

Returning to learning following the ongoing war in Gaza

- Supporting teachers and students in establishing new school routines and stimulating natural recovery

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Photo from Gaza. UNICEF/UNI485696/EI Baba

Introduction: As soon as a credible ceasefire agreement is in effect, the focus of support to the affected population will shift from saving lives during war, including meeting basic needs and providing medical assistance, to recovery and building a sense of safety. This will include supporting a return to learning, likely through temporary learning spaces, for children and youth in Gaza. Education services are uniquely positioned to facilitate holistic support and stimulate natural recovery after conflict. A gradual transition back to learning, however, requires strategic planning to overcome the barriers and challenges specific to this war. In this brief we offer reflections on how to open and operate learning spaces to support children and teachers in returning to regularized learning.

Aims

This brief aims to complement existing sector strategy by offering insights on the following:

1. Integration of new educational routines to improve well-being and academic functioning within existing strategies. The goal is to re-establish the provision of education within the Gaza Strip, including trauma-informed expectations of the return to learning with a long-term view of the recovery of the formal education system.
2. Support for teachers to address feelings of being overwhelmed in the post-war environment through the provision of a basic framework for teacher self-care while delivering instruction and support of students.

This brief is intended to support the education sector emergency response of the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) in Gaza. NRC works in close collaboration with the Education Cluster and key stakeholders, including the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), to plan and deliver humanitarian education service, including the establishment and operation of temporary learning spaces. The reflections offered here build upon the theoretical and practical perspectives presented in the earlier Educational Response Brief for Education in Emergencies (Schultz et al., 2023).

In view of the specific context to be expected in post-war Gaza and the severe lack of resources, serious difficulties can be expected in natural recovery for children and adolescents. All children in Gaza will need extra care and support. A considerable part of the essential help could be received in settings of structured learning. Therefore, the return of students and teachers to education is vital.

Teachers, counselors, educators, and parents or caregivers can help by stimulating and strengthening children's existing coping skills and providing new tools to improve their recovery from traumatic stress. In addition to natural support from the adults in children's lives, it is essential for students to receive targeted psychosocial support (PSS) in education settings (Schultz et al., 2023). Furthermore, teachers will require additional support in this context due to the universal loss and trauma suffered by adults in Gaza as well.

Most formal schools will probably not be functional for an extended period due to a) the extent of the damage to infrastructure and b) the use of any sufficiently intact school buildings as shelters for displaced people, many of whom have lost their homes and will not be able to vacate the premises even when hostilities cease.

By framing the process as a return to learning rather than a return to school, we emphasize that education can and must continue even when the infrastructure is not in place. Still, it is important to note that we are likely talking about temporary classrooms, classroom settings, and/or learning spaces rather than the familiar concept of formal schools.

Education tends to be deprioritized as a sector in conflict settings. We emphasize that education cannot wait, as it is an essential condition for natural recovery and an opportunity for broader, holistic support. We use the term "a transition back to learning" to refer to the need to adapt the content of education as we rethink the concept of learning for the Gaza context.

What should learning look like now?

A "soft start" to learning. The situation in Gaza is an ongoing humanitarian catastrophe. Following a credible ceasefire agreement, it will continue to take time before a sense of normality can be re-established. In the context of earlier wars and armed escalations in Gaza, UNRWA has built experience in launching a transition back to school through days and weeks of recreational or play-based activity before resuming progression of the national curriculum.

Due to the extreme situation and the extent of damage anticipated following the ongoing war, a longer period of transition should be considered: we recommend a period ranging from one to three months with a significantly shortened school day, starting with only two hours per day. A shorter day would benefit both students and teachers. Teachers would benefit from less planning and having a more manageable workload upon the initiation of the resumption of learning. They would thereby have more time for their own recovery and to engage in a structured plan for self-care. Students would receive a "soft start" in which they could socialize, rebuild routines, regain a sense of structure, and reestablish their capacity to concentrate.

More specifically, children will need time to gradually adapt to the new situation following months of exposure to trauma and extreme stress. It is reasonable to believe that people will need weeks and months to gradually process the events of and the loss resulting from months of war: what has happened to me, to other people, our neighborhood, and the whole of the Gaza Strip? Simply "showing up" at school may be the most achievable and commendable aim for children, teachers, and parents or caregivers in the first few weeks or even months. Initially, showing up for learning will be more important than the content and extent of learning.

Our expectations of what education can achieve should be flexible. Academic functioning is frequently impaired by emotional distress (e.g., Malarbi et al., 2016; Perfect et al., 2016). Therefore, many students will experience more challenges in learning. Their concentration will be impaired and thereby negatively affect their capacity for learning. A “soft start” to the resumption of structured learning will improve academic performance and allow more space for a focus on recovery. Since learning can only take place when distress has been addressed, teachers should expect and be supported to deliver more psychosocial support.

The two-hour school day could be a combination of play-based activity and activities that focus on and facilitate the learning process with the aim of building routines, freshening up study skills, and building academic motivation. This implies a transition period between established phases of the existing Education Sector Emergency Response Plan for Gaza in which Phase 1 focuses on mental health and PSS (MHPSS) through the provision of PSS and structured recreational sessions for children and Phase 2 focuses on the return to structured learning (see Occupied Palestinian Territory Education Cluster, 2024). A gradual transition allows for a “scaffolding” approach to avoid overwhelming both children and teachers.

During the war, a few temporary school centers managed to operate partially and ran sessions of Dabke, the traditional Palestinian folk music and dance. These sessions were very well-received by students and parents – and well-liked by teachers. Dabke and other traditional cultural activities, as well as activities like play, educational games, reading books aloud, and structured ways of storytelling (Buheji & Khunji, 2023) can foster cognitive abilities, resilience, and adaptability in children, which helps build capacity toward a return to academic learning. Such culture- and play-based activities could be led or supported by volunteers, such as parents or other community members, adding an element of community support and strengthening. Involving volunteers as teacher assistants in collaboration with teachers can further reduce the workload for teachers in this initial return to learning. Furthermore, some humanitarian organizations and agencies have been providing PSS and structured recreational sessions to children in displacement sites when conditions allow. Where suitable, facilitators employed to deliver these sessions can also support teachers or, if they are qualified teachers themselves, can integrate techniques from this phase of the response into lesson planning and delivery.

Both students and teachers will benefit from returning to the structure, social activity, and daily life of classes,

which signal a return to more normality. Still, even a gradual return to learning in the post-war context will necessitate PSS specifically tailored to both students and educators. Students should receive structured school-based PSS, allowing them to learn about natural stress reactions and cope with grief and stress. PSS should be integrated into daily teaching. Teachers should minimally receive instruction in the principles of self-care – and preferably will be invited to join structured peer-support groups together with fellow educators. Teachers would also need a minimum knowledge of student care through school-based PSS. An example of PSS for children is NRC’s Better Learning Programme (BLP; NRC, 2017, 2019, 2024). The two first levels of BLP are school-based and teacher-led PSS focusing on stress reduction (both traumatic and daily stress) and the improvement of study skills. The BLP has been culturally adapted for Palestine and was already being implemented in Gaza before the war by both UNRWA and the Ministry of Education. NRC has already been delivering an adapted version of the program, integrated with other toolkits, for PSS and structured recreational sessions in displacement sites while hostilities are ongoing.

Further integrated and holistic recovery support can also be delivered in educational settings. Good practices have been established in other contexts affected by conflict and displacement: offering a warm meal (school meals), distributing clothes (school uniforms or other suitable clothing) for children, using the structure and routine of classes to share messaging on physical and other risks affecting children, reinforcing hygiene and other public-health messaging and practices in classroom settings, and providing ongoing teacher professional development opportunities to reinforce education quality (see the minimum standards for education in emergencies; INEE, 2024).

Summary of reflections on how to structure and organize the transition back to learning:

- Initial education structure:
 - o A transitional period of one to three months before a full-scale return to learning.
 - o Short days, starting with two hours: a gentle start for students and teachers. Once routines are established, consider a gradual increase in school hours.
 - o A soft and gentle start with academic subjects, with a focus on refreshing the use of study skills.
 - o Combined sessions of play-/culture-based activity and academic content to allow students to rebuild learning capacity.
 - o Recruit volunteers and local organizations to support teachers in play-/culture-based activities,

especially culturally appropriate activities, such as Dabke. Consider also recruiting youth as volunteers.

- o Nutrition: classroom settings to facilitate a light lunch.
 - o Clothing and school materials to be delivered through classroom settings.
 - o Additional integrated responses when suitable and reflective of needs, including hygiene/public health messaging and the dissemination of risk-reduction information (e.g., explosives and demolished buildings).
- Educational framework for students:
- o Regular attendance: shorter schooldays are more manageable.
 - o Establishing routines and structure.
 - o Building a sense of safety.
 - o Addressing grief and stress.
 - o Receiving social support.
 - o A primary focus on holistic well-being, with a secondary focus on academic functioning through a slow and gentle start.
- Goals for teachers:
- o A manageable workload (shorter schooldays and volunteer support).
 - o Self-care: participating in structured peer-support groups, including psychoeducation about normal responses to trauma and loss.
 - o Engagement in ongoing professional development opportunities that improve capacities to deliver conflict-sensitive education, including discussions on students' need for psychosocial support.

Psychosocial needs of children and families

Students, teachers, youth, other educational personnel, volunteers, humanitarian service providers, and their families have all been, and continue to be, confronted with large-scale destruction and trauma due to the war and a long history of oppression and conflict. The absence of housing, food, and other necessities, combined with extended exposure to violence and loss, are sources of major physical and mental stress that need to be addressed. Although the current situation is extremely dire and it is anticipated that many children and adults will experience prolonged mental-health challenges, it is also important to note that, historically, both children and adults have shown an impressive capacity for functioning in the aftermath of trauma and devastation (Bonanno, 2021; Khamis, 2019; Qouta et al., 2008).

Regarding children, sometimes assumptions are made after trauma exposure: either that they are “damaged beyond repair” or that they are too young to be affected. Both assumptions are incorrect; children are often

deeply affected by trauma, just like adults, but, like adults, they also have a strong capacity to function. On an individual basis, the difficulties, needs, and strengths of both children and adults will vary (CTSNN, 2024).

The specific ways children and young people respond to traumatic exposure can also vary. They may include sleeping difficulties and nightmares, irritability, social withdrawal, depressive symptoms, regression to earlier developmental stages (e.g., losing language or returning to bedwetting), concentration difficulties, anxiety, and difficulty leaving parents or other important adults for even short periods of time (e.g. Dabbagh et al., 2023; Karam et al., 2014; Thabet et al., 2016). These responses may also vary by developmental stage. For example, some adolescents may show risk-taking behavior, while some young children may show clinginess to caregivers.

Parents may also show a range of mental and physical health difficulties, including, for example, posttraumatic stress, depression, anxiety, and somatic symptoms (Nickerson et al., 2017). Traumatic exposure and loss, as well as daily stressors in their aftermath, can contribute to these difficulties. In mass trauma situations like war and disaster, the mental load on people can also translate into more outbursts of family conflict and violence at home, as well as violence in the community (see, e.g., Istratii, 2023; Molyneaux et al., 2020; Van Daalen et al., 2022), which can be an additional source of trauma exposure for children.

It is important to take note of other vulnerable groups of children in post-war Gaza. Children with injuries and/or disabilities resulting from injuries will require additional consideration in our return to learning plans. Physical limitations and mental-health struggles resulting from adjustment to sudden disability may interfere in their ability to engage in learning as quickly as other children. Other examples are Deaf children and children who are hard of hearing who may be at risk of mental-health conditions and psychological distress because of social exclusion and limited accessible communication. See existing guidelines for schools in the Gaza Strip on mental health and psychosocial support for deaf and hard-of-hearing children (Scherer et al., 2023).

Finally, due to the large scale of this war, many children will have suffered the loss of not only family and community members but also the deaths of their peers. Grieving these losses will continue for some time, and teachers and other adults in the new learning spaces will be important facilitators of healing in the learning community. Awareness of the need for potential additional psychosocial help for affected children is essential.

Supporting teachers

Getting children back to learning relies on the effective work of teachers. After the catastrophic war on Gaza, all teachers will have themselves been exposed to potentially traumatic situations and loss. In addition, ongoing stress from the secondary effects of the war (e.g., displacement, losses, living conditions, food shortages, injuries/disabilities) may continue to affect teachers. For a successful return to learning, teachers will have to be supported in additional ways.

Emphasis on the self-monitoring of teachers' emotional and mental health. Teachers may struggle with their own post-trauma difficulties (including sleep problems, distress, and grief). This may lead to reduced teaching capacity, irritability, more feelings of being overwhelmed, and difficulty hearing about the children's or families' traumas and losses. Promotion of self-care as essential for teachers is the starting point for monitoring their own physical and mental well-being. Ongoing scheduled peer-support groups for teachers are needed to provide spaces in which to express and validate difficulties and access help from others. Initially shortened school days and practical help from volunteers can decrease the load on teachers as they adjust to teaching with their own post-war responses. Finally, as resources allow, it will be beneficial to provide straightforward ways for teachers to access additional PSS when needed.

Focus on teachers' strengths and abilities. Teachers benefit personally from engaging in teaching and re-building the learning community. Being able to teach and help children will increase the teachers' sense of their ability to make positive changes in their environment. Research indicates that teachers are often uncertain about their roles and how to assist children effectively after their students have been exposed to traumatic stress (Alisic, 2012). Providing teachers with structure for the return to learning and information on how to support their students who may be struggling is essential to helping them succeed. In addition, helping teachers maintain realistic expectations of how teaching and learning may be different in this situation will lead to better outcomes. Helping teachers understand the gradual plan to return to learning can help them focus on small successes (e.g., just showing up, returning to routines, increasing motivation and capacity for learning) to build toward a return to schooling more like what they were accustomed to in the past.

Focus on the learning community. Disaster research (Gallagher et al., 2019) has shown that extremely strong social/community engagement ("taking it all on one's shoulders") can be a predictor of increased distress. An emphasis on rebuilding learning with support

from organizations and others in the community can show teachers that they are not solely responsible for children's improvement and allow them to accept their own limitations.

Returning to learning campaign – doing this together

The transition back to learning will most likely be a process and will need a Returning to Learning Campaign. During the planning stage, stakeholder engagement in this campaign will be a critical factor in the success of children's re-engagement with education.

- a. Local adults, youth and children are the experts and should be engaged through broad, ongoing consultation. Local community members can identify resources (including people, materials, and opportunities) and sources of risk (including locations, people, or practices).
- b. Culturally appropriate support cannot happen in a vacuum. Planning and implementation need to be discussed with cultural brokers. This will likely include imams, and mosques or other religious sites may be of importance in the response.
- c. Depending on the structure of education provision as determined by the education authorities and sector partners, principals may be critical if temporary learning spaces are structured as "schools." Principals and/or other community leaders are likely to heavily influence engagement with education and should be involved in service planning and provision.
- d. Other individuals can play important roles. For example, facilitators who have been delivering PSS and structured recreational sessions, Dabke instructors, and community volunteers may offer important perspectives and may be able to be engaged as teachers (if qualified) or teacher assistants.

"Showing up" is a first step in this for both students and teachers and should not be underestimated. Moreover, in the short term, as discussed above, education may need to serve different functions than it did before, and a new approach may be needed to motivate students and families for learning again. It is recommended to ask students, parents or caregivers, and teachers what school means for them now and how a return to learning can be made a reality. These conversations will allow for practical ideas about what is feasible and motivating.

Research suggests that, in the Arab world, war traumas are to a large extent seen as a collective tragedy rather than as individual experiences, which necessitates a

support and recovery focus that is not on individual treatment alone but that is geared toward the collective community (Hosny, et al., 2023, 2024). One way of involving the collective community could be collaboration on launching the Returning to Learning Campaign.

Key recommendations

- A transitional period of one to three months before a full-scale return to learning (see the separate summary above).

-Engage individuals and the community:

- o Engage children, teachers, and parents by asking about what the role of classrooms can be now, and what would be motivating/enabling a return to learning: ask, “What should learning look like now?”
- o Engage youth to participate in cleanup and repair work in their learning space and their community, provided that it is safe and under the supervision of local authorities.
- o Engage teachers in designing learning spaces and

creating strategies and programming. Teachers are experts on teaching, learning, and their own well-being (see, e.g., INEE, 2022).

o Engage teachers to participate in peer-to-peer support.

- Define a school-based and teacher delivered psychosocial support strategy:

o Encourage teachers to teach about natural stress reactions, reactions to grief, and coping strategies.

o Encourage teachers to be willing to discuss children’s reactions to traumatic experiences and grief with children.

o Be aware of, and question, assumptions made about children, parents, and teachers (e.g., that children are damaged beyond repair or are too young to be affected, that parents or teachers are too traumatized to be able to look after children when this may actually give them meaning).

o Be aware of the possibility of increased violence at home, at school, and in the community as a source of new trauma exposure for children.

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Guiding the Delivery of Psycho-Social Support

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Educational Response Brief for Education in Emergencies

This document, part of a series of briefs addressing the protection and support of children in emergency contexts, serves

as academic foundation for practical initiatives. The series aims to present a framework of research-informed principles to guide the planning, delivery, and evaluation of responses for education in emergencies. This collaborative effort involves the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and UiT, the Arctic University of Norway.

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Recommended Form of Citation

Schultz, J.H., Alisic, E., Harb, G.J., Diab, S.Y., Al-Shanti, K., Ashour, A., Wadsworth, D., Barhoum, E., Schenzle, S., Forsberg, J.T., & Lodi, C. (2024). Returning to learning following the ongoing war in Gaza – Supporting teachers and students in establishing new school routines and stimulating natural recovery. *Educational Response Brief for Education in Emergencies, No. 8*. UiT, the Arctic University of Norway.

