A systemic approach to teacher development – the UNRWA way

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<th>Organization</th>
<th>United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA)</th>
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<td>Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and the West Bank</td>
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<td>Teacher Profile</td>
<td>Refugee teachers</td>
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DESCRIPTION OF CRISIS-SPECIFIC CHALLENGE

The context in which UNRWA provides education in each of its five Fields of operation presents both generic and specific challenges which have to be taken into account in its planning. In Gaza, the situation remains volatile, with recurrent hostilities and an ongoing blockade entering its twelfth year. In the West Bank, refugees continue to experience difficult socioeconomic conditions, often due to occupation-related policies and practices. In Syria, UNRWA estimates that the ongoing conflict has left 95% of Palestine refugees in critical need of sustained humanitarian assistance. Lebanon too has faced the challenges of an influx of Syrian and Palestine refugees from Syria (PRS), with Palestine refugees having high rates of poverty, limited employment opportunities, and being deeply dependent on UNRWA services. More recently, weeks of political upheaval and demonstrations has led to UNRWA, and Governmental school closure. In Jordan, Palestine refugees suffer from the high costs of living, high poverty levels and overcrowding in the camps. Throughout these challenges UNRWA, however, has ensured the provision of education for Palestine refugee students.

Although the UNRWA Education Programme had achieved a good reputation, likely reflecting the support of UNESCO from the early 1950s, an independent external review of the UNRWA Education Programme in 2009 highlighted the need for change. It described a teaching model that was didactic, with teacher-based classroom practices unlikely to support the development of students’ 21st century skills. This review further highlighted the need for strengthening the professional development of teachers and ensuring the provision of ongoing professional support to both teachers and school leaders. Moreover, the lack of agency-wide policies, strategies, and evidence-based approaches were considered to be negatively impacting on the potential of the education programme to support the learning needs of all UNRWA students. This evaluation served as a springboard for the UNRWA Education Department to lead an Agency-wide systemic programme reform from 2011 to 2016.

BRIEF OVERVIEW

The Education Reform sought to strengthen the UNRWA education system and to this effect it addressed three key levels – policy, strategy/structural, and individual capacity development. Interrelated but defined programmatic areas were also determined relating to teachers, curriculum, student assessment, student inclusion and well-being. Strengthened planning, monitoring and evaluation, and measurement of impact underpinned the whole reform and throughout the role of the teacher was central.

To explicitly address this central role, an UNRWA Teacher Policy was developed; this provides a framework for teacher management, their professional development, career progression, and well-being. In so doing, the policy seeks to strengthen both the day-to-day, and the longer term professional support system. Teacher toolkits, such as those for Inclusive Education and Human Rights and Conflict Resolution and Tolerance, and the flagship School-Based Teacher Development (SBTD) and Leading for the Future (LftF) programmes help teachers better cope with the challenges they face. The reform approach to teacher development was innovative in that it enabled teachers to learn in situ, alongside their peers and have the overall responsibility for their own development. However, they are supported throughout to reflect on their own practice, learn about new pedagogies and their impact on children’s learning, and try out new ideas and approaches.
Another key area of the Teacher Policy is career progression, with successful completion of substantive professional development programmes, alongside other key criteria (years in profession and overall performance evaluation), now leads to staff ‘grade’ enhancement. Teacher management and support was also strengthened through Field-based professional structures, i.e. the Strategic Support Units and these are the Quality Assurance Unit, the Assessment Unit, and the Professional Development and Curriculum Unit.

In this way the Teacher Policy and its different strands have directly impacted teacher well-being through career progression and better professional support, but also through the Communities of Practice that have developed as teachers undertake professional development together. In Syria for instance, the UNRWA teachers were determined to move forward with the study of the SBTD programme despite the conflict. They reported later that the peer discussions played a key role in helping them cope better with the impact of the conflict on their work.

**EVIDENCE AND OUTCOMES**

Reflecting the broader Education Reform and its emphasis on monitoring and evaluation of the Education programme as a whole, the progress and impact of the Teacher Policy is continuously measured at both system and programmatic level. At the system level, UNRWA monitors, evaluates, and measures progress and achievements through the Agency-wide Common Monitoring Framework (CMF). Within the CMF there are universal education indicators at both Outcome and Output levels. At ‘outcome’ level, a Classroom Observation study was developed and implemented with a partner university; this looks at the nature of teaching and learning practices in classrooms. At the ‘output’ level, indicators measure the prevalence of human rights culture and practices in classrooms and the overall equity of educational learning outcomes.

Evidence of the impact of the holistic focus on teachers through the reform, and now the UNRWA Medium Term Strategy, is indicated by these student learning outcomes which have improved in all grades and subjects and across all domains (content, cognitive, and higher order thinking skills). The percentage of students reaching the “Achieved” or “Advanced” levels in grade 8 Maths increased by 35% over this period. Similarly, the Perceptonal Survey showed improvement in teachers’ enjoyment of teaching, teacher motivation, and stakeholders’ perceptions of classroom practices.

The newly established UNRWA School Quality Assurance process was developed once the reform was in place. It focuses on measuring the performance of the schools and its teachers with regard to all aspects that had been addressed over the previous years, from student well-being to parental engagement.

There has been recognition of the quality and innovation of the UNRWA Education Reform by the Host countries, the region, and even at a global level among education stakeholders. The World Bank 2014 report, “Learning in the Face of Adversity”, describes the strong results of the UNRWA Education Programme in terms of its quality, inclusiveness, and equity. The UNRWA Education in Emergencies approach was showcased as a “promising practice” in refugee education in the initiative led by UNHCR, Pearson, and Save the Children at a side event at the UN General Assembly in 2017. More recently, an external performance assessment commissioned by several top donors, through the Multilateral Organisation Performance Assessment Network (MOPAN), commended the agency for its systemic reform in education and said that it is “characterised by a high technical competence,” efficiency, and quality (MOPAN 2019, 7).

**LIMITATIONS, CHALLENGES, AND/OR LESSONS LEARNED**

A holistic, overarching approach to teacher development, teacher management, professional development, career progression, and well-being is what makes the difference with regards to a quality education system.

There have been some challenges with regard to the implementation of this holistic approach. These could be said to be of a financial, administrative, political, and professional nature. The instability of the operating environment continues to impact the implementation of the Teacher Policy; the recurrent financial challenges that the agency faces has led to an increase in class size, a reduction in education posts, and an increase in daily paid teachers. These various challenges have also led to uncertainty among the Palestine refugee community, not only because of the threat they pose to the provision of quality education by UNRWA, but
also for what they see as the wider implications with regard to the future of the agency and themselves as Palestine refugees.

Despite these challenges UNRWA and the UNRWA education continues to strive for quality, inclusive, and equitable education by investing in its teachers.

REFERENCES


LINKS

- The UNRWA School Based Teacher Development, UNRWA (2013) - https://www.unrwa.org/sbtd