

'Supporting the Supporters'- refugee teachers and teachers living in protracted conflict

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Location	Jordan and Palestine
Teacher Profiles	Refugee teachers and host community teachers
Topic	Teacher well-being

DESCRIPTION OF CRISIS-SPECIFIC CHALLENGE

The main crisis-specific challenge NRC seeks to address in their 'supporting the supporters' interventions under the Better Learning Program (BLP) programme is that children affected by crises in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region have heightened psychosocial support (PSS) and social and emotional learning (SEL) needs which are, largely, unmet by the existing education systems. As a result, there is demand for additional capacity building for teachers in both formal and non-formal education settings to address these needs:

- **Formal education in MoE/UNRWA schools in Palestine:** Formal school teachers who have limited professional support through the formal system and who are struggling with their own sense of well-being because of the protracted crisis and occupation;
- **Non-formal education programmes in refugee camps in Jordan:** Camp-resident staff who are well trained by NRC in SEL and PSS programming, but who have their own social, emotional, and well-being needs which are often unmet.

In both cases, 'supporting the supporters' mechanisms are needed to ensure adequate support for these educators, both in terms of professional development as well as building their capacity, resilience, and own well-being to be able to effectively meet the PSS needs of the children they work with.

BRIEF OVERVIEW

NRC's response to the above challenges over the past years has been to establish comprehensive 'supporting the supporters' components for the teachers in its BLP programming. The components include both professional capacity development opportunities,

as well as mechanisms to address the well-being of the caregivers themselves. These components were created in response to:

1. Results of NRC's external evaluation of the BLP in 2016 (Shah 2016) which showed that NRC was not adequately caring for its carers (such as counselors, teachers, parents and master trainers);
2. Regular structured feedback sessions carried out in After Action Reviews with staff through an internal counselling mechanism (explained further below), to tailor the specific support provided to PSS service delivery on its staff and partners as service providers;

Hence, in 2017 and 2018, NRC started to pilot 'supporting the supporters' initiatives in Palestine and Jordan, in tandem with teacher professional development opportunities.

The non-formal education programme in Jordan instigated the following components:

- **Establishment of a Monitoring and Support Unit (MSU)** which acts as an internal counselling department for BLP and PSS staff composed of camp resident staff (Syrian refugees). The team is trained in child protection and PSS techniques and has the specific mandate to monitor child protection issues and to identify children who are in need of additional PSS support, including whether they need internal or external referral. The MSU also provides technical advice, workshops, and capacity building to other staff who deliver BLP to children to better be able to cope with emotional burdens.
- **Regular professional debriefing and learning sessions** with teachers as an opportunity for teachers to unload, debrief, and recover after PSS delivery.

- **Regular subject-specific capacity development opportunities** for BLP staff, with technical staff consistently following up.
- **Opportunities for personal/professional growth** for staff, including being able to move away from delivering PSS and BLP interventions if required, and opportunities to take on more roles of responsibility within the programme.

In Palestine, these initiatives have been implemented by specialised local partners, namely the Palestinian Counselling Centre (PCC) and the Gaza Community Mental Health Program (GCMHP). Partners were selected based on their local expertise in this field. A series of meetings with NRC took place to define the objective of the proposed intervention, the strategy, and the methodology. The intervention focused on the following components:

- **Capacity building focusing on self-awareness and regulation techniques to deal with stress** including breathing and relaxation exercises;
- **Expressive arts therapy** including writing, drama, dance, movement, painting, and music;
- **Recreational games** to improve well-being and reduce stress in open air settings;
- **Phone hotline** made available where qualified operators can refer counselling requests or provide online counselling services aiming at delving deeply into the major stressors affecting teachers' personal and professional lives;
- **Provision of PSS materials** as part of a kit in tandem with capacity building to teaching and non-teaching staff to implement PSS related activities in schools.

EVIDENCE AND OUTCOMES

Providing PSS-based services to children in camps by guiding them through processes to deal with symptoms of trauma and distress, including sharing of horrible memories about war, can result in emotional and well-being burdens for the staff. Similarly, living under constant attacks in Gaza and violations of international humanitarian law (IHL) in West Bank, results in living constantly with high levels of stress. The main outcomes of integrating the 'supporting the supporters' mechanisms into the BLP include the following main results:

- **BLP teaching staff** overall, reported having an increased sense of personal resilience and well-being. Specifically, 74% (N=113) who were part of this initiative in West Bank reported that it was a source of support and 86% understood better the importance of practising self-care approaches in their personal and professional lives. 64% (N=57) in Gaza showed clear improvement in their ability to manage stress and 84% female teachers reported improvement in their daily work and in solving personal life problems. Overall in Gaza, 76% reported having improved their work deliverables by becoming more accurate and more motivated (Shah 2016). In Jordan, it was reported that staff were coping better with the stress of living in camps: 'I began practicing the content of BLP in my daily life. I started becoming calmer and my anger gradually faded away. I feel I'm a better teacher and person today. I have the knowledge and tools to change the way these children, and myself, view life. The students I work with continuously give me the motivation and encouragement to deal with my own problems' (Shah 2017).
- **Camp-resident refugee staff** in Jordan, have grown professionally covering now managerial positions in the NRC Learning Centres. They have been placed in charge of capacity development and performance of ten staff in each unit dealing with PSS support, outreach and community engagement, curriculum development, and quality control.
- **BLP service provision to children** suffering from trauma has strengthened as a result of having improved skills, practices, expertise, and motivation: 'We are now able to understand why children are being very challenging and aggressive, we understand now how much do they suffer and we were not considering that before'. In Jordan, data suggest that 80% of BLP students reported not having nightmares at all after the completion of the BLP individual sessions. A further 19% reported only having 1-2 nightmares per week (compared to on average 5 nights with nightmares/week at the start). A very small minority of students (less than 1%) continued to have 3 or more nightmares per week. Teachers reported stronger improvement on children' well-being as a consequence of teachers having greater skills and improved well-being themselves (Shah 2016).

LIMITATIONS, CHALLENGES, AND/OR LESSONS LEARNED

Jordan

- Camp-resident staff have their own traumas and social and emotional distress with few services in camps available.
- NRC camp resident staff (with a small number of exceptions approved by the Ministry of Interior) are not allowed to leave the camp. This limits the occasion for professional exchange.
- The camp management's cash for work policy includes a staff rotation system which has been one of the main challenges exposing NRC to the risk of losing expertise. NRC has advocated to limit the rotation only to certain positions, excepting those staff who are engaged in PSS/child protection and education and should not be considered under a cash for work scheme.
- Displaced populations in camps were a great resource in the management of the crisis and during this post-crisis phase. Camp management policies should encourage the strategy of engaging with displaced populations from the early stage of a crisis.

Palestine

- Protracted conflict and intensity of attacks in Gaza and violation of IHL in West Bank raise the level of stress and hopelessness, limiting the abilities of teaching and non-teaching staff to completely recover.
- Based on the pilot carried out in Palestine, it was suggested to increase the number of capacity building/training activities in order to increase the level of support and consistent follow-up and to have this initiative institutionalised in MoE schools.

REFERENCES

Shah, Ritesh. 2016. *Improving children well-being: an evaluation of NRC Better Learning Program in Palestine*. Norwegian Refugee Council.

Shah, Ritesh. 2017. *Most Significant Change Story Teacher at Zaatari Refugee Camp, After Action Review in Jordan*. Norwegian Refugee Council.

LINKS

- End the Nightmares: <https://youtu.be/vnx6OARQeYs>

TEACHER PROFILE

Story one: Resident staff Zaatari Camp

I am from, Syria- Duraa- Nawaa. I have been working with NRC for 6 years and the last 4 years I've been working in the Monitoring and Support Unit. NRC provided me with many professional development opportunities, this helped me both professionally and personally in re-adapting to the camp's life and facing difficulties. Supporting children who are traumatised made me being very proud both professionally and personally.

The professional development was very useful not only from the professional point of view. The camp environment was new for me and not easy. I learned how to support the community, children and other teachers. Children in camps are so different between each other and have different backgrounds and



MSU teacher. Photo credit Thilo Remini

conditions. Most of them when we started BLP3 (Fighting Nightmares and Sleeping Problems) were experiencing the symptoms of severe distress and were sharing horrible memories about the war. As part of my job I was also supporting the other teachers working at the Learning Centre. Teachers are dealing with different challenges and needs in working with children who are hyperactive, isolated and underachievers these are all symptoms of traumatic stress which we try to address under the Monitoring and Support Unit operations and using several relaxation techniques.

I like to provide assistance to those in need, sometimes is difficult because I am aware that this can affect my emotional well-being. Working and living in camp is not easy, the environment around doesn't help our emotional well-being, and sometimes when we don't manage to support properly all the children in need this might affect ourselves too. Continuous support with workshops and supervision sessions is needed. Sharing our experience with other MSU staff is essential and helpful both professionally and emotionally.

Story two: Formal school teacher in Gaza

S.M is a female Math teacher living in Rafah, in Southern Gaza Strip. She has been working as a teacher for more than ten years, supporting her family including her husband who is not working any longer.

S.M.'s home was demolished during the 2012 war and the family fled to her relative's home for a period of over six months. In 2015, her big brother died and she took care of his 5 children. During her first pregnancy, she was affected by cancer but managed to survive.

S.M. was selected to participate in the BLP 'Supporting the Supporters' program by her school principal due to the fact that she was showing signs of depression and stress, together with the fact that her performance at work had declined. After having participated in the program, S.M. reported the following: "My life has changed completely, now I am happy and I feel better because I practice the techniques I learnt, I manage to get rid of the past negative thoughts, and now I feel I can support the others, particularly my sisters when she goes through hard times." S.M.'s school principal recognized the change and recommended S.M. to cascade the skills and techniques learnt to her peer-colleagues.



Photos of Story 2 from Gaza