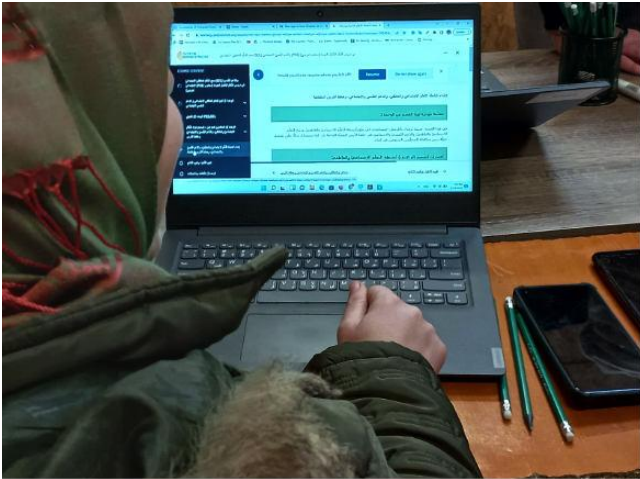
Appendix B: QHL CoP Knowledge Sharing Events & Efforts

In addition to workshops, teacher learning circles, and other professional development initiatives, QHL project fellows, consultants, and staff participated in a number of knowledge sharing events supported by the QHL Project community of practice.

Digital Teacher Professional Development Report Launch

Teach for Lebanon Professional Development Conference

Migration Summit   **Webinar with the ASU LEARN Initiative**

And shared their work [in a blog](#) published by REACH at Harvard Graduate School of Education

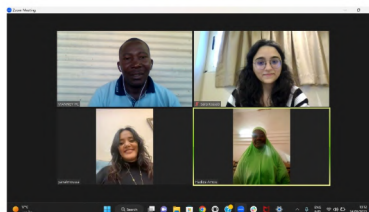# Quality Holistic Learning: Teachers Learning and Leading in Displacement Contexts

Photo provided by the authors

By Hadizatou Amou Ali, Sara Kassab, Yanal Moussa, and Vianney Mpitabavuma

27 FEBRUARY 2023

We are teachers. We work in displacement contexts: in urban areas in Niamey, Niger which only recently started experiencing an influx of refugees; with Palestinian, Iraqi, and Syrian refugees located throughout Lebanon, making up 1 in 4 residents of Lebanon; and with recently displaced refugees and communities of prolonged displacement residing in both refugee camps and urban areas of Kenya. Some of us are refugees or children of refugees. We are all advocates who support the learning of every young person in our classrooms, regardless of their status, prior schooling experiences, or current life circumstances. We have persevered through political and economic unrest, wars, the COVID-19 pandemic, climate crises, and many other challenges. We are committed to education and take pride in our work as educators.

What teachers in displacement need

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Additional Resources

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