Tawasol: A pilot project offering extended, online professional development for Syrian and Egyptian teachers in the Syrian informal learning sector in Egypt

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DESCRIPTION OF CRISIS-SPECIFIC CHALLENGE

In order to provide every child with primary and secondary education by 2030, 69 million new teachers are required (Global Partnership for Education 2019). Meanwhile, the world witnesses the largest number of displaced individuals in human history, with challenges to recruitment, training and retention of teachers in emergency contexts. Refugee children are most acutely impacted by current teacher shortages and are five times more likely to be out of school than non-refugee children (UNHCR 2016).

After the arrival of a large number of Syrian refugees in Egypt in 2011, a presidential decree equated the treatment of Syrian refugees in Egypt to that of Egyptian citizens with regards to education and health services. Significant progress has been made since then towards improving enrolment rates. However, some barriers related to access and quality of education remain in the public school system, including overcrowded classrooms, depleted resources, dialect barriers, and long distances required to reach schools. In addition, the number of education personnel available to support the diverse needs of refugee learners is insufficient. As a result, many Syrian refugee children in Egypt use a combination of public and community-based schools to realize the best possible education. In 2018, Plan International Egypt (PIE) received funding from DG ECHO for *Tawasol: Learning Coexistence*, a project responding to the education and child protection needs of the most vulnerable girls and boys among the Syrian refugee community and Egyptian host communities in six areas across Greater Cairo, Alexandria, and Damietta.

BRIEF OVERVIEW

Through *Tawasol*, PIE committed to supporting 14 Syrian-led learning centres (SLCs) across the country, many operating with minimal resources and without highly-qualified teachers. Consultations were held with a representative sample of 166 educators out of the total target of 255 who received the face-to face trainings in the SLCs, including 14 head teachers/ academic supervisors. Sample respondents confirmed an almost balanced stress on needs for training on psychosocial support (PSS) and social emotional learning (SEL), classroom management, and managing large classes. Next were requests for training on lesson planning, child protection, the Egyptian curricula, and code of conduct. Many educators confirmed willingness to explore distance learning, alongside access to and skills to use ICT.

A face-to-face *Primary School Teachers in Crisis Contexts-Introductory Training Pack* (TiCC-ITP) training, developed by the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE), was conducted for five days in each location during January 2019. This was intended to build basic teaching competencies for new or inexperienced educators. The TiCC-ITP is comprised of an introductory training as well as four core modules on:

a. Teacher's Role and Well-being;
b. Child Protection, Well-being and Inclusion;
c. Pedagogy; and
d. Curriculum and Planning.

Following PIE's face-to-face TiCC-ITP training, a pilot online course (also called *Tawasol*) was developed and implemented by Plan International and the Carey Institute for Global Good's Center for Learning in Practice (CIGG-CLP), aiming to extend learning and deepen conversations around well-being, inclusion, social and emotional learning, lesson planning and assessment. The pilot course was designed around TiCC core competencies using TiCC-ITP content, and

CIGG's Sustainable Learning Framework.

A six-week facilitated course and community of practice was designed for Syrian educators and host-community educators in Egypt. Participants were provided with relevant materials in Arabic, including videos and activities for practice, and had opportunities to dialogue with each other and a team of facilitators, guided by CIGG's Center for Learning in Practice instructional team. All content and facilitation was delivered in Arabic on a mobile learning platform to support participation. The entire *Tawasol* pilot course can be thought of as a blended learning endeavour; incorporating face-to-face and online platform components.

Tawasol pilot course set out to develop and test a blended learning professional development program that capitalizes on, as well as refines, understanding of local assets and capacities of Syrian refugee and host-community educators in Egypt.

Tawasol pilot course focused on the following objectives:

- Develop a Community of Practice within learning centres to foster collaboration and sharing of resources, cultivate teacher leadership, and build sustainable professional learning models.
- Enhance educators' knowledge and skills to develop positive classroom cultures, build safe and productive learning environments, and increase student academic achievement and well-being.

Fourteen participants were enrolled in the online learning platform from all SLCs: ten representatives from Damietta SLCs, two from Greater Cairo, and two from Alexandria. Of those, eight completed the entire course. The other six had variable levels of engagement on the platform.

Blended learning allows focused, flexible learning whereby participants can access structured content as best suits their schedules and available technology, while support and discussion around topics and materials presented on the online platform are available.

The online component of *Tawasol* was delivered in four modules across six weeks reflecting TiCC-ITP, including a one-week introductory foundation, a two-week module on the concepts of well-being and SEL, a two-week module on lesson planning and types of assessment, and a concluding/further professional development planning module in the final week. (Figure 1).

The pilot was delivered through the CIGG-CLP online learning platform, with weekly MeetUps facilitated by a team of Arabic-speaking volunteers with varied and complementary areas of educational expertise using Zoom platform.

EVIDENCE AND OUTCOMES

Surveys were a key feedback source during this pilot and were administered at the beginning, middle and end of the course. Participants confirmed that *Tawasol* pilot course was a success as they self-reported increased confidence and growth across their pre- and post-training survey results. (Figure 2).

Week 1: Getting Started
- Orientation
- Our community norms & practices
- Why we teach & our teaching philosophies
- Our professional learning goals

Weeks 2 & 3: Well-being and Learning
- Taking care
- Social and emotional learning
- Ensuring safe, inclusive & productive classrooms
- Checking in: Evaluation & feedback

Weeks 4 & 5: Pedagogy, Curriculum and Planning
- Lesson planning
- Lesson study #1
- Assessment (Formative & Summative)
- Lesson study #2

Week 6: Closing and Next Steps
- Personal reflections
- Collective hopes
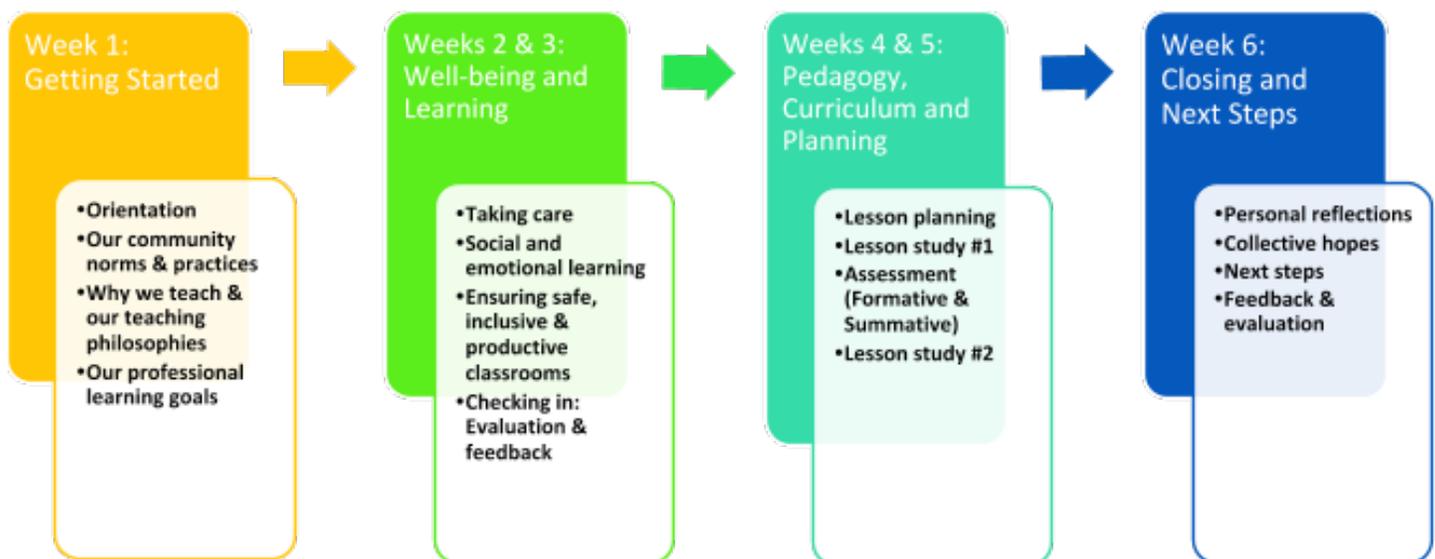- Next steps
- Feedback & evaluation

Figure 1: *Tawasol* Pilot Online Course Modules

Overall the *Tawasol* pilot project was considered a success. Participant and facilitator feedback was overwhelmingly positive and both self-reported data and facilitator assessments indicate growth and progress along key indicators for the project.

The teachers working in the learning centres are highly motivated and eager to engage in professional learning communities. The teachers in this context are struggling with issues of bullying among students, providing psychosocial support for students, and building trauma-informed systems at their learning centres and within the community. They are overwhelmed by these concerns and prioritize learning and support in these areas. Offering a blended learning opportunity was a creative new idea. It allows for focused learning and discussion around topics and materials presented in the online course. The weekly Meet Ups are a critical component of building community and sharing concerns and resources in real time. Having multiple facilitators allows for needed scheduling flexibility, anchors the learning in the varied expertise of the facilitators, and provides a strong network of support.

LIMITATIONS, CHALLENGES, AND/OR LESSONS LEARNED

Challenges identified included:

- difficulties with translation and identification of quality multimedia resources in Arabic;
- inadequate on-boarding for participants, highlighting the need for a face-to-face kick-off event;
- a lack of adequate technological resources and competencies among participants; and
- problems scheduling synchronous meetings for participants from multiple learning centres.

Recommendations and lessons learned related to the implementation of future blended courses include:

- taking into consideration different work schedules and time zones during course planning;
- not underestimating the need for, and power of, synchronous and face-to-face gatherings or Meet Ups;
- organizing an in-country kick-off event with all participants and facilitators is ideal, if feasible;
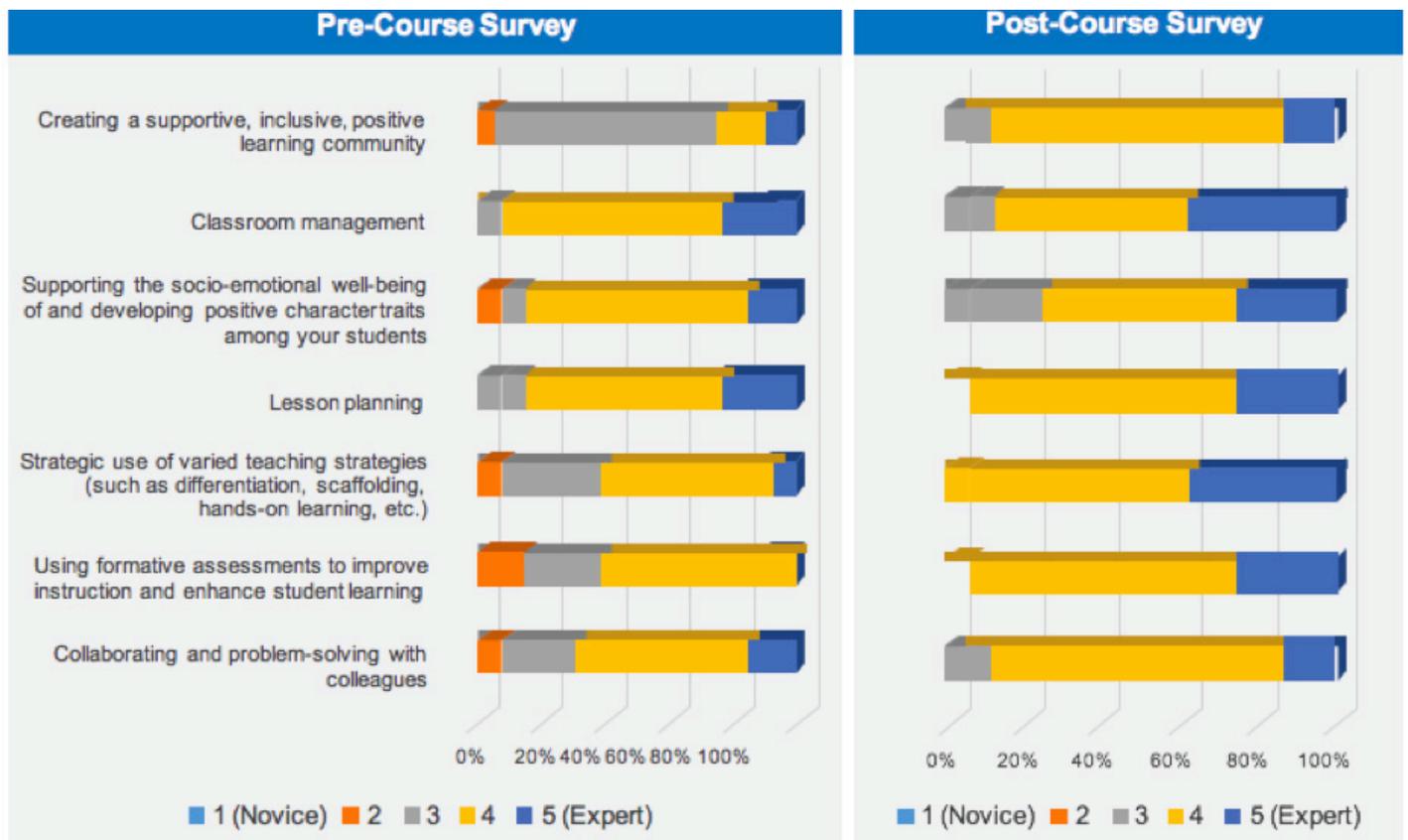

Figure 2: Tawasol Pilot Pre- and Post-Course Survey Data

- keeping in mind different communication styles and participant needs;
- maintaining digital spaces for community to gather after the course or "official" activity ends, and planning to keep discussion forums and other communication channels open after the course ends for ongoing support and dialogue; and
- ensuring that teachers understand and feel comfortable with the technology that will be used including registering, posting messages, communicating with each other and the facilitators.

Recommendations and lessons learned related to the course design, curriculum, and pedagogy include:

- inviting teachers to express their learning needs and goals through pre-course surveys and throughout the course in dialog with facilitators and learning coaches;
- finding online material in the respective language (Arabic) can be challenging, therefore investing adequate resources for identification of linguistically appropriate materials and for translation is critical;
- simplicity of course design is key;
- experts in social and emotional learning should be included on the facilitation team and/or in the course "guest speaker" schedule;
- designing reflective assignments and engaging in reflective discussions is highly important for a sustainable knowledge construction (i.e. online material is just a trigger for further skill development and knowledge construction); and
- providing support and follow-up to sustain knowledge building and professional relationship building during and after the course.

REFERENCES

Global Partnership for Education. 2019. "Education Challenges." https://www.globalpartnership.org/education/education-challenges

UNHCR. 2016. "Missing Out: Refugee Education in Crisis." September 2016. https://www.unhcr.org/57d9d01d0

LINKS

- Carey Institute for Global Good - Center for Learning in Practice: https://learning.careyinstitute.org
- Teachers in Crisis Contexts Introductory Training Package: https://inee.org/resources/teachers-crisis-contexts-training-primary-school-teachers