

The Proof is in the Improvement: Using Continuous Quality Improvement to Engage Teachers in Lebanon

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| Location | Lebanon: Akkar and Bekka |
| Teacher Profile | Host community teachers |
| Topic | Teacher professional development |

DESCRIPTION OF CRISIS-SPECIFIC CHALLENGE

Achieving a high level of program quality is the ultimate aspiration of all practitioners, but improvement is too often slow, inconsistent or undocumented. Improvement rarely relies on evidence, or such evidence takes years to result in improved implementation. Meanwhile, our teachers and staff strive to do the best they can, but without the tools to help them turn their aspirations into reality.

The International Rescue Committee's (IRC) multi-pronged approach to teacher professional development in Lebanon consists of five to ten days of face-to-face training, monthly teacher learning circles (TLCs), and monthly coaching visits. Research shows that continued support is more effective than one-off trainings (McEwan 2012) and teachers improve best through instructional coaching (Knight 2007), as well as with added opportunities for peer learning (Orr 2012). However, as the IRC strives to build teachers' capacity, the tools to help them be agents for improving overall program quality are lacking. We rely heavily on lessons learned and anecdotal best practices to improve program quality on a continuous basis. Our monitoring systems are becoming more responsive as we digitize attendance and other crucial course-correction metrics, but we still lack the mechanisms to activate a system for finding solutions to the barriers to quality implementation.

In an effort to close this gap between quality programming and fidelity of implementation, we are combining our existing robust professional development and our monitoring systems with the methodologies of CQI (Continuous Quality Improvement/Improvement Science). This strengthens our potential to achieve high program quality on a continuous basis through empowering all actors in the system, especially teachers, by giving them the tools

they need to be their own agents in improvement and experiential learning.

CQI, as a methodology and a set of tools, adds rigor to the process of improving program quality and puts the impetus for change in the hands of those closest to the challenges of implementation —the teachers themselves.

BRIEF OVERVIEW

Improvement science is a methodology, process, and a set of tools that was developed originally in the field of manufacturing to lower costs and improve quality. The method then moved to the healthcare sector where it is now a widespread part of how hospitals improve outcomes for patients. It has only been in the last decade that improvement science has been adapted to the education sector, but it is showing promise across a wide variety of educational contexts. (Bryk 2015) The IRC is the first implementer to test the methodology in a fragile context.

CQI provides the tools and resources necessary to rapidly mobilize all actors in the system-- particularly teachers in the case of education -- towards improved outcomes. As a methodology, CQI consists of developing theories around improvement, testing these changes in rapid, safe-to-fail cycles, collecting data to verify whether these changes are resulting in improvement and then sharing the changes with relevant stakeholders in networked communities.

The IRC piloted the integration of CQI methodologies into our support model for remedial teachers in northern and eastern Lebanon. The pilot lasted eight months and consisted of training six IRC staff coaches and 30 Lebanese teachers in improvement science by integrating it into existing coaching and teacher trainings. Then, protocols for TLCs and coaching visits were adapted to reflect the CQI methodologies and to

use CQI tools. For every third scheduled TLC, the IRC would host a larger TLC for training and consolidation of learning purposes. The first CQI-focused TLC, for example, focused on teachers identifying their goal and planning which changes to test. For example, teachers in Akkar wanted to improve French language comprehension. They chose to how many children in their classrooms could correctly pronounce all letters of the French alphabet. Teachers got together and developed a common theory around what they thought were the crucial drivers to improving these outcomes for students. IRC subject matter experts also provided information for teachers to use and combine with their experience and expertise. After developing the theory, teachers focused on two specific drivers—behaviour management in the classroom and ensuring students attended regularly. The teachers were guided in a series of activities to develop “change ideas” or small, safe-to-fail practices that they could test in their classrooms over the course of a day or week and teachers planned when they would test these changes. Teachers would collect data around the driver they were trying to improve, such as using a behaviour management chart in the classroom to collect data. They would then get together during the TLCs to discuss the changes they had tested and use data to guide the conversations.

The pilot aimed to create a culture where teachers felt empowered to participate in self-reflection and improvement. It also aimed to generate suggestive evidence around the outcomes of different teaching practices and to develop a knowledge base around how to better incorporate CQI into the IRC’s teacher professional development model in Lebanon and globally.

EVIDENCE AND OUTCOMES

The purpose of the pilot was to see how this method would work if integrated into existing structures and how it would be received by coaches and teachers. To understand this, we took a two-pronged approach: (1) we varied the intervention by region to see which was most successful; and (2) we conducted routine surveys and, at the end of the program, focus group discussions with teachers and coaches.

1. We varied the intervention by region to see which was most successful.

We varied the intervention by levels of autonomy

vs. independence in the two regions. We wanted to balance giving teachers enough autonomy to make sure they were focused on improving an area of primary concern, thereby harnessing the power of the approach to be motivating and self-directed. At the same time, the need to provide significant guidance given the overall newness of the methodologies was recognized. In Akkar, teachers had the same aim and a list of change ideas were provided to which teachers could add, but the change ideas were largely prescribed. In Bekka, teachers chose their own aims and we made the use of change ideas more flexible.

We found that the common aim was crucial to success. It allowed the sharing among teachers to be more fruitful as they could confidently compare across their classrooms. It also made the data collection and visualization much easier for our M&E staff as they were collecting similar data from every teacher. In Bekka, because the aims were not universal, the data management burden was larger and it was harder for the teachers to work together—however, teachers were very motivated and created a lot of really interesting change ideas. For example, one teacher created behaviour tracking sheets for every student that scored the student on a variety of positive behaviours and was sent home weekly to share with parents.

2. We conducted routine surveys and, at the end of the program, focus group discussions with teachers and coaches.

For the satisfaction surveys, we surveyed teachers at the end of each learning session. Teachers were asked what they learned and to rate the usefulness of the information in terms of its immediate applicability in their classrooms. At the end of the intervention, 100% of teachers said they wanted to continue doing CQI in the upcoming school year.

Focus group discussions were held with groups of both teachers and coaches in each region. Teachers reported finding the approach useful and were especially excited about being involved in the process of generating and testing new ideas. Teachers openly shared their data with one another, a behavior that was originally approached cautiously.

Reinforcing the encouraging response by teachers, coaches who participated in focus group discussions reported that the majority of teachers were motivated



Photo 1: teachers with their dashboards in Akkar

and energized by the approach and that CQI helped structure TLCs. Specifically, coaches reported that the protocols for reviewing changes and outcome-level data during the peer learning enhanced conversations around quality practice and drew teachers into deeper conversations and sharing.

In both Akkar and Bekka, teachers who tried the change idea of praising students throughout the day for good behavior saw a surprising spike in the data related to positive behaviour of their students. Given that the behaviour management measure was self-reported by the teacher, it isn't clear if behaviour actually improved or the practice of praising students all day made teachers more likely to record good behaviour.

LIMITATIONS, CHALLENGES, AND/OR LESSONS LEARNED

Teachers struggled most with the collection and interpretation of the data. Data interpretation is a skillset we will need to build over time and also we will need to work on presenting the data in easy-to-read ways. Stronger data collection instruments and systems are needed to more accurately assess which changes result in improvement and automate the

process so as to not create an additional burden on the staff. They also found that the remedial program cycle (four months) was too short to generate meaningful evidence.

Given that having the same aim was found to be more beneficial in Akkar, in the upcoming school year, IRC will integrate CQI into the curriculum where all teachers will follow the same schedule and track progress of students at the same points in time. This will be done with all remedial teachers and some of the Basic Literacy and Numeracy teachers. Alignment on aims will help teachers collaborate more effectively as they will be able to compare changes over time. Teachers suggested that in the upcoming year students get involved with CQI by helping develop change ideas themselves (especially for behaviour management) and help track the data. Data collection will align with existing tools in order to begin the process of merging monitoring and improvement data and lessening the data management burden.

By consolidating our learning from this pilot over the past year, we hope to continue mobilizing teachers and all actors in our system towards improving learning outcomes for children in Lebanon.

TEACHER PROFILE

Rim Omar has been teaching with IRC for the last 3 years in the remedial program in the Bekaa area of Lebanon. She works in a community-based classroom in Baalback in Hawsh Barada.

Rim is 23 years old and Lebanese. She holds a degree in Accounting. As part of her IRC-supported professional development, she has received face-to-face training, coaching, and participated in Teacher Learning Circles (TLCs).

Rim participated in the pilot of CQI. She was a particularly good candidate as she had already received the traditional package of support from the IRC over the last three years.

When identifying aims, Rim stated that her main challenge was managing her students' behaviour during class and teaching a class that had many different levels and student needs. She is keenly aware that her students have been through years of stress and wants to use positive techniques to keep her class organized and all students able to pay attention and learn.

Given her goals, Rim worked with her coach to develop different ideas on changes she could test out in her classroom. She wasn't forced to implement any specific strategy, but given several strategies and told to try each for a week and see how she felt they worked. She was also taught to track data around her

specific goals for her classroom so she would know which changes resulted in her desired improvement.

Rim attended three learning sessions, which are larger TLCs, to receive additional training around CQI tools. She learned how to conduct Plan-Do-Study-Act cycles to test and analyse her ideas.

Rim struggled at first with the theoretical explanation of the CQI process, but after having another practical session with examples of change ideas, she began to understand and grew excited about being able to test new ideas.

She noted that “teaching multi graded classrooms was the main challenge that faced me in my teaching journey and the ability to deliver the lesson plan for multi graded students. However; when I started using CQI I became able to found several ways to deliver my lesson tackling all my learners’ styles.”

By the end of the program, Rim mastered the tools and created some of her own to track data around her ideas. She created her own run chart in a notebook, in which she tracked how frequently she tested different ideas and the results these tests generated. She approached CQI like a scientist, observing her environment for changes. Afterwards, she was able to bring this approach to learning sessions and show other teachers what she had discovered.



Photo 1: Rim Omar in her classroom



Photo 2: Rim Omar's adapted behavior management data collection tool. She would put the overall behavior for the day in one of three slots and then take a picture of it and send it to an M&E staff member who recorded it.

Rim said "I hope that we can use CQI in our public and private schools because it is not a task added to our effort, but it is a way of thinking that help us in our daily and work life."

Additionally, Rim started using the approach in her personal life to improve herself. She also began using it to test different ideas to help her son with his math skills.

Rim's experience shows how CQI is more than a methodology. It can also serve as a focused way of thinking that can help any individual improve the quality of their work and personal life.

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