

**Strategies for Creating Safe Spaces for Children in and around Schools
and Non-Formal Education Centers in Lebanon:**

Children's and Educators' Perspectives

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Abbreviations

AI	Appreciative Inquiry
CERD	The Center for Educational Research and Development
CLS	Centre for Lebanese Studies
DOPS	Counseling and Guidance Department at MEHE
HRW	Human Rights Watch
MEHE	Ministry of Education and Higher Education
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
PSS	Psycho-Social Support
STC	Save the Children
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
VAC	Violence against Children
VCD	Violent Child Discipline
WHO	World Health Organization
WV	World Vision

Executive Summary

This research report has been published as part of the “Safe to Learn” initiative in Lebanon that was launched by International Alert in collaboration with the Centre for Lebanese Studies (CLS) and three other Non-Governmental Organizations that run six different non-formal education centers (NFEs). The report presents the findings of an “Appreciative Inquiry” study conducted by CLS. The study aimed at identifying the effective child-protection strategies in place at both public schools and NFEs and generating evidence on the efficacy of these strategies in securing the safety of vulnerable children. We hope through the generated evidence to inform the work of all stakeholders at schools and non-formal education centers in addition to that of concerned civil society actors.

The overarching research question that the study tried to answer is: What are the various effective child-protection strategies adopted in and around schools and non-formal education centers from the perspective of school children and their teachers. To answer this main research question, the qualitative “Appreciative Inquiry” approach was adopted as it is a strengths-based approach that is usually utilized to facilitate organizational positive change. The study targeted 42 teachers and 132 children from six NFEs and five public schools. Two different instruments were used with the two groups of participants: a semi-structured interview for teachers and a focus group activity for children.

Based on the collected data, certain themes have emerged and specific findings were reached regarding the recommended strategies. It was evident through the findings that violence is still prevalent and pervasive in and around schools, and girls are more subjected to its different forms. It was also apparent that there is some consensus on the effective strategies and measures that can be adopted by educational institutions. However, these measures were not equally adopted by all public schools and educational centers. The strategies that can be adopted are presented based on whose perspective they represent, children or their teachers.

Strategies that Work from the Perspective of the Children

Children have identified several effective strategies that enhanced their sense of safety and well-being within and around the school or NFE. Strategies that were identified by children are those that target their various needs, namely the need for physical safety, emotional safety, academic progress, and leisure time. Children felt safe around teachers who accommodated these needs through various techniques inside the classroom or on other school premises. Some examples of strategies that provide for the physical needs are providing children with meals, a warm and welcoming space, and taking into consideration all safety conditions around them. Teachers could also foster the children's sense of safety by satisfying their emotional needs through displaying affection and showing care. Children also appreciated teachers who attended to their academic needs by making use of all pedagogical strategies that helped them achieve the targeted academic progress. In addition to all the above basic needs, children felt appreciative of strategies that helped them enjoy their time with peers through play and extra-curricular activities.

Strategies that Work from the Perspective of the Teachers

The strategies pinpointed by the teachers were categorized under three different themes: “Teachers’ Strategies”, “School-Wide Strategies”, and “Collaboration between School and Home”. The successful strategies employed by teachers are those guided by the principles of positive discipline, mainly giving children agency and teaching them social skills. Other measures utilized effectively by teachers are more attitudinal in nature: being firm yet empathetic and taking a stand on bullying and responding to any early signs of it. Teachers also affirmed the need to closely monitor the students at all times which would enable them to detect different forms of abuse and emotional distress.

Equally important to the strategies adopted by teachers are those employed by the school. Educational centers that worked on securing the physical environment helped in satisfying the children’s need for physical safety. Moreover, centers that had a clear and accessible child-protection policy were more successful at providing a clear code of conduct for everyone concerned. Another critical school-wide measure that contributed to creating a safe space is having a specialized psycho-social support team within the school and a clear referral system in place. Finally, all teachers underscored the need for receiving continuous emotional and professional support through school-organized activities that target all dimensions of their well-being and provide them with the needed professional training.

Teachers and schools alone would never succeed if the parents are not taking on their responsibilities. According to teachers, some parents were very supportive of the schools’ policies, but others were part of the problem of inflicting violence on their children. Teachers conceded that this latter type of parents should be also targeted in different activities that spread awareness and make them partners in the fight against violence.

Based on the findings extracted from the teachers’ interviews and children’s activities, it was evident that many of the effective strategies described by the teachers were also deemed effective by the children. However, children pointed out more needed strategies like those that help in making them feel connected with others within their community, and that would imply the need for more team-building and social cohesion activities. Children have also pointed out the importance of academic support and not only emotional one. Another key finding that we reached is related to the presence of major disparities between the systems adopted by NFEs and public schools where NFEs have a more systematic and efficient approach to child protection. This latter finding calls for more collaboration between the private and public sectors and exchange of expertise between the two.

Because child protection is a collective responsibility, it is high time that all stakeholders, i.e. teachers, psycho-social workers, administrators, and policymakers take on their responsibilities and adopt the various recommended measures. It is also critical that educational institutions and social actors try to involve parents and the community at large in the fight against all forms of violence against children.

Introduction

Violence against children (VAC) is a highly prevalent problem all over the world. More than one billion children – half the children of the world – are subjected to at least one form of violence almost every day (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). According to Keygombe et al. (2019), in addition to being a violation of children's rights, VAC is considered a major global public health concern that threatens the physical and mental safety and well-being of children everywhere. Based on their study, alarming numbers of children experience violence every year in all its different forms: physical, emotional, and sexual abuse and neglect. In Lebanon, the most recent figures about VAC prevalence are equally staggering. According to a UNICEF report in 2016 which was based on surveying 7000 children in Lebanon, 57% of the Lebanese children, 65% of the Syrian Children, and 82 % of the Palestinian children had experienced violence in one form or another at their homes (UNICEF, 2016). To illustrate how serious the problem is, A Human Rights Watch [HRW] report that was released in 2019, shows that all the Syrian children in one Lebanese village almost stopped going to school because of all the forms of violence that were exercised against them (HRW, 2019). More recently, with the Corona Virus pandemic and the unprecedented economic crisis in Lebanese modern history, the children's safety and well-being are even more threatened (UNICEF, 2020).

One form of VAC that is being normalized is violent child discipline (VCD) which is usually exercised both at home and school. As revealed through the documented evidence, the reported numbers of VCD cases are distressing (World Vision, [WV] 2019). The WV Report (2019) which was based on a mixed-method national study, reveals that 3 out of 4 children are exposed to VCD. Regionally speaking, the report shows that 85% of the children aged 14-2 are subjected to VCD. The most common forms of violence were those exercised at home followed by those exercised at school (UNICEF, 2017). These alarming numbers pushed the international community to raise a red flag and announce "Child Protection" as one of its main sustainable development goals (SDGs) in 2012 (Keygombe et al. 2019).

At the local Lebanese level, fighting violence against children was first tackled in 1974 when the Ministry of Education issued a regulation that prohibited all forms of corporal punishment of students in public schools. Later, in 2001, MEHE issued a detailed circular to both private and public schools in which it banned verbal abuse in addition to corporal punishment (HRW, 2019). However, the same Human Rights Watch Report (2019) reveals that "due to the lack of enforcement, ... widespread abuse persist[ed]" despite passing the regulations to schools (p. 2). The lack of enforcement of child protection measures prompted Saint Joseph University to conduct a country-wide survey in 2011, whose results revealed that 76% of the 1177 school children interviewed reported that they "had been subjected to physical violence by teachers and administrators in schools, with the highest rates among younger, socially-vulnerable children in public schools" (HRW, 2019, p.2).

Despite the collective effort of the international community to end violence against children in the last two decades (Keygombe et al., 2019), the problem has escalated in Lebanon due to the spillover effect of the Syrian conflict that started in 2011 (Insan Association, 2014). Since then, the number of students in public schools has doubled with around an equal number (210,000) of Lebanese students and Syrian students being enrolled (HRW, 2019). Due to this increase in numbers, more and more teachers who are "struggling to cope" have started resorting to corporal punishment (Ministry of Education & Higher Education [MEHE], 2014).

Many of those teachers who had used different forms of corporal punishment were never questioned, where until 2014, teachers were exempted “from liability for inflicting ‘culturally accepted’ level of physical pain on children in the name of discipline” (HRW, 2019, p.2). Lack of liability has pushed several marginalized students, such as Syrian refugees to drop school and join non-formal educational settings to avoid the different forms of violence and abuse (Shuayb, et al. 2014).

With the increased number of reported and documented cases of VAC, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has pushed MEHE “to make the prohibition of corporal punishment, ‘however light,’ explicit ‘in all settings,’ including public and private schools (HRW, 2019, p. 3). However, despite all the calls, MEHE had not enforced any clear and detailed regulations regarding corporal punishment in schools until the year 2018. A major leap in this regard was made in May 2018 when MEHE launched a comprehensive Child Protection Policy after working closely and collaboratively on it with UNICEF (UNICEF, 2018). Based on the policy, school counselors should identify and refer any documented or suspected cases of violence (at home, school, or the community at large) for appropriate follow-up. Even though the policy was regarded by officials as a major step towards the prevention of VAC, one major problem with it is that “it does not sufficiently address the key problem of impunity for school teachers, supervisors, directors and support staff who harm children in the name of discipline” (HRW, 2019, p. 3). According to the policy, any form of abuse inflicted by a school staff member against a child would be dealt with internally at the level of the school. Along with issuing the policy, MEHE established a hotline for reporting cases of violence in schools. Unfortunately, several civil society organizations reported the failure of MEHE to respond to their complaints. MEHE’s failure to implement the policy along with a lack of transparency in the reporting mechanism have prompted civil society organizations to resort to alternative ways of reporting such as resorting to public persecutors (HRW, 2019).

In addition to the many forms of violence exercised by school staff and administrators, disadvantaged children (both Lebanese and non-Lebanese) have reported other forms of violence. According to a Save the Children [STC] Report (2018), several Lebanese, Syrian and Palestinian children have decided to drop out of school as a result of being bullied by other students. Other Syrian children who attend the afternoon shifts reported facing additional risks on their way to school such as being subjected to physical and verbal abuse (Shuayb et al. 2014). Many of these marginalized children who are most prone to abuse might opt to remain silent to avoid any further violence that would be inflicted on them as a result of speaking out (HRW, 2019).

Unfortunately, with the compounded crises that hit Lebanon, the cases of VAC are expected to escalate. A recent UN report warns that the Lebanese economic crisis poses a major threat to the safety of children in Lebanon. Dr. Najat Maalla M’jid voiced her concern through the UN report by revealing how the crisis “threatens the present and the future of millions of children. [Thus,] ensuring their protection from abuse, harm, and violence and safeguarding their rights are needed now more than ever” (United Nations Lebanon, 2021, p.1). Considering the severity of the situation, it is imperative that all stakeholders try to help in getting children’s rights recognized and respected and their well-being safeguarded.

Despite the gloomy picture, numerous national and international initiatives have been taken in the last decade to identify the root causes of VAC and start addressing them. Our research project falls under one of these initiatives which is the “Safe to Learn” Project.

The Safe to Learn Project

Concern for children and their safety has prompted “End Violence Against Children” to form a growing coalition known as “Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children” that is the driving force behind what is known as the “Safe to Learn” initiative. The five-year initiative is dedicated to ending “violence in schools so children are free to learn, thrive, and pursue their dreams” (End Violence Organization [EVO], 2021). The coalition includes major partners such as the United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), The Commonwealth and Development Office (UK FCDO), The World Health Organization (WHO), among many others (EVO, 2021). So far, fifteen countries have endorsed the “Safe to Learn” Call to Action which aims at ending violence in and around schools by working directly with governments, civil society organizations, communities, teachers, and children themselves. The formed coalition hopes to reach that goal through generating and collecting evidence from the various partner countries so as to use that evidence to secure safer environments for children all over the world.

One of the 15 countries which were first to endorse the call for action was Lebanon. The International Alert initiative that was launched in October 2020 falls under the same call for action. Under the Alert project, CLS has worked with three partners who run non-formal education centers and 5 public schools that are run by MEHE. The ultimate aim behind this collaboration was to come up with practical recommendations on how to create a safe environment for children in and around schools and NFEs, in the hope of generalizing these recommendations to the other stakeholders, i.e. officials at MEHE and the Ministry of Social Affairs, school administrators, teachers, parents among others within the Lebanese context.

Because NFEs were established as alternative pathways that were set up to meet the needs of the vulnerable children in Lebanon, they were among the first organizations to adopt a variety of approaches to address child protection. Most of these centers tried to focus on psycho-social support along with academic support. To investigate these tried and tested approaches, it was essential that we work directly with the selected NFEs along with the public schools that were part of a child-protection project run by MEHE in collaboration with UNDP and UNHCR.

Through this appreciative inquiry study, we tried to generate evidence from within these schools and learning centers on the efficacy of particular approaches in the prevention of VAC. Based on the collected data and evidence, several recommendations are presented regarding the practices that can be adopted by all stakeholders specifically those in non-formal education centers and the public schools overseen by MEHE.

Purpose of the Study

Through the appreciative inquiry participatory process, and based on the shared experiences of the selected schools, formal and non-formal education centers, teachers, and students, we could articulate how the different systems operate in reality and not in guidebooks. Our study helped in identifying the effective child-protection strategies and practices that are adopted in and around the schools and learning centers. The generated evidence will inform the work of schools, non-formal education centers, and civil society actors. In addition, such evidence can provide educators with the required knowledge and skills so that they can develop their capacities in adopting a systematic approach to the prevention of VAC. Besides empowering educators, we aim at enlightening children and giving them voice within their communities (educational, familial, and social). Finally, we hope that by sharing the findings of our research, we will provide all stakeholders with the chance to reflect on and co-build a system for child protection that fits their context.

Our ultimate goal is to contribute to the refinement and enactment of a national child protection policy and a transparent safeguarding system for reporting VAC cases in and around schools and education centers. Creating a safe environment for the children is a prerequisite for their academic success. Children need to satisfy their basic need for safety before they start focusing on higher-level needs like self-achievement and actualization. Once children feel safe in their immediate environments – home, school, or social community – they become more mentally and emotionally available for learning.

Research Questions

The overarching research question that this study tried to answer is: What are the various successful child-protection strategies adopted in and around schools and non-formal education centers?

To answer the overarching question, we investigated the following sub-questions:

1. What are the child-protection strategies that the educators think are effective?
2. What are the child-protection strategies that the children think are effective?
3. How are the perspectives of educators and children on child protection strategies similar and/or different?
4. How are the strategies used by schools and NFEs similar and different? And
5. Which child safeguarding system (the one followed by public schools or NFEs) is more effective?

Methodology

To answer the above research questions, the Appreciative Inquiry (IA) Approach was adopted. AI is a positive strengths-based leadership approach used in the field of organizational development to facilitate organizational positive change (Coghlan et al, 2003). According to Watkins and Mohr (2001), AI is an alternative mindset that focuses on bringing to the spotlight success factors or strategies within an organization to be utilized in planning further organizational development. The primary model for conducting AI as proposed by its founder Cooperrider is the 4-D model which takes place in 4 stages: Describe/Discover, Dream, Design, and Destiny (Cooperrider et al., 2003). Figure 1 illustrates what is usually done at each stage.

Figure 1: Appreciative Inquiry 4-D Model



Source: Adapted from Watkins and Mohr (2001)

AI was first developed to promote organizational development in the field of business, but it has been increasingly utilized as a research method in different disciplines including that of education. According to Shuayb et al. (2009), AI appears to have great potential when conducting research that focuses on one or more of the following:

- Evaluating and developing initiatives in schools and local authorities
- Organizational development
- Identifying examples of good practice and suggesting ways forward
- Projects wishing to record young people's voices
- Participative research

[p. 14]

Because our research project aimed at identifying examples of good practices in child protection and helping the different schools and educational centers develop their safeguarding strategies, AI was chosen as the research method to be adopted in the study. The research project adopted a participatory approach where we worked directly with the selected educators and children on identifying what is already working in their organizations and what would still be needed to turn the schools and educational centers into safer spaces for children.

Participants

The study involved 42 teachers from six centers run by three NGOs: Basmeh and Zeitooneh, Damma, and SAWA for Development and Aid, and five public schools overseen by MEHE. The study also involved 132 children from the same centers and schools. The selection of the NFEs and schools was based on convenience. The three NGOs were part of the Safe to Learn project and the teachers and children were selected by the administration of the three NGOs based on the criteria specified by the research team. As for the public schools, they were selected by MEHE based on the geographic area where they operate and based on their prior participation in child-protection projects run by MEHE.

Four of the learning centers (formal and non-formal) operate in Bekaa, one in Beirut and one in the North while two of the public schools operate in Bekaa, two in the North, and one off Beirut on the way to the North. With the help of our partners, we ensured choosing the participants to reflect the different types of diversity: gender, experience, educational background of teachers and age, grade level, and socio-economic background. Table 1 reveals the numbers of the teachers, their gender, and nationality. As the table reveals, the vast majority of the teachers in the NFEs are non-Lebanese while those in the public schools are Lebanese, and this is due to the employment legal regulations. The table also shows that all teachers in the public schools are females while there were male representatives in the NFEs. All the teachers chosen in the NFEs had a minimum of 2 years of experience and a maximum of 6 at the center (15+ outside) while those at the public schools had a range between 4 years and more than 30 years for some.

Table 1: Teachers in NFEs and Public Schools

		Center - Location	Nb of Male Teachers	Nb of Female Teachers	Nationality Of Teachers
NFEs	B & Z	Center 1 - Beirut	2	4	5 Syrian 1 Palestinian
		Center 2 - Bekaa	1	3	3 Syrian 1 Palestinian
		Center 3 - North	1	1	1 Syrian 1 Palestinian
	SAWA	Center 1 - Bekaa	1	2	2 Syrian 1 Palestinian/Syrian
		Center 2 - Bekaa	1	3	Syrian
	Dama	Bekaa	1	3	3 Syrian 1 Lebanese
Public Schools	School 1	Off Beirut	0	3	Lebanese
	School 2	Central Bekaa	0	4	Lebanese
	School 3	West Bekaa	0	4	Lebanese
	School 4	North Akkar	0	4	Lebanese
	School 5	North Akkar	0	3	Lebanese

Regarding the children selection criteria, each school or learning center chose 12 children, 6 males and 6 females all between 12-9 years old. Those in the learning centers were mostly Syrians with a few Palestinian children in two of the centers while those in the Public schools were all Lebanese except for two students in one of the schools. The schools and learning centers tried to select children to make sure they are representative of different socio-economic backgrounds and different abilities, though the majority belong to the marginalized classes. One of the public schools chosen by MEHE failed to arrange for the children's activity, so the research team decided to work on the collected data from five public schools instead of the originally targeted six.

Research Instruments

The research team used two instruments: a semi-structured interview for the teachers and a focus group activity for the children. The interview included ten questions that focused on the first two Ds of AI, i.e. the things they value in themselves and their school and what they envision their centers or schools could be like. Concerning the focus group activity, it focused on the same two Ds through a child-friendly activity that focused on their “Current Special School” and their “School of Dreams”. For the research instruments, check “Appendix I” and “Appendix II”.

Research Process

Once the educators’ selection process was finalized, the research team prepared all the consent and assent forms both in English and Arabic as per the institutional IRB regulations. The consent forms were shared with the educators by the CLS senior researcher prior to the interviews. Likewise, the parents’ signed their consent forms before the research team conducted the focus group activity with the children. The children gave their verbal assent to the teachers and the CLS research team after being informed about the activity and their right to withdraw anytime they stop feeling comfortable. All the research ethics guidelines were adhered to throughout the process of data collection and later in storing and analyzing the data.

The CLS research team started the interview process with the NFE teachers first and Public school teachers later. All the interviews took place online via Zoom, except for the interviews with the public school teachers in Bekaa which took place face-to-face upon the teachers’ request. Each interview took between 60-40 minutes.

The children’s focus group activities were run in the NFE centers and schools face-to-face. Each focus group activity included six of the students at the center. In the NFEs, the teachers conducted the activity with the support of the researchers. The teachers had received eight hours of training on research ethics and on how to work on the focus group activity earlier. In the public schools, the research team conducted the focus group activity in the presence of the principal and teachers because it was impossible to train the teachers on it and the ethics requirements. In the activity, the students worked on two tasks: “Current Special School” and “School of Dreams”. The first task focused on their positive experiences at their school or learning center and the second one focused on the changes they would still like to see implemented in their school communities to make them safer spaces. Following their completion of each activity, a discussion was carried out to help in understanding the students’ choices.

The qualitative data collected through the recorded interviews were transcribed by the researchers and thematically analyzed. Likewise, the data generated through the focus groups were coded and analyzed thematically.

Findings

Based on the in-depth analysis of the collected data from the children's focus group activities and teachers' interviews, specific themes have emerged. These themes were classified under two major categories: "General Findings" related to the topic of child safety in general and "Specific Findings" focused on answering the research questions about the most effective strategies that can be employed to create safe spaces for children in and around schools and education centers.

General Findings

Prevalence of Violence

One of the main general findings is that violence against children is a prevalent and pervasive problem in the community. In reply to the question regarding a moment when teachers felt proud protecting a child/children and safeguarding their rights, almost every teacher had a story to share about cases of violence they had witnessed. Teachers in both schools and NFEs shared stories about the maltreatment of children through the commission of children to act in a certain way or through omission of care which would result in emotional and/or physical harm. This harm is usually perpetrated by the closest people to the children, i.e. the parents. The most common forms of violence illustrated by the teachers are child labor and early marriages for girls which are both underpinned by poverty and deprivation of education. More than one teacher shared stories about children who were forced to leave school either to work or to get married in the case of girls. In most of the stories shared, it was the parents – mainly fathers – exercising pressure on the children either to drop out of school or be absent from school on many days to go to work.

Similar stories of parental abuse were shared by public school teachers. However, the causes behind this abuse as perceived by the teachers were different. At least one teacher from each public school could retrieve an incident of parental violence against children due to the child's under-achievement at school. One teacher shared the story of a mother who called the teacher to proudly tell her that she (the mother) hit her daughter who arrived home crying because she did not finish the test. Another mother begged the same teacher not to say anything about her children's weak performance in front of the father because he will get infuriated and will end up hitting her and the children.

The problem, according to another public school teacher, is that many of these cases of violence are never revealed. The teacher explained that children prefer not to disclose family matters especially when treated harshly either because they are ashamed of it or because they are afraid of their parents' reaction once they know that their children shared private family matters with others. Unfortunately, these cases still exist predominantly, and the majority of the public school teachers preferred to show support to the child without taking any measures that would stop the act of violence from re-occurring.

Some parents think if they are tough with their children, they will be preparing them for life. A common cultural habit that some parents still exercise is telling the teachers, "The bones are yours, and the flesh is ours." When parents tell teachers that, they are giving them a green light to exercise corporal punishment with their children. This statement is still commonly heard in many public schools within small communities where the teacher is treated as an authority figure. Two of the interviewed public school teachers mentioned how frequently they still hear the expression.

Other forms of violence that are perpetrated and actively condoned by children and even their parents **are those exercised by teachers or school staff**. Through the children's contributions during the focus group activities, it was evident that verbal abuse is prevalent in educational centers and schools, and it is never questioned. Shouting at the children is considered a necessity in disciplining them, and as such, it is normalized as a common disciplinary practice. At least one child from every center showed his/her fear of the teacher's verbal reprimands or screaming. **Another form of abuse** that was always mentioned by the NFE children **is physical abuse in the form of hitting**. In describing what they valued about their educational centers, NFE children contrasted their "kind and affectionate" teachers at the center with their "always mad" teachers at the public schools. Three of the NFE children talked openly about being hit by the teacher at the public school, and always being afraid of asking her any questions. The children's fears were also confirmed by two of the public school teachers who openly talked about the principal resorting to hitting the children as a needed disciplinary intervention sometimes.

Refugee children join the non-formal education centers for academic and psycho-social support. The NFEs provide them with the needed support which is sometimes at the level of basic numeracy and literacy. Another key role that the NFEs play is providing the children with regular psycho-social support sessions. These same children are also registered in public schools in the same community, and 90% of them are registered in the afternoon shift which was established after the Syrian crisis to accommodate for the increasing numbers of refugee students. Around 80% of the NFE children who participated in our study referred to their unpleasant public school experience trying to contrast it with their pleasant experience at the NFE. The fact that children volunteered this information without us asking or probing for it is reflective of the scale of their frustration with the public school experience.

Gender-Based Violence

Another general finding in our study suggests that females are more vulnerable and prone to violence than males. Ninety percent of the VAC stories shared by teachers were about girls. The majority of these stories were about girls who were forced into early marriages or were about to be forced to quit school to get married. One teacher illustrated by saying, “Early marriage is a crime! I am glad we could save a few girls.” The same idea was echoed by at least four other teachers. Another form of violence that young girls faced is being lured into relationships with older males, and then being afraid to talk about it. A public school teacher showed her concern about a few girls who got into unhealthy relationships, and who could not seek the help of their parents out of fear of shame or punishment. In all these cases, the teachers had to interfere keeping the parents out of it.

Girls in the focus group activities have also shown concern about being bullied by others in and/or around schools. Several girls in the centers and public schools expressed their wishes for more opportunities to play because they were mostly barred from the games by the bullies. Moreover, most of **the games were more boy-friendly or boy-dominated**. One girl expressed her frustration saying, “We are kept out of most sports because they are designed for boys” as she was talking about excluding girls from all soccer games. One older girl had to endure a different kind of violence where she had to repeat the same class as she was not allowed to go to the public school due to cultural pressure exercised on her there, so her only option was to stay in the same school and repeat her class. Upon asking her teacher about the situation, we were informed that the main reason behind her problem is not having the official documents that would allow her to join a public school.

When asked about her dream school, a 12-year old girl from one of the NFE centers said that she would like to have a 100 friends who would rescue her from the bullies (boys) who attack her on her way back home. The girl was saying it with utmost fear emphasizing the word 100 to show how much support she really needed.

Consistency of Results

Looking critically into the findings, it is evident that they are consistent for the teachers and children of the same center. The teachers who work in the same center or school echoed similar ideas about effective child protection strategies that work in their context. Likewise, children of the same center valued the same things in their school or NFE. This consistency across the results renders them valid and objective which is usually a challenge upon looking into qualitative data. Another level of consistency that was observable is that related to the consistency of findings across the different non-formal education centers. The effective strategies that were adopted by the NFEs revolve around the same big themes: the presence of a clear child-protection policy, the presence of a clear referral system, continuous professional development and skilling for teachers among many others. However, this same level of consistency was lacking across the different public schools. It was apparent through the collected data that each public school followed a different philosophy and employed varied strategies in dealing with violence against children and in trying to create a safe haven for them. Despite being overseen by MEHE, the approach adopted by each public school solely depended on the principal's character and vision.

Unexpectedly, none of the 18 interviewed public school teachers showed any awareness of the child-protection policy that was launched by MEHE in 2018. Awareness of the policy should be a pre-requisite for its implementation, which is not the case in the public schools.

Strategies that Work: Children's Perspective

Through the children's work on the two activities "Current Special School" and "School of Dreams", they could identify various measures that contribute to creating a sense of safety for them in and around their school or educational center. These measures were thematically grouped into different categories depending on the needs they satisfy: physical needs, emotional needs, educational needs, and other needs.

Strategies that Satisfy the Need for Physical Safety

When talking about what they value in their school or what they would like to have in their dream school, the most immediate response of the children was **factors that contribute to their sense of physical safety**. One common answer that was echoed by children of all centers is their need for green spaces within the school. Whether they have these spaces or not, the participating children of all centers showed how significant it is for them to have **green spaces** - no matter how small they are - where they could rest and play. In one of the centers, children wanted to at least have that green space "virtually" by having paintings of trees and flowers on the walls. For centers where it was not feasible to have that space like one center in the city, the children could think of alternatives like going to the nearby field to spend some time occasionally. To them, that **created a sense of escape to a more child-friendly space**.

Another set of measures that children of NFE centers highlighted more than the children of public schools is those that would **rid them of any pending danger in the infrastructure of the school**. A few children shared their "accident experiences" on the school premises that were mostly caused by poor infrastructure. A few examples given by the children were related to having rocks in the playing area, protruding nails in the walls, narrow stairs that are usually very crowded, and unsafe playground games such as swings and slides, among many others. Two children in two of the NFE centers recommended having a higher fence and hiring a gatekeeper because they were usually attacked by outsiders from behind the low fence. These same children **expressed their fear of the older kids who are not at school** and could still bully them from behind the walls.

The participating children at two of the NFE centers expressed their **appreciation of the meal they receive at school**. It was evident that these children used to look forward to the "rich" breakfast they had at school since it included a piece of fruit every day. This need was highlighted in the centers **that hosted the most vulnerable, marginalized, and impoverished children who lack the most basic needs in life**. Unlike these children, the ones at the public schools wanted to have a bigger shop with a wider variety at school where they have more options to buy what they desire such as potato chips and chocolate. **None of the public school children mentioned the need for a free meal** either because they are not familiar with it or because they do not feel the need for it.

The children at both public schools and NFEs revealed a **high level of awareness of the safety measures taken during the time of COVID**. Their **heightened concern for all COVID** precautionary measures was evident. One reason might be that our children's focus group activity took place right after the re-opening of schools. All children manifested full compliance with all the health safety regulations and showed an utmost sense of appreciation of these measures that according to them contributed to their sense of safety at the school.

In addition to their care about the COVID measures, the children of both NFEs and public schools showed their awareness of the value of general hygiene and cleanliness in and around the school even when living in disadvantaged areas like camps. Besides caring for hygiene, all children expressed their need for a good heating system – whether primitive or advanced –since most of the schools and NFEs are located in areas where the temperatures are low in winter.

Finally, children expressed the need for strategies that ensure their physical safety beyond the walls of the school. Students who walked back home because of the short distance showed more concern for their safety due to the bullies who intercept their way. Three girls showed genuine fear of that trip back home and how threatened they felt. On the other hand, children who were provided transportation or who were accompanied by adults were happier with the school experience and wanted that practice to continue.

All children at one of the public schools wanted their “Dream School” to be at another location. Upon asking them about the reason, they pointed at the cemetery which is right next to the school. Almost half of the children there talked about having nightmares every time there is a funeral.

Making sure that the school or educational center is in a safe location and securing the trip back home are pivotal for creating a sense of safety among the children.

Strategies that Satisfy the Need for Emotional Safety

It was noticeable through the focus group activity that ALL children value every strategy that contributes to their sense of emotional safety. Once talking about emotional safety, every participating child named at least one teacher who helped in creating that feeling of safety among the children. When asking children about what these teachers did, they stressed similar qualities: being affectionate and caring, being patient, and creating a warm and inviting space within the classroom and the school at large.

Caring teachers helped in creating a sense of community in their class through team-building activities. Many children appreciated the teachers who involved them in decorating the classroom and the school at large. Such activities gave them a sense of ownership of the space they were in. Another trait that the children repeated frequently is patience. Teachers who were ready to re-explain the material more than once and never blamed the students for their lack of competence were the ones children favored the most. According to one girl, her teacher helped in creating a peaceful atmosphere for all the children because she never raised her voice at them and wanted to help them all learn.

Besides favoring teachers who are caring and affectionate, more than 50% of the participating children appreciated teachers who created an orderly classroom with clear rules and expectations. These children felt more secure once knowing what was expected of them and how to reach that expectation. Teachers who put up clear and achievable rules without teaching the students how to follow them created a sense of frustration among their students while those who taught them the “how to” contributed to the children's sense of safety.

In one of the NFEs, the children were very quick to clean up happily as soon as the focus group activity was over. It was apparent that they are used to this kind of order, and only an expert would realize how much effort it had taken the teachers to get students to act that way.

The strategy that mattered the most to children in terms of emotional safety was having a platform where they could talk about their feelings and emotions. As one child put it, “Ms. X is accessible; we can talk to her about anything that is irritating us, and that makes us all feel comfortable in class.” Many of the children referred to their teachers as their caring moms who do not like to see them sad. It is worth pointing here that in one center only, the children talked about a male teacher while talking about his academic excellence. It was apparent that female teachers could display more emotional support to the children and could provide them with a sense of safety more than the male teachers who were still appreciated, but not to the same degree.

Strategies that Satisfy the Need for Learning

One compelling finding of the focus group activity is how highly the children appreciated strategies that helped in advancing their learning. The word learning appeared more than 150 times in the data extracted from the focus group activity. To many children, providing them with learning has given them a long-term sense of safety. Through learning, children felt more empowered, confident, and positive about their future. As one child put it, *“Learning will set me and set my family free because I want to be a doctor, and that way, I will help save all my family and relatives.”*

A twelve-year old girl who is at the basic numeracy and literacy level could not hide her excitement about her ability to read. To her, what she valued the most about her center is her teachers’ support as she was learning how to read and write.

The girls’ eyes were lit up with delight when she was sharing her experience.

When asking children to be more specific about the strategies their teachers used to support their learning, children were quick to spotlight **the attitude of the teacher. Teachers who believed in the children and continuously motivated them to set new goals and move towards achieving them were more successful in instilling high self-esteem in the children.** Teachers who used motivational strategies could empower children to face anyone who tried to violate their rights including their parents and teachers.

Other strategies that were highlighted by the children are **more pedagogical** in nature such as:

- Providing children with the needed learning material such as books and worksheets
- Using cooperative learning practices
- Giving clear instructions and guidelines
- Providing children with the needed support
- Giving children enough opportunities to practice what they have learned
- Showcasing the children’s learning products

In one non-formal education centers, all the children referred to a training they had on bullying as a key learning experience in their educational journey.

According to one boy, “the training taught us how to stand up for ourselves and for others.”

In addition to valuing what their teachers were doing to support their learning, **almost every child expressed his/her desire to learn more subjects at their schools or NFEs.** The subjects that the children mentioned are: **music, sports, art, cooking, handicrafts, and swimming, among many others.**

Additional Strategies that Contributed to the Children's Sense of Safety

Children at both the NFEs and public schools pointed out a myriad of other strategies that are conducive to creating a safe environment within their schools. Almost in every group of six children, two wanted to maintain the spirit of sharing at their school or center. Children felt safer with friends and teachers who would be willing to share with them material and non-material things. Despite their appreciation of the spirit of sharing, many of the same children wanted their privacy to be respected. As one child put it, *"I like to be with others, but when they interfere with my personal affairs, I feel that my safety is jeopardized."*

Another strategy that enhanced the children's sense of safety was the **communication between their teachers and parents**. The few children who highlighted this strategy are high achievers who felt a sense of pride when their teachers communicated with their parents. A few other children preferred that their teachers would not communicate what they do at school to their parents unless it was necessary.

Finally, almost all participating children especially those at the public schools expressed their **need to participate in leisure activities such as play, games, trips, and extracurricular activities**. The children felt the need for such activities, especially after a year of being locked down due to the COVID pandemic. Voices asking for such activities were more heard among public school children who are more advantaged than the NFE children. Having the basic needs satisfied made these children think of higher-level needs that might be considered a luxury for someone who was living under challenging circumstances.

The strategies presented in this section were all shared by the students during the focus group activity. They mostly focused on what they have in the school and their relationship with their peers and teachers. Teachers, on the other hand, identified effective practices that have to do with the teacher's character, knowledge, and skills in addition to the effective child safeguarding standards and system in place at the school or NFE.

Strategies that Work: Teachers' Perspective

In-depth analysis of the rich teachers' interview data has helped elucidate and give insights into effective strategies that contribute to children's safety and well-being in their schools and educational centers. These strategies are categorized under three different themes: Teachers' Strategies, School-Wide Strategies, and Collaboration between School and Home.

Teachers' Strategies

Teachers at both public and private schools accentuated the importance of their role in creating a safe environment through the classroom management approach they adopt in class. Teachers who mostly employed the **"Positive Discipline" principles** were aware of their effect on creating a safe environment within the classroom and the school at large. The main principles that teachers used effectively and recommended are **giving students agency, and holding them accountable for their actions. Teachers did that by setting clear expectations and supporting children in meeting those expectations.** NFE teachers were more cognizant of the need to establish clear expectations of routines to be followed at school due to the students' background, as illustrated by one teacher: "There is a routine at school. Students must go to class when the bell rings, students must line up in the playground; when the students who live in camps are outside the school, there are no routines to follow. However, when the student is at school, he/she knows there is a system and a routine to abide by, and that makes all the difference in creating order at school."

Another effective "Positive Discipline" principle that teachers resorted to is **teaching social skills**, especially to very young learners. Teachers commented on how teaching social skills helped in making children more respectful and tolerant of each other. Both NFE and public school teachers pointed out that many of the children who come to their classes lack such skills, and they have to spend a considerable amount of time teaching them explicitly in class. The effect of working on social skills was observable even outside the school. One public school teacher illustrated how the students could even transfer these skills to their families giving an example of *a 6-year-old boy who told her, "When my siblings speak loudly at home, I tell them to lower their voice because it is more respectful as you told us!"*

Trying to maintain a balance between **being firm** regarding classroom rules and **showing empathy** is another rewarding approach. Teachers who displayed this trait could win the children's trust and were more approachable. One key finding is that the Syrian teachers at the NFEs talked more frequently about empathy than the public school teachers. Being aware of the children's background and having lived the same experience might have influenced the NFE teachers' perceptions of their role. More than 50% of the NFE teachers reminded us during the interviews that they are dealing with war children who have been through a lot. This realization made **their role double fold where they had to alleviate the suffering of the children first and educate them second.**

The **Positive Discipline Model** was developed by Dr. Jane Nelson in the 1970s.

Its main tenet is **giving children agency** and getting them to play a meaningful role in focusing on solutions rather than being recipients of punishment.

Through adopting this model, teachers and/or parents focus on **teaching young people social and life skills** so that they become responsible, respectful, and resourceful members in their communities.

Positive Discipline Association

One teacher reminded us during the interview in a very emotional manner: “These children are suffering from the effects of war: poverty, psychological problems, living in camps, moving from one place to another ...My role is to teach them to reduce the impact of war .. Our role is to restore and teach as much as possible to avoid illiteracy and ignorance. Through the knowledge and support I am offering, I can alleviate the suffering of students especially those who lost their parents or a relative during war.” These same thoughts were echoed by more than 10 of the NFE interviewed teachers.

Teachers with this conviction could give several examples of **children who sought emotional refuge in them**, and who could be saved from the repercussions of despair. **Once trust was established, children would feel comfortable sharing even some personal stories of abuse** and neglect that the school could deal with afterward in a professional manner.

Taking a stand against bullying and responding to any early signs of it is another effective strategy that helped in reducing the cases of bullying by teachers. Despite being a school-wide responsibility, many teachers were the ones who could spot attempts at bullying and stop them before they would escalate. **The most common form of bullying that teachers alluded to is verbal bullying.** Some of the examples that were shared by teachers are children taunting a shorter/taller peer and children making fun of what someone wears or eats, or where someone lives (a camp for refugees). In all these examples, teachers would respond in a similar fashion displaying zero tolerance of the comments and trying to resort **back to positive discipline principles, especially working on social skills.**

In addition to looking for early signs of bullying, several teachers pointed out the **need to detect early signs of emotional distress through close monitoring.** More than 50% of the teachers interviewed at both NFEs and public schools emphasized the **need to monitor the students closely at all times. Through close monitoring, teachers could stop any harm from occurring whether physical or emotional.** A few teachers shared examples of accidents that could be stopped because the teacher was fully alert to what was going on around him/her in the classroom. Other teachers could also spot serious problems that the children were going through such as family problems or parental abuse by just observing the children closely.

One teacher commented on how he kept his eyes open to what is happening in the class saying, “I pay attention to details a lot. In class, I can tell who is distracted or who is thinking about something else... Many times, we are not aware of their daily problems, but observing them closely and trying to find out what is wrong would help save them from bigger problems.”

Finally, a few teachers – more male teachers than female teachers – viewed the creation of a safe environment from a different perspective. They spotlighted the role of the pedagogical methods they used in creating an “academic” sense of safety. These teachers succeeded in creating a risk-free climate where children could take “academic risks” by asking for clarification or responding when not fully confident about their answers. This kind of atmosphere enhanced the children’s sense of safety within the classroom and it also helped in getting them to mutually support each other, and avoid ridiculing and verbally bullying each other.

School-Wide Strategies

The teachers' role is crucial in creating a safe and violent-free environment for the children. However, that role is not enough on its own. Unless the school establishes its safe-school policy and strategies, it will not be able to achieve its mission of creating a safe environment in and around the school or educational center.

To achieve that goal, the interviewed **teachers have identified several strategies adopted by their schools** that contribute to creating a safe and violent-free environment for the children. Among these strategies are **securing the physical environment, establishing a clear child-protection policy, having a clear referral system, and supporting teachers emotionally and professionally.**

I. Securing the Physical Environment

Securing the physical environment was the first thing that came to the mind of 90% of the interviewed teachers when asked about what their schools are doing to secure a safe environment for the children. Teachers referred to actions taken to **secure the physical environment within the classroom, on the stairs, and in the playground.** They illustrated by giving examples of classroom measures such as the following:

- Keeping a distance between seats and clearing the space between them
- Monitoring the distance from the heater
- Trying to cover all electric wires and power outlets
- Monitoring the use of sharp materials like a compass
- Providing for all health safety measures during the COVID pandemic
- Having fenced windows
- Having cameras in every classroom monitored by the principal (a practice only followed in three of the public schools)

Physical safety was also attended to by closely **monitoring the stairs leading up to the classrooms and to the playground (in one of the centers the playground is on the rooftop.)** Teachers at both the public schools and NFEs emphasized how important it is for schools to **always have a teacher and/or supervisor on duty** to monitor the stairs when there is break traffic (students going to break or coming from break). **The appointed teacher on duty can help in reducing the chances of physical injury** that might be the result of accidents, children pushing and shoving each other, or children physically bullying each other.

The final space where the physical safety is attended to by the school personnel is the playground. Most public school teachers stressed the need to have **children of different age groups having different recess time.** They felt that older children posed a threat to the safety of younger children due to the games they play. Schools, where this practice is in place, could secure the safety of younger children, mostly Kindergarten students. It was also recommended to couple this practice with **close monitoring of the young children during their recess time** by making sure that there are no blind spots where the children are not visible. Another recommendation for playground safety is making sure that **all the games are in open spaces and the ground underneath is not rocky or concrete** to save the children from physical injury. Finally, teachers also affirmed how important it is to **have a guarded gate and a high fence around the playground** to reduce the chances of outsiders bullying the children inside the school or threatening their safety.

II. Establishing a Clear Child-Protection Policy

All interviewed NFE teachers showed their awareness of the child protection policy in place at their center. Every NFE teacher mentioned the policy as one of the first things they are introduced to by the administration where teachers need to **sign their consent** to all the items in the policy as a **pre-requisite for their employment**. The policy items cover **how teachers should behave around children** and what they are not allowed to do. Having these guidelines clearly stated provides all staff with the needed “code of conduct” that they have to abide by within their center. It **also helps in safeguarding the children’s rights and protecting them from violent discipline practices**. One key finding regarding the policy is that **all the NFE teachers showed their deep conviction in the principles of the policy** in place, and how they followed it unconsciously rather than being forced to follow it.

One of the NFEs has produced their child protection policy as an animated video with all the “Dos” and “Don’ts” that teachers and staff have to abide by. The video is also child-friendly, so that the teachers can share it with the children to introduce them to their rights and duties. The use of the video was highlighted as a very effective strategy by the psycho-social support team at the center.

Unlike the NFE teachers, the public school teachers showed no awareness of the child protection policy that was launched by MEHE in 2018. What they mostly referred to are the **guidelines provided by the principal** orally such as “No hitting” and “No physical punishment” as the most prominent regulations.

To public school teachers, the principal’s guidelines provided were what they seemed to follow without focusing on the philosophy behind these guidelines. In one of the public schools, a **policy brief was posted on the walls** of the school based on a UNHCR-MEHE 2016-2015 joint project; however, **none of the interviewed teachers referred to that policy brief** and whether it was adopted or not. None of the children at the same school showed awareness of it too.

Note: The image of the brief on the right was captured at the school. It is titled “Policy with Behaviour Guidelines for Violent-Free Schools”, and it highlights the rights and duties of students, teachers, and parents.



III. Having a Clear Referral System

It was apparent through the interviews that the NFEs have a clear referral system in place. All the interviewed NFE teachers referred to the internal referral system within the center as one of the key strategies adopted to help in the safeguarding of the children's rights. Each of the centers has a **specialized department that was referred to either as the "Protection Team" or "Psycho-Social Support Team" (PSS)** depending on the center. The main duty of that specialized team is to follow up on the cases where signs of abuse or neglect are detected. In most cases, **teachers or administrators are the front-liners** who suspect something wrong, and they refer the cases to the specialized team to follow up and provide children with the needed protection, support, and care.

In half of the centers, **the PSS team provides all the children with psycho-social support sessions** that are focused on the children's well-being. One teacher commented on the value of such sessions by describing the children's attitude towards them saying, *"They feel safe and protected during the PSS sessions which all wait for and look forward to. They even prefer this session over going on a picnic with their family because they enjoy it a lot."* At the centers where these sessions are not frequent, teachers recommended adding them and/or running them on regular basis due to the great positive impact they can have on both the teachers and the children.

Most of the interviewed NFE teachers tried to make a clear distinction between their role and the role of the "Psycho-Social Support" team members. One teacher tried to show how important the PSS support team is saying, "Although we have training on all forms of violence, but we are not specialized in PSS. Our role is to identify the cases and refer them to the specialized team that is more competent than us in that regard." Although the majority of the teachers acknowledged the role of the PSS team, but some teachers still conceded that students feel closer to their teachers and tend to confide in them more than they would do with the PSS team members especially in the early stages of case follow-up.

The **centers have realized the pivotal role that these teams are playing, so they all expanded their teams in number** in the past two years to provide more focused support to all children. In addition to their regular duties, the PSS team members started a new task during COVID 19 which is **reviewing all online teaching material to make sure that it satisfies all the academic and psychological needs of the children.** One teacher illustrated the importance of this added role by saying, "They check videos and scripts to be presented to children online and add comments that WE do not pay attention to, and I thank them for that. *For example, in a video about doctors, they added 'When you visit a doctor, you should be accompanied by an adult' or 'You cannot visit a friend without the approval of the parents'. These comments are at the heart of child protection, and we as teachers never notice them."*

Unlike the NFEs, **public schools do not have a PSS Department within the school.** Usually, the cases are referred to the principal who decides in his/her turn the action needed. In some other schools, there is a "Health Counselor" at the school who is responsible for documenting the cases in need of specialized follow-up. One of the interviewed "Health Counselors" described the referral process at public schools as such: *"The DOPS counselor appointed by MEHE comes to school every four months. I show her the cases."*

If the cases are simple, she will deal with them, but if the case is severe, she refers it to a specialist. In our school, the cases are simple and there are no severe ones so far. Our cases include the death of a parent, divorce, or parental problems.” Describing the latter cases as “not severe” shows a lack of awareness of when PSS support is needed!

The majority of the public school teachers, like the one in the above example, showed nescience of the need for a specialized team. To this majority, **the principal is capable of dealing with all cases and is the one to be entrusted with that mission.** In the examples given, the principal either tried to deal with the child by using positive discipline principles, or threats, or even physical punishment. Some other principals communicated with the parents frequently, and together, they tried to resolve any problems with the child. However, in some of the examples given by the teachers, **the principal’s approach was not always successful, and sometimes it led to undesirable outcomes** as revealed in the example on the right. Such examples have made a few public school teachers wish for more specialized staff within the school who can deal with severe cases and save children from the gloomy realities many of them are living.

In one example, a public school teacher was describing emotionally what she and the principal did to help a 13-year old boy who was facing a lot of problems. After suspecting that the boy was on drugs, the teacher discussed the case with the principal and together they tried to communicate with the parents. Unfortunately, the parents dealt with the case violently, and the child ran away. After almost a week, the child was found at his grandparents’ house in another city and he was brought back home. However, to the dismay of the teacher, the child dropped out of school, and she never heard of him again.

IV. Supporting Teachers Emotionally and Professionally

As presented earlier in this section, teachers play a pivotal role in protecting children and creating a safe environment for them. However, **for teachers to play this role successfully, they need to be supported both at the emotional level and the professional one.** Emotionally speaking, as one of the public school teachers put it, *“If the teacher is psychologically comfortable, she can take care of the children, but if she goes into class with anxiety, she will not be able to focus on the children. The teacher’s emotional state has a ripple effect on the students’ state!”* This same idea was echoed by more than 50% of the interviewed teachers who **all asserted how their performance in the class has been affected by the general situation everyone is living.** Many of the same teachers who succeeded in maintaining their emotional well-being during times of multiple crises and in supporting their students pertained their success partially to the support they received from the school. This support was more evident among NFE teachers than among public school ones, and it took different forms. **Teachers gave examples of steps taken by the administration such as showing appreciation and praising effort, organizing collegial support sessions, having special social events, and even organizing PSS sessions for teachers on regular basis.** To most teachers, such moves, no matter how simple they were, had a great impact on their emotional well-being.

Unlike NFE teachers, **public school teachers showed more symptoms of “emotional drain”** which might be related to age and years on the job, in addition to lack of emotional support. Only at two of the public schools, **teachers acknowledged the effort made by the principal to help in keeping the morale of the teachers high** through praise and displaying flexibility with both: the students and the teachers.

In addition to the need for emotional and moral support, the interviewed teachers focused on **the value of the professional support they received through training**. All the interviewed NFE teachers conceded that **the training sessions they had received on child safeguarding and protection are invaluable** and they have had a great impact on how they deal with the children. It was apparent that the NFE teachers had frequent and regular training on various themes related to child protection such as the following:

- Classroom management
- Child-friendly communication strategies
- Types of violence
- Detecting and dealing with bullying
- The languages of love
- Using art in psycho-social support, and many others.

All interviewed teachers at one NFE center referred to **two training sessions** they had describing them as extremely effective in the domain of child protection. The two topics are: **“The Languages of Love”** and **“The Use of Colors in Psychological Support”**. Under the former, teachers were introduced to the **different ways how they can show their love to children** who are most in need of it. According to the same teachers, being able to identify the emotional needs of the most vulnerable children would help any teacher respond to these needs using the most effective “language of love” for that child such as giving him/her a physical object as a token of love, saying a word of affection, or simply making a caring gesture. The latter **training about the use of colors has helped teachers identify cases of violence and professionally respond to them**. One story shared by a teacher best illustrates how effective such a technique can be; *“The psychological training was important. We can tell from a student’s drawing what is going on in his mind, and any color he/she uses has a meaning. In one of the activities, one of the students picked a red crayon and started to make strong meaningless strokes on the paper. It reoccurred more than once. When I saw his mother and told her about his reoccurring behavior, she told me that he witnessed the death of his sister and he couldn’t forget the amount of blood that was on the ground. We could eventually help that child later and his behavior has completely changed with the support of the PSS team who followed up on the case.”*

A computer teacher referred to a distinctive training he had under the title “Psychological First Aid”. As someone who teaches a technical subject, there are things that never crossed his mind and through that training he became aware of the need to be conscious of every word he utters or every move he made.

He gave an example about an incident that happened before the training saying, “In computer, we frequently use terms like “parent” and “child” as we explain ideas like folder in another folder. Once, I drew on the board a family tree of folders telling children this is the parent folder and its children. All of a sudden, a female student started to cry and I discovered later that she was an orphan who lost her father in war. The example I used was innocent, but I should have thought about it more!”

According to that teacher, the “Psychological First Aid” training he received later has prepared him to avoid such situations and/or deal with them professionally if they ever happen again.

as very practical and relevant to their context. Under this training program, teachers practiced effective communication strategies with the children. That training, according to one teacher has not only helped the children in the class, but it has helped him in his personal life. He illustrated describing how he started to use the “Peace Building” approach with his own children, “The idea of becoming a non-violent person is not an easy task. I personally used to hit my kids when I got mad at them. Now after the “Peace Education” training, I ask them to take a deep breath, which makes them laugh. Sometimes, when I notice a conflict between them, I step aside and ask them to figure out why the problem happened by asking each other ‘why questions’. Once you ask ‘why’, you get the reason and you deal with it. Change does not happen overnight, but I can see now how problems can be solved in a more peaceful way.

All the examples given by the NFE teachers on the effective training sessions they had received demonstrate how important it is for schools and educational centers to provide their teachers and staff with the needed professional training that would prepare them to fulfill their job. Unfortunately, public school teachers have not demonstrated an equal level of awareness through the interviews. When asked about any training they had received on the topic of “Child Protection”, 80% of the teachers could not recall any. They mostly gave examples of the training sessions run by the Center for Educational Research and Development (CERD). Usually, they receive CERD’s list of workshops and they have to choose two workshops from that list to attend. What teachers mostly choose is topics related to the subject they teach. Only at two of the schools, a few teachers referred to a full-day training on violent-free schools that they had in the academic year 2016-2015 without being able to retrieve any of the details. In one of these two schools, one teacher who received the training said that they could not implement any of what they had learned due to the pandemic. Upon asking them about their wishes, around 50% of the public school teachers wished for more useful training, especially on topics related to dealing with children with special needs of all kinds: physical, emotional, and learning needs.

In addition to all the recommended “Teacher Strategies” and “School-Wide Strategies”, teachers have pointed out the need to enhance the collaboration between school and home.

Enhancing Collaboration between School and Home

The importance of collaboration between school and caregivers was a topic that both NFE and public school teachers agreed on. According to one teacher, **the success of any child protection program would never happen without the involvement of each side of the triangle: student, teacher, and parent.** To her, the effort of the teacher would never pay off without the students' interest and motivation, and the parental follow-up. It was noticeable how important this relationship is through the frequent reoccurrence of the word "parent" in every teacher interview we had. Different teachers referred to the role of the parents and/or caregivers differently: as supporters, as in need of support themselves, or as obstacles that have to be dealt with.

I. Parents as Supporters

A few interviewed teachers referred to parents/caregivers as key stakeholders in the success of any child-protection program. To them, **the parents are partners who contribute to their success through their appreciation or contribution.** Teachers who referred to parents as supporters were elated by the parents' heartwarming messages especially when they came through the principal. One teacher said that she can never hide her joy when the principal communicates to her the parents' complimentary messages. What makes her happy is that the child was able to transfer his sense of safety to his/her parents, and the parents in their turn showed appreciation of what the teacher and school are doing to secure the well-being of their child.

Another level of indirect support that parents could provide is by being active in parents' committees. In one public school, two of the interviewed teachers referred to the active role that parents are playing through their active committee. Teachers gave examples of the activities supported by the committee like extra-curricular activities or funding of certain projects. To the teachers, such activities contributed indirectly to every child's sense of well-being in the school.

Parents'/caregivers' support could also be materialized through follow-up on their children's academics. Several public schools' teachers commented on the positive effect that parental follow-up can have on the children's performance and well-being at the same time. According to them, **a child who is taken care of at home would ultimately contribute to the well-being of his peers in his/her class.** The positive impact of parental/caregiver involvement was also noticed by a few NFE teachers. One NFE teacher commended **the role of the elderly in some families.** She described what one illiterate grandmother did and how exemplary her behavior was. As she put it in her own words: "The parents are not responsive, unlike the grandmother. Whenever we have a teacher-parent meeting, the grandmother attends the meeting. She has many grandchildren at the center and she asks about each one of them. She tries to follow up on their progress and behavior. This follow-up was reflected on her grandchildren's academic performance and behavior."

Even though a few teachers praised the parents'/caregivers' effort in following up with their children, **the majority of the teachers felt the need to work more collaboratively with the parents hoping to skill them in positive and non-violent discipline.**

Parents in Need of Support:

The majority of the teachers at the NFEs in particular referred to **parents as “incompetent” in child protection and due to their incompetence, they need support.** According to these teachers, their centers are playing a pivotal role not only in educating the children and safeguarding their wellbeing but also in skilling the parents/caregivers in matters that concern them or concern their children.

As described by the teachers of the different centers, the NFEs employ similar strategies in **skilling the caregivers either directly through training sessions or indirectly through frequent positive communication with them.**

At least one teacher from each center commented on the effective training that they had for parents/caregivers. Some of the topics that parents were trained on by the centers are:

- Psychological relief
- First aid training about cases of suffocation and fire
- Covid 19 safety measures
- Bullying
- Positive discipline, among many others.

In many of these training sessions, **mothers were highly involved and they showed eagerness to learn how to protect their children.** According to teachers, this positive attitude towards training has encouraged the centers to think of more topics that they can train parents on.

At another center, the administration has organized several social events and invited the parents. During these events, **the protection and PSS teams tried to talk to the parents about different ways they can approach their children.** Noticing how receptive many of the parents are, especially mothers, has encouraged the center to think of more social events to host. It was evident to the teachers that such activities are achieving their objective of educating the parents around positive discipline, but they still **acknowledged the fact that change would not be achieved all at once where the cultural values still hold some of the parents back.**

While many of the NFE teachers reflected their awareness of the parents' cultural background and how it affected their child-rearing practices, they were still convinced of the value of the strategies adopted by their centers. However, **a few other teachers,** especially the public school ones referred to parents as **obstacles standing in the way of the fight against VAC.**

Parents as Obstacles to be Dealt with

Many teachers felt that some parents/caregivers are not fulfilling their role in terms of rearing their children and safeguarding their rights. Parents who fall under this category **either exerted destructive pressure on their children or were negligent of them.** A few teachers gave examples of parents who punished their children severely for not meeting their expectations in terms of academic performance. As a result of this pressure, children started to perceive themselves as failures, and that led them either to self-isolation or to unhealthy practices like cheating or bullying other kids to boost their self-image.

Another group of parents that are seen as obstacles is parents who have neglected their responsibility of attending to their children's rights. To one teacher, the health pandemic has revealed some parents' negligence of their children's education. **A few teachers have expressed their concerns about the high dropout rate among school children who are pushed out of school either to support their families or to get married in the case of girls.** Another form of negligence that is perceived as most dangerous is being extremely lenient with children as revealed in the following example.

One public school teacher expressed her frustration at parents' negligence: "I want the parents to help in creating a safe environment for their children. They can create a safe environment for the child by not allowing him to go out at night, not to walk with a stranger, and not to leave school with anyone. In this way, they will be protecting their child from psychological problems, from sexual harassment, from robbery, from smoking, and from exploitation. Isn't that what child protection is all about?!"

The last group of **parents** that are perceived as the most problematic is parents who **are abusive of their children and are resistant to change.** One teacher was infuriated by her experiences in the public school where she teaches, and how hopeless the situation is. To her, *"Nothing can be applied here! They tell you about your rights, what you can do, and to whom you can complain, but we cannot apply it! For example, I observed a child being subjected to violence by his parents, and we complained about it to the highest authority, but then what? The parents are in a position of power and they usually threaten the teachers. After all, the teacher is a human being and he/she will not take the risk! The parents can really offend the teacher and the administration by asking them not to interfere in family matters!"* This latter comment reflects how challenging the situation might be in some contexts. To deal with such challenging cases, the school administration needs the compounded effort of all stakeholders in the community to secure the rights of the children entrusted to their care.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The children's perspectives along with the teachers' deep insights have revealed several tested and tried strategies that can be utilized in the fight against VAC. It was also evident that the views of both the teachers and children are analogous except for a few discrepancies that are presented in the next section. Moreover, the study revealed that there is no unified national referral system (in practice) that is adopted in all schools and educational centers to help in safeguarding the children's rights in the Lebanese context. By comparing the children's and teachers' perspectives along with the system followed at both public schools and NFEs, it is hoped that we will be able to come up with recommendations that are tailored to our national context.

Between the Teachers' and Children's Perspectives

Teachers and children have identified very similar strategies that conduce to creating a safe environment in which children can learn and thrive. Both have identified the safety of the physical environment as a key pillar that contributes to the physical and emotional well-being of the children within their educational centers. However, **children were able to identify some blind spots in their physical environment** that many teachers were not aware of such as the location of the school, low fences, the route back home, or even unnoticeable objects like nails in the walls in some schools or centers.

Despite the importance of physical safety throughout the school, both teachers and students have **prioritized the importance of feeling emotionally safe within the classroom and school at large**. It is compelling that students were able to pinpoint effective classroom management and positive discipline strategies without being able to name them. All the classroom management measures that teachers resorted to were identified as effective by the children. However, the majority of the teachers did not concentrate on the pedagogical needs of the learners as a priority while children accentuated its value to them. It was apparent through the focus group activity that **children felt safer around teachers who contributed to their academic progress** while the majority of the teachers focused more on the emotional well-being of the children.

Two major discrepancies between the views of teachers and children are those related to the **role of friends and psycho-social support teams**. Teachers downplayed the role of friends and only referred to the negative role they might play through bullying. However, **children highly valued the support their peers can provide them with** which calls for more team-building activities within the classrooms. Another compelling finding that was revealed is the **high level of trust that children have in their favorite teachers and the lack of awareness of the role of the PSS teams even in the NFE centers**. **None of the participating children has mentioned their awareness of the PSS teams' role at their centers and they only referred to their teachers, or at least to their favorite teachers, as the source of safety for them within their school or center**. One reason for this is that the children we had in the focus group activity might have never had an encounter with the PSS team or that encounter might have been brief, that they could not recall it immediately. On the other hand, **teachers, especially at the NFE centers emphasized the importance of the PSS team and the key role it plays**. This finding calls for more frequent contact between the PSS team members and the children through a variety of activities, and for more empowerment of teachers who are the trusted front-liners mostly visible to the children.

NFEs and Public Schools Compared

One of the key objectives behind the study was to compare the strategies in place at public schools and NFEs to identify what might be a more effective safeguarding system to recommend and embrace. Major disparities between the two systems can be highlighted.

Even though both public schools and NFEs have a referral system in place, the one at NFEs seems to be more functional. NFEs have their referral system within the center while that at public schools is more external. A major shortcoming in the public school system is the lack of permanent presence of counselors who visit schools very infrequently as pointed out by the teachers. Moreover, each of the DOPS counselors is in charge of several schools in his or her area which will make it challenging for them to track all cases and work with them closely. NFE centers, on the other hand, have specialized teams who are present physically at all times in their centers and ready to respond to any arising situation immediately.

Another major spotted difference between the two systems is related to the level of awareness among teachers of the existing child protection policy in their center or school. All NFE teachers are fully aware of the existing child protection policy and they are held accountable for all its content. This same level of awareness was lacking among public school teachers who displayed awareness of some child protection practices, but no awareness of the child protection policy that was launched by MEHE. This lack of awareness was coupled with a lack of focused and specialized training for all public school teachers on child protection. More than 70% of the public school teachers had no prior training on child protection and creating safe schools while 100% of the NFE teachers received continuous training on the topic. It was very apparent that NFE teachers have internalized many of the safe practices and they started to be characterized by them. Unfortunately, public school teachers are still in need of more intensive and specialized training sessions and follow-up in the schools.

Due to all the shortcomings in the approach adopted by public schools, the role of the principal has become central. All public school teachers underscored the key role played by the principal who seems to carry a heavy burden, especially with the successive crises hitting the country. Many of the principals mentioned in the interviews seemed to be going out of their way to create a safe environment for the children entrusted to their care. However, the principals have many other duties they attend to which makes it essential that they have a full operational protection team that is present at all times.

Finally, we must point out that the public schools were selected by MEHE with one criterion in mind which is their prior participation in the “Safe Schools” project run by UNDP and UNHCR back in 2016-2015 in collaboration with MEHE and other NGOs. Knowing this would make us question the state of affairs in less advantaged public schools across the country.

Recommendations

Based on the in-depth thematic analysis of the data, we could reach the major findings that we shared in the previous section of the report. The findings affirm that for any school child-protection program to succeed, all stakeholders need to collaborate together to achieve their goal. They also have to stretch their hands to the parents and forge bonds with the community. Because creating a safe school is a collective responsibility, we propose the following recommendations that can be adopted by teachers, psycho-social workers, administrators, and policymakers.

Recommendations for Teachers

To help in the creation of safe spaces within their classrooms and other spaces where they are usually present with the children at schools and educational centers, teachers can take on the following recommendations:

- Establish clear rules and guidelines that the children can follow, and hold the children accountable for abiding by them.
- Adopt the “Positive Discipline” principles, mainly through teaching the children the needed social skills and giving them agency.
- Work on community-building activities within the classroom that would help in reinforcing the team spirit among all the children.
- Provide children in your classes with the needed academic support and scaffolding.
- Address issues of children’s rights explicitly and deal with bullying cases as they arise.
- Monitor the children closely at all times whether in the classroom, in the hallways, on the stairs, in the playground, and even on the way back home if possible.
- Follow the referral system in place and benefit from the expertise of the specialized team.
- Utilize all professional development opportunities that would help you hone your skills.

Recommendations for Psycho-Social Workers

Psycho-Social Workers have a very critical responsibility in safeguarding children’s rights and maintaining their state of well-being. As such, it is recommended that they follow these guidelines:

- Have more regular activities with all the children that will help you become more visible to them and worthy of their trust.
- Share knowledge and skills with other stakeholders through workshops and training sessions that you organize in coordination with the administration.
- Work closely with all the front-liners, especially teachers.
- Facilitate psycho-social support sessions for teachers on regular basis, especially during hard times.
- Take care of your own well-being, and read the warning signs.

Recommendations for administrators

The administrators' responsibility at both NFE centers and public schools is pivotal for the creation of a safe space within and around the school and/or educational center. To succeed in fulfilling their responsibilities, administrators can utilize the following recommendations:

- Check for safety measures everywhere with special attention to some “blind spots”, and make sure that you have regular rounds of checks throughout the academic year.
 - Assign different staff members with the duty of monitoring children at all times while on the premises of the school.
 - Secure the children's journey back home either by providing them with the needed transportation or by ensuring a “parental pickup” or having staff members in charge of escorting them back home in case they commute walking.
 - Provide students with a playing space and free time during the day. If possible, try to make that space a green one.
 - Plan recreational activities for all children at the school without excluding any intentionally or unintentionally (by organizing activities that are more male- or female- friendly.)
 - Share the child-protection policy in place with all stakeholders and make all accountable for its implementation.
 - Provide teachers and other staff members with the needed training and skills. That would require including all workers on the premises of the school like the gatekeepers, security guards, janitors, and all other staff.
 - Document all reported cases and follow up on them with all the stakeholders.
 - Provide teachers with the needed emotional support to maintain their well-being, especially during hard times.
 - Form partnerships with the parents and larger community by organizing special social events and awareness sessions.
-

Recommendations for Policymakers

The policymakers' role is essential for ensuring a unified system of child protection and an efficient reporting process. To warrant success in their role, policymakers can adopt the following recommendations:

- Establish a unified and comprehensive system that is clear and transparent, and share it with all the stakeholders.
- Refine the child-protection policy, and make it more user-friendly and accessible to all stakeholders.
- Work on long-term initiatives and ensure the sustainability of these initiatives.
- Provide all the stakeholders with the needed knowledge and skills through more focused and specialized continuous professional development events.
- Evaluate the success of any program at all levels of implementation.
- Forge partnerships between the private and public sectors and capitalize on the expertise of each of the sectors to reach better outcomes.
- Plan for whole-community approaches and work on their sustainability.
- Form global partnerships and utilize the experiences of specialized groups.

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Appendix I: Teachers' Interview guide (English and Arabic)

1. Think back on your experience at the school/center and remember a certain time when you felt energized and most proud. Tell a story about that time. What happened? What was your role? What led you to success?
1. فكّر/ي بتجربتك في المدرسة أو المركز وحاول/ي تذكر موقف أحسّسك بالحيوية والفخر. أخبرنا/ينا ما حدث حينها. ما كان دورك في هذا الموقف؟ وما كانت العوامل التي ساهمت في نجاحك حينها؟
2. Without being modest, what do you value the most about yourself as a teacher?
2. بكل صراحة وبدون أي حاجة للتواضع، ما هو أكثر ما تقدره/ينه في نفسك كمعلم(ة)؟
3. At what point in time, did you feel most proud of yourself in trying to safeguard the rights of children?
3. متى أحسست بالفخر كونك ساهمت في خلق بيئة آمنة للأطفال؟
4. How do you know that the strategies that you are using are working in safeguarding the rights of children/preventing VAC?
4. كيف يمكنك تحديد نجاح الاستراتيجيات التي تتبعها/ينها في حماية الأطفال وخلق بيئة آمنة لهم؟
5. When do you feel most successful in contributing to the general idea of safeguarding children and preventing violence against them?
5. متى تشعر بأنك قد نجحت في مساهمتك في مجال حماية الأطفال وخلق بيئة آمنة لهم بشكل عام؟
6. What are the things at your school/center that you feel are contributing to the success of your program in creating a safe environment for the children?
6. باعتقادك، ما هي الأمور القائمة في مدرستك أو مركزك التعليمي والتي تساهم في خلق بيئة آمنة للأطفال؟
7. What are some major milestones in the journey of your institution in fighting VAC?
7. ما هي أهم المحطات التي ساهمت في وقف العنف ضد الأطفال في مسيرة مؤسستك التربوية؟
8. What are you doing that should be preserved as you think of change?
8. ما هي أهم الأمور التي تودون ابقاءها على حالها والمحافظة عليها اذا ما أردتم الشروع في التغيير في سياسات المؤسسة؟
9. How is the school/center currently operating in order to improve its capacity as a safe learning community?
9. ما هي الآلية المتبعة ضمن مؤسستك لتحسين قدراتكم على خلق بيئة آمنة للأطفال؟
10. If you had three wishes about this program to make more of these exceptional experiences possible, what would they be?
10. اذا منحت الفرصة لاختيار ٣ أمنيات متعلّقة بكيفية تحسين تجربتك في مجال حماية الأطفال، ماذا تتمنى/ين؟

Appendix II: A- Focus Groups Discussion Guide

Each of the pictures is presented as a separate activity. The educator works first on the “Current Special School” activity, and later on the “School of Dreams” one.

After presenting the following task, the educator asks the following questions:

1. What is special about your school and what makes you feel safe in it?
2. What are the things that you would like to keep in your school and never change?
3. What is special about your relationship with your teachers and friends at the school?

The educator should encourage the children to write or draw their thoughts on the first picture. They might choose to write words, phrases, or sentences, or they might simply decide to represent their thoughts through drawing and the use of colors. Then, the educator would discuss with the children the activity and would probe them to illustrate their ideas by talking about experiences that happened with them or with their friends.

The same process should be repeated for the “School of Dreams” activity, asking the following questions:

1. What are additional things you would like to have at your school to feel safer and more comfortable?
2. What can your teachers and friends do to make the school a safer place for everyone?
3. What can you personally do to make your school safer for you and your friends?

Students can work on their activities individually at first, and then the educator would probe them to share their responses. The facilitator would note down all the ideas on a flipchart to refer to the generated data later. The educator should make sure that no names are written or shared with others.

Use the following images, each on a separate sheet.

