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LEARNING NOTE

Safe to Learn: Part 2

The role of teachers' wellbeing in creating safe learning environments

In partnership with:



End Violence
Against Children

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Introduction

This learning paper is the second in a series of four under the Safe to Learn project. The paper presents the experiences of teachers and social-emotional learning (SEL) officers at six non-formal education centres in Lebanon and how they tried to maintain their wellbeing during times of multiple crises. All the ideas presented in the paper are practices tried and tested by the teachers and SEL officers (hereafter referred to as educators) of the non-formal education centres who participated in the Safe to Learn project.

Safe to Learn is an initiative dedicated to ending violence in and through schools, so children are free to learn, thrive and pursue their dreams.¹

To date, Lebanon, along with 14 other countries, has endorsed Safe to Learn's call to action, which sets out principles, commitments and measures to end violence in schools.²

In 2021, International Alert, in partnership with Basmeh & Zeitooneh, the Centre for Lebanese Studies (CLS), Damma Foundation and Sawa for Development and Aid, took part in the Safe to Learn initiative to prevent and address violence against children in learning environments in Lebanon. The objective of the project was to increase the evidence base and capacity of learning centres in Lebanon to reduce violence against children in areas with high concentrations of vulnerable populations, including refugees.

Definition of wellbeing

The concept of wellbeing is not new, but interest in it has resurged with the international health crisis precipitated by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. By 1946, the World Health Organization (WHO) had defined health not only as the mere absence of disease, but as the state of "complete physical, mental, and social wellbeing".³ The concept was brought to the scientific research agenda with the work of Ed Diener in the 1980s when he first examined subjective wellbeing and how it relates to life satisfaction.⁴

Recently, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has proposed a conceptual framework to measure the occupational wellbeing of teachers in particular.⁵ The OECD framework identifies four core dimensions for teachers' occupational wellbeing: cognitive, subjective, physical and mental, and social (see text box).

Core components of teachers' occupational wellbeing

- 1. The cognitive dimension** reflects the teachers' cognitive functioning and the degree to which they are able to take up new information and concentrate on their work. It also pertains to the teachers' self-efficacy and their beliefs about their abilities to perform.
- 2. The subjective dimension** encompasses three elements: a. life evaluation, which is a reflective assessment of a person's life or some aspect of it, b. affect, which is particular feelings or emotional state, and c. eudemonia, which is a sense of meaning and purpose in life.
- 3. The physical and mental dimension** relates to the presence or absence of physical and psychosomatic symptoms that can develop into disorders.
- 4. The social dimension** refers to the quality and depth of the social interactions with the various stakeholders that teachers deal with in the society.⁶

Why teachers' wellbeing?

The theme of teachers' wellbeing surfaced as a priority for most of the educators, protection team officers, and administrators who were interviewed for the research. In Lebanon, a country grappling with multiple crises, the mental health and wellbeing of the whole society have been severely impacted. Since early 2020, Lebanon has been undergoing concurrent economic, political and social crises, aggravated by the shock of the devastating Beirut Seaport explosion in August 2020 and the escalating health crisis precipitated by COVID-19. These overlapping crises took their toll on the whole Lebanese society physically, emotionally, and psychologically.

One sector that has experienced more pressure than most under the multiple crises is the education sector, jeopardising educators' mental and physical health. According to a recent study, the majority of 800 teachers surveyed across Lebanon have been affected by the multiple crisis that have hit Lebanon, and as a result their relationships and jobs have suffered.⁷ This study found that 84.5% of the teachers surveyed reported being anxious about their current living situation; 72.3% experienced frustration as a result of the current crises; 39.9% noticed that they have become moodier; 30.8% reported feeling worthless; and 10.5% felt total emptiness. Out of the 800 teachers surveyed in the study, 799 have dealt with one

or more psychiatric symptoms.⁸ This alarming reality has prompted us to investigate how the non-formal education educators are coping with these multiple crises and what coping mechanisms they are adopting. It is essential to understand how educators are dealing with their emotions because, it goes without saying, if educators are to engage in teaching practices that support the SEL and wellbeing of the children, they need to feel emotionally well themselves.

Relationship between teachers' wellbeing and children's wellbeing

The wellbeing of teachers has received significant attention in the past two decades leading to a plethora of studies on the factors that affect teachers' state of wellbeing and how this affects the students' state of wellbeing. Teachers play a pivotal role in creating the right classroom atmosphere in which children can grow and develop emotionally, socially and cognitively. Thus a teacher's emotional and mental state will ultimately be reflected on their students wellbeing. According to Jennings and Greenberg, the teachers' wellbeing affects their relationships with their students, their classroom management style and their social-emotional teaching.⁹ Moreover, teachers who are emotionally overwhelmed are not as effective as teachers who are emotionally stable, and they are more prone to leave the profession.¹⁰ Research further suggests that teachers who cope well with stress during challenging times maintain better relationships with their students and co-workers and spread positivity around them.¹¹ In another study, Zinsser et al found out that providing teachers with support and training in SEL reflected positively on the teachers' sense of self-efficacy, eventually resulting in greater job satisfaction among teachers, more positive perceptions of the workplace and more positive support to the most challenging students.¹² Therefore, any programme that aims to safeguard children's wellbeing and protect them from all forms of violence needs to start targeting educators' wellbeing.

Lessons from the research

Educators' state of wellbeing

The first step in solving any problem is admitting there is one. For educators to be able to attend to their wellbeing, they need to acknowledge their feelings, both positive and negative, and deal with the factors that are causing them. Most of the participating educators in the facilitated learning

circles (FLC) displayed symptoms of poor wellbeing without realising it. More than 50% of the participants in the FLC admitted their intolerance of noises and their tendency to act impulsively, especially in critical situations. A few more shared how annoyed they become even with minor inconveniences or demands. What is alarming is that the majority of the participants did not associate these subtle signs of burnout with wellbeing and they tended to ignore them. Another warning sign that the majority of the educators reported was spending more hours at work. For many this was not a problem because it reflects their dedication to their job, but for others it was perceived as a response to the financial crisis and some commented that they felt advantaged because they have the choice of working extra hours or having more than one job and source of income.

Reflection: on the verge of burnout?

One moment worth reflecting on during the FLC was the reaction of a group of participants during the icebreaking activity at the beginning of the day. Upon asking them about how they were feeling during that activity, all four members of the protection and SEL team from the same centre immediately responded in frustration about how distressed they were feeling with the general situation in Lebanon and their own situation in particular.

Their reaction could be perceived both positively and negatively. The positive side of it is that the SEL team members are aware of the need to acknowledge and accept negative emotions such as sadness and anger and be able to talk about them openly (unlike the other participating teachers who were not comfortable enough to discuss their personal feelings in front of the group). However, on the negative side, these team members who are entrusted with the task of supporting the emotional wellbeing of the children are themselves on the verge of burnout and were calling out for help in their own way.

Considering the educators reactions to the OECD framework, it is evident that the 'subjective' wellbeing of the group members is affected by the increasingly challenging environment they are working in, but they do not question it much within their own context. Interestingly enough, a few of the participants reiterated that they feel they should be thankful for their situation because they are in a better position than others in their community and the whole nation is immersed in several crises. Although suppressing negative emotions might indicate a high level of emotional resilience

among some people, it is not always the best strategy. According to research, people who engage in repression as a coping strategy have a higher risk of suffering from physical ailments.¹³

In addition to the poor state of 'subjective' wellbeing, it was apparent during the FLC that the 'physical and mental' dimension of the participants' wellbeing is suffering. Almost 80% of the participants admitted having experienced more physical aches and pain recently and around 85% shared that they were always tired physically and mentally. Almost all educators were aware of what caused such psychosomatic feelings relating them to the demands of the job, the overwhelming tasks they had, and their tendency to overthink and perfectionism. Being aware of the causes is the first step towards solving the problem; however, some educators conceded that these issues were out of their control. Many others were able to formulate an action plan to cope with the job requirements and still maintain some work-life balance.

Unlike the 'subjective' and 'physical and mental' dimensions of the participants' wellbeing, the 'cognitive' and 'social' ones were not as affected by the country's multiple crises. Despite the psychosomatic symptoms that the participants had been experiencing, the majority still felt they were able to plan and think clearly and be efficient (except for two participants who admitted that their productivity had been affected). The dimension that had helped many educators maintain their wellbeing until very recently was the 'social' element. Feeling appreciated by the children, their families, and the community at large is what has helped many teachers maintain their emotional balance. With the economic crises, the financial meltdown, and the plummeting value of the Lebanese currency, however, the educators' salaries have lost more than 80% of their value and that is beginning to threaten their social status in a country where financial status determines social status. With the ongoing financial crisis and political unrest, it is expected that even the 'social' dimension of the educators' wellbeing will become affected, which will raise another red flag.

Educators' coping mechanisms

Being conscious of how stressful a job teaching is, the participants in the FLC showed awareness of the need for to work continuously on improving their wellbeing, especially under adverse circumstances such as those at the non-formal education centres and the country as a whole. The participants proposed several effective and tested techniques that have helped them in coping with the challenging situations and improved their wellbeing.

The proposed techniques can be grouped under four categories:

1. praying or any other form of meditation;
2. working on time management and organisation skills such as setting priorities and having a to-do list;
3. avoiding situations that trigger stress such as watching the news (in a country that is facing several crises and going through political instability, this can reduce stress significantly); and
4. engaging in distracting activities or hobbies, such as taking care of plants or pets, cooking, cleaning and camping.

In addition to the effective adaptive tactics listed above, the educators proposed a variety of other strategies that can be employed to improve all the dimensions of their wellbeing. Some of these strategies are to be implemented by the teachers themselves, while others target their colleagues and the administration.

What can be done at the individual level?

The different groups of participants suggested similar approaches to improving wellbeing that can be adopted by everyone. They highly recommended embracing every self-development and professional development opportunities as a way to improve the 'cognitive' dimension of their wellbeing. Participants agreed that through self-development they are not only improving their wellbeing, but they are also advancing their life opportunities as well. Even though such engagement might seem to add pressure to their lives, they could still see that its benefits outweigh the pressure that might result from it. Another suggestion put forth by a few educators was trying to reconnect with one's own purpose through doing one thing regularly that reminds them of the reason why they have chosen education as a profession.

The participants also thought of different strategies that they can easily adopt individually to improve the 'subjective' dimension of their wellbeing, such as treating oneself to something pleasurable every now and then to bring happiness into their life. Another technique that would help give the educators hope is setting achievable goals and working on them no matter how insignificant to others these might be. Having achievable goals in life ultimately adds optimism to everyone's days and motivates them to keep moving forward. Finally, for anyone who is on the verge of burnout, it is highly recommended that they engage in formal or informal counselling sessions.

Where this is not feasible, they could talk to a friend who is available to listen to their feelings.

In addition to the above recommendations, the educators came up with a few others that target the 'physical and mental' and 'social' dimensions of wellbeing. At the 'physical and mental' level, individuals are advised to take care of their bodies through moderate exercise, which can be as basic as going for a walk every day. Another suggestion is for individuals to notice their psychosomatic triggers and signs of fatigue and respond to them by taking a break and resting. The main recommendation highlighted by all educators is the need to maintain a good work-life balance at all times no matter how much pressure they are facing at work.

Individuals can improve their 'social' wellbeing through trying to maintain positive relationships with their students, the parents and the community at large. Such relationships can bring incomparable rewards. Positive relationships can easily be achieved if teachers set clear interpersonal rules and work on establishing communities within their own classrooms. For more on interpersonal rules, see the first paper in this series.

What can be done with colleagues?

Based on the educators' discussions, it was very evident that the community-based solutions are beneficial to teachers' wellbeing in times of crises. The participating educators highlighted the value of exchanging knowledge and skills and how this will be reflected on the 'cognitive' dimension of their wellbeing. Through sharing expertise, both the receiver and the giver feel rewarded. Another recommendation that helps boost cognitive wellbeing is listening to each other's success stories and celebrating them together. It was also affirmed that all forms of feedback, if given in a constructive manner, would ultimately lead to an enhanced state of cognitive wellbeing.

Colleagues can also support the 'subjective' dimension of each other's wellbeing through working on their personal relationships. This can be done by organising trips together and these do not need to be costly. Connecting with nature fosters strong bonds between colleagues, as well as distracting them from the pressure of work. The group members should avoid discussing any unpleasant or stressful events in work or life in general. They should consider such events as opportunities to rejuvenate and recharge their mental energy. Colleagues should also be available to listen to each other and try to boost each other's morale during rough times. Similar recommendations were

also given by the participating educators to help in improve the 'physical and mental' dimension of wellbeing.

At the social level, it was proposed that colleagues should try to accept and respect each other's differences, especially in a context where the staff members come from different nationalities as is the case in all the non-formal education centres. Colleagues can also organise 'retreat days' during which they get to know each other at a deeper level. These retreat days can also help at the professional and cognitive level if utilised well. All the above adaptive tactics would work better if supported by the administration, which can play a pivotal role in everyone's wellbeing.

What can be done by the administration?

The role of the administration is critical in forging bonds between all the staff members and creating a community where all feel safe and supported. To help in boosting the educators' 'cognitive' wellbeing, administrators can organise capacity-building events that are based on their staff needs. They can also work on building the skills of the whole team and enhancing the strengths of the different team members. To help in maintaining the staff members' ability to plan, think critically and work efficiently, the administration can delegate different tasks to different members, without overburdening them with tasks that would require work beyond the official working hours. By monitoring the flow of emails and the frequency of meetings, administrators can improve both their own and the staff's cognitive wellbeing.

The administration's support can go beyond the 'cognitive' dimension of the team's wellbeing to the 'subjective'. Through simple tokens of appreciation, the administration can boost the morale of all the team members and motivate them. Having an open-door policy where employees can walk in and talk about their concerns – both professional and personal – would help create an atmosphere where everyone feels supported. In hard times and times of crisis, the administration can work on organising psychosocial support sessions for teachers in addition to those targeting students. Working on boosting the subjective wellbeing of all the staff will be reflected positively on the wellbeing of the administrators too at all the levels of the hierarchy.

To help support their physical and mental wellbeing, the participants proposed that the administrators provide them with different kinds of training such as first aid, personal safety, emergencies, and hygiene training to name a few. They also proposed that the whole staff is given some

allowance to engage in physical and mental wellbeing activities like joining a gym or going on hiking trips. Another strong recommendation that was put forward by all participants was the need to provide a safe space for everyone (children and staff) and trying to make that space warm and inviting. For this to happen, the administration can collaborate with the local community to make sure that all their safety needs are provided for.

Finally, the administration can play a key role in improving the 'social' dimension of the whole staff wellbeing. This can be achieved through organising peer coaching sessions starting with a few volunteers and then expanding to include everyone. Participants suggested conducting icebreaking and team-building activities that target all staff members to create a sense of belonging to the professional community at the centre. All participants spotlighted the value of fairness towards all team members so that no one feels singled out or judged. Ultimately, the administration can succeed in building the staff's social wellbeing by creating a platform for dialogue between all team members based on respect and appreciation.

Conclusion

Wellbeing is a collective responsibility; it starts with the individual and ends up with those around them. Educators need to remember that they 'cannot pour from an empty cup'. It is essential that they take care of their wellbeing to be emotionally and physically available for their students. If they fail to do so, they will cause harm both for themselves and for the others around them. Individuals can work better if the right atmosphere is created for them to collaborate and engage with each other both at the personal and professional level. Collegial support is not to be underestimated; feeling a sense of belonging to the group is key for creating a safe, healthy and rigorous learning environment.

The administration has a crucial role in protecting and improving staff wellbeing. In an institution where staff wellbeing is a priority, the administration delegates tasks to everyone and avoids overburdening their staff members with unnecessary paperwork that distracts from the main task at hand, i.e. teaching and caring for the children. If the administration notices that there are signs of burnout among staff members, that should be an indicator that the work dynamics need to be revisited. By leading with a lens of empathy and care for each other, a safe climate can be created that will have a ripple effect in the classroom with the children.

Additional sources

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Endnotes

- 1 For more information see: <https://www.end-violence.org/safe-to-learn#context>
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