



LEARNING NOTE

Safe to Learn: Part 5

Teachers' perspectives on preventing violence against children

In partnership with:



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Introduction

This learning paper provides lessons from International Alert's programme on the prevention of violence against children (PVAC) in Lebanon and aims to inform similar programmes targeting vulnerable children. The paper was inspired by the experiences of teachers from non-formal education centres, which they shared in a series of facilitator learning circles (FLCs) in 2020-2021. The recommendations presented in the paper are based on the teachers' reflections on their own practice. The paper offers a summary of learning notes 1 to 4 and outlines good practice in securing a safe environment for children, classroom management, ensuring teachers' wellbeing, working with students with learning challenges and mainstreaming child safeguarding in non-formal education.

Safe to Learn is an initiative dedicated to ending violence in and around schools, so children get free to learn, thrive and pursue their dreams. To date, Lebanon, along with 14 other countries, have endorsed Safe to Learn's call to action, which sets out principles, commitments and measures to end violence in schools. In 2021, International Alert, in partnership with Basmeh & Zeitooneh, the Centre for Lebanese Studies (CLS), Damma Foundation and Sawa for Development and Aid, took part in the Safe to Learn initiative to prevent and address violence against children in learning environments in Lebanon. The objective of the project was to increase the evidence base and capacity of learning centres in Lebanon to reduce violence against children in areas with high concentrations of vulnerable populations, including refugees.

Securing a safe environment for children

A safe environment is not only about space; it also relates to the learning culture and the enacted policies and processes that ensure child safeguarding in these learning spaces. In the FLCs, educators outlined the necessary steps in designing a safe environment for children.

Picking a convenient building for the learning centre

Organisations working on non-formal education often select the learning space based on availability and budget. The

space, therefore, is not always fit for purpose and responding to the children's needs. Basmeh & Zeitooneh spent some months rehabilitating their new centre to turn it into a safe and child-friendly space for learning. Likewise, Sawa and Damma have rehabilitated and upgraded their spaces in and around the centres to render them more child-friendly.

Despite all the efforts made, the centres can still work on making their spaces safer and more comfortable through taking certain measures, such as securing the building stairs and adding colourful and relaxing spaces. Teachers also felt that sharing a building with other organisations is not optimal for learning centres.

Another factor that contributes to the safety of the space is its size; it should be convenient to the group of students in the centre, neither too small, nor too big. The number of students per class needs to be dependent on the size of the room they are put in, as this will affect how the lessons will be conducted. Additionally, the physical space within the classroom and the furniture used should not put children in danger. For example, the centres need to attend to exposed electrical cables, non-secured balcony spaces or a board that could fall on a child. Furniture should also be child-friendly in terms of size and appearance. Finally, regular maintenance of classrooms and their equipment should be planned in the absence of children.

Educating children to empower them and prepare them to pick safe spaces on their own

The children who received awareness sessions on their rights were able to identify what suited them and what did not in terms of the space they were provided with. Another set of awareness sessions related to the physical individual space of the child also proved to lead to empowerment. Based on these sessions, children were able to recognise their bodies as private and they learned to maintain a healthy distance between themselves and others. Children who are given a safe space are aware of their rights and duties in class, in a group, towards teachers and proved to be active in their own learning process rather than being passive.

Another measure that contributes to the children's sense of safety is their seating arrangement. The seating arrangement adopted by the schools depends on how the school views students as participants in learning instead of an audience watching and listening to one teacher who is transferring his/her knowledge.

The last FLC took place right before the elections. Participants were asked to share their own electoral campaigns for what they considered to be a right they can achieve if they were to be elected by other teachers. In the electoral phase, we tend to review our priorities before we vote.

The major educators' needs were highlighted as follows:

- Better quality learning
- More accessible quality learning
- Better salary for teachers
- Better health (physically and mentally)
- Longer maternity leave (we assume paternity leave as well)
- The right to think about the curriculum, to add input and review it as an active teacher
- Appropriate locations for learning centres
- Inclusive education to all students
- Better healthy snacks
- Preserving teachers' dignity and gratitude for the work
- A learning centre safe for the children is a safe environment for the teachers as well.

Classroom management gives children a safe space and time to share and express how they feel and how they should behave. If the roles of educators are well defined and the rights of the students are well explained, violence against children becomes limited and violence cases would be easily spotted and managed.

Educators' roles and responsibilities in securing a safe space

The key educators' responsibilities that were highlighted by the participating teachers are: maintaining positive and active communication with students, building trust with the children, showing patience and trying to understand the children without judging them. One key form of communication that educators can work to create an environment of trust is related to body language. Educators can be more conscious of their gestures, ways of behaving, looks and even tone of voice.

Teachers can demonstrate their love for children and their love of teaching through their body language. The teachers' attitude towards the children will be noticed and appreciated by the children themselves and by their parents. In addition, teachers can add to the feeling of safety among children by making sure the curriculum is understood and mastered without overwhelming the students. Teachers can employ all the skills and tools while trying to support the children.

When educators have the needed background knowledge in psychology or social work, they can behave with sensitivity and deal with diverse scenarios whenever these arise. Many teachers present in the last FLC recommended that the knowledge gained through project trainings and learning circles gets to be cascaded to all their colleagues.

Learning culture

The child should feel comfortable to voice his/her opinion and to contribute to discussions in class. Moreover, he/she should be represented in the drawings and decorative aspects in class. To secure this feeling, it is important to start working on classroom management through setting clear rules that would apply to everyone without exception to avoid favouritism. The rules need to be convenient and fair to the age group of the students and they need to be flexible. Children should be comfortable with the rules and perceive them as fair. Educators need to make sure that some of the rules focus on relationships where children need to be respectful of each other and of adults and avoid all forms of bullying.

Coming up with the right rules and creating the right atmosphere within the classroom and school at large would make children happy to show up instead of being scared and reticent to go to the centre every morning. This learning culture will be ultimately reflected on the teachers' and children's wellbeing, as well as parents' healthy relationships with the child and the learning centre.

Awareness of safeguarding/ protection risks

The child should be aware that there is a protection department he/she can visit. He/she should meet the protection staff members and know about their role in providing psychosocial support as this will enhance the feeling of safety among the children. The child should also be aware of the reporting and referral mechanism which should be transparent and easy for the child. Furthermore, the privacy of children needs to be respected. For instance, the child should know that their names will never be disclosed and that they can refuse to be in pictures for example.

A trained team of experts in safeguarding/protection

The team of psychosocial support experts and of safeguarding experts can follow up on cases referred. The activities can vary and include psychosocial activities organised by the psychosocial support team. When the

staff members know how important safeguarding is and the policy is updated regularly and shared with everyone, safeguarding becomes a priority. Moreover, teachers should receive proper training on the safeguarding and protection policy. These trainings should be assessed with the educators' department as well and students should be aware of these cycles of trainings.

Some other tools which can contribute to a safe environment:

- a box of opinions, where children can share how they see the activities in class, what their impression of the group work was, whether they would want to repeat or not the celebratory events taking place that day, etc.
- games engaging children in fun and play-based learning
- Complaints box to remind children they have a right to complain (with a policy for reporting that is clearly visible in class, explained to students and if possible, signed by children in a personalised and child-friendly way)
- And a small detail we should never forget: a first aid kit to have at hand where teachers feel safe enough to intervene when incidents happen instead of waiting for the nurse or the protection officer to pass by (basic material such as bandages and sanitisers)

Classroom management to reduce violence against children (learning note 1)

Classroom management skills reduce violence in the classroom and help the dynamic become positive and engaging to both teachers and students. Here are some major concepts to engage in a non-violent educational setting on your education project.

Capacity building at the level of teachers

Teachers in learning centres in Lebanon work with mixed groups of children from different backgrounds: religious, social and cultural. In response to this diversity, educators need to display fair treatment of all students present and act as a role model for respect and acceptance. The participants in the FLC highlighted that training and knowledge exist at the managerial level at the learning centres and coordinators receive more professional development opportunities in

this regard than teachers. However, overwhelmed by the tasks at hand, teachers feel they deserve those professional development meetings as they are the ones who are in touch daily with the students.

Participatory approach in designing the code of conduct

Teachers can include students in designing rules that are convenient for everyone, making sure all students are involved in the process. Educators are motivated to be involved in setting a code of conduct for learning centre staff as well. This came up in the discussion as teachers felt they were listening to students, but they themselves were not always listened to by administrators. Giving voice to both students and teachers will help in ensuring their accountability for the rules and regulations in place.

When the child is involved in designing the code of conduct, he/she feels committed to the rules that concern his/her own behaviour. This has an impact on the group dynamic which can positively bring students and authority figures together. Having clear rules for acceptable behaviour will also limit the cases of bullying. Rules can help in creating a class environment that is welcoming kindness instead of intimidation.

Positive dynamic

The teacher should make sure children hear kind words and comments throughout the day. He/she can highlight to students achievements relevant to their academic performance, to positive social skills or to actions that help prevent violence against children. Teachers can also resort to tools to help encourage cooperative behaviours, for example giving students simple tokens of appreciation such as stickers or colouring books when participation is impressive.

Peer assessment can also lead to a positive and encouraging atmosphere. Some activities can put students together and motivate them to evaluate their friends' work, finding what is 'worthy of celebration', such as nice handwriting, an original idea or a nice drawing.

You're not just a teacher, you're a multitasker!

Teachers recognise that they do not have all the answers and, yet, when caregivers or administrators are faced with challenges, they tend to turn to the educators expecting immediate solutions. Looking at educators' situation

realistically, it is worth noting that educators receive low pay, are not paid for overtime (rare are the centres that consider preparation, grading and meeting times as working hours) and sometimes they lack the needed academic background knowledge.

In some cases, the protection department of the learning centre can require referral of a child to additional services, thereby reducing the responsibility of the teacher. Referral systems however should be improved and referral pathways clarified to both the children and their caregivers. Teachers can support this communication as they are the focal points between students and adults in the centre. Many educators, especially those who are new to NGO-run learning centres, need more clarification on their own role when a child is in need of medical, psychological or other support.

Teachers' wellbeing (learning note 2)

Educators largely agreed that "teacher wellbeing is often conceptualised as a means to achieve student wellbeing." Much time was spent on separating both and reinforcing the concept of teachers' wellbeing in its own right. Here are the most important ideas shared to improve teachers' wellbeing in learning centres.

Communication

One way to secure teachers' wellbeing is through positive communication with the team of colleagues. This might be an individual skill where many individuals can certainly decrease the amount of tension in any situation through relaxing dialogue. Having an understanding environment can create a support system with a strong and stable network of educators who easily can step in and stop escalation when someone is running out of patience or feeling triggered by an angry caregiver.

Therapy/Counselling/Coaching

When working in a challenging context, teachers may not always feel psychologically prepared to face their students. In such cases, teachers may need to resort to therapy or continuous follow up with a counsellor before they return to class. Expecting struggling teachers to take care of children and, most importantly, vulnerable children, is putting them at risk on both an individual and professional level. One other solution can be paid leave or the right to a long-term vacation.

To many participants, wellbeing of teachers is strongly linked to the feeling of usefulness and being appreciated by society. The negative social perceptions of teachers and the teaching profession at large added to the reality of teachers feeling unimportant on many levels, and that can impact the way they feel. One way to deal with this problem is through developing expertise among teachers and creating opportunities for them to share it with the community. Expertise development can enhance confidence, motivate competition and give new roles and opportunities to teachers.

Right to make a living

One more factor that contributes to the teachers' wellbeing, which the FLC participants highlighted, is their right to receive a good financial compensation. Teachers' salaries are not only low compared to other careers, but they are also unstable in NGOs where the majority are hired on project basis. A secure job and a stable salary can have a strong positive impact on teacher's wellbeing.

Enhancing self-care habits and routines

The discussion on being overwhelmed led us to review the skills a teacher has to enhance a safe environment for the children: should a teacher learn teaching skills alone? Burnout within the teaching profession can lead to putting many stakeholders in danger not limiting it to the teachers, but also expanding it to the children themselves.

Teachers would feel better once they are regularly offered opportunities to talk and express themselves. This is part of recognising emotions. Self-care workshops can bring more safety to the teacher and therefore to the children as teachers who master self-care can be flexible with students, especially the challenging ones. Some participants even recommended some teachers needed to learn about self-care, work on it and practice it for a long time before dealing with children.

Another idea participants presented is the self-appreciation habits. At times, teachers have difficulty congratulating themselves on an idea they came up with, on a project they did with students or on overcoming a challenging situation with a student. This counts as an important step in having a sense of purpose and a personal motive at work. They need to develop healthy habits that include the ability to appreciate one's work, take care of oneself and find empowering and uplifting vocabulary to use when talking about oneself.

Professional growth

Participants emphasised the role of professional development in teachers' wellbeing. One possible way to motivate teachers and keep them curiously striving for more, while also remaining interested in the development of their students, is by creating opportunities for their professional development. This can include expanding one's role, building on successes through involving educators in other roles such as the design of educational material, facilitation of meetings, etc. You can maintain the idea of growth in a flexible circular round of tasks where teachers feel appreciated and free to accept their willingness or inability to perform some days by allowing themselves to check in with their colleagues and voice their concerns before going to class. This flexibility in a positive environment will protect them from the risk of burnout, as they feel ready to visit their own emotional state and awareness of challenges, counting on their colleagues to step in when they feel they cannot.

Establishing a culture of learning

Cultivating the knowledge of the educator helps him/her surpass problems. For example, the more a teacher is knowledgeable of the subject he/she teaches, the more he/she masters the subject, the more confident he/she is and the more present he/she can be in the life of the students. Having a personal motive guiding a teacher in his/her life helps him/her develop and enhance his/her wellbeing.

Dealing with life's challenges

During a complex economic, political and health crisis, teachers face multiple difficulties in and outside their working environment. An open space for peer discussions can help teachers vent and support each other. This space can be created when learning centres ensure a comfortable lounge room for teachers to meet, talk to colleagues during recess or after classes and consider establishing regular informal debriefing sessions.

Working with students with learning challenges (learning note 3)

Educators recognise the need to support safe environments for children with learning challenges. Yet, educators need to understand the causes behind these challenges. Many

of these challenges are biological in nature and have no treatment; with such awareness comes great understanding. This helps teachers react with less frustration or judgement and becoming more tolerant and accepting of differences in the classroom.

Supporting teachers in ensuring inclusion of students with their peers

The more aware the teacher is of all learning difficulties, the more he/she will be able to help the kids in class. When teachers face a learning challenge that they might not be familiar with, the lack of knowledge will lead to lack of referral and ultimately lack of necessary and convenient support. When children struggle, and teachers do not come to the rescue out of ignorance, students can become isolated or bullied; they can also initiate violent behaviour to cover up the feeling of failure and to protect themselves when confronted with a difficult task that they cannot handle.

Protection officers: access to trainings on special needs

One way to help teachers is through providing them with the needed training. Training can focus on modern tools such as new programmes that the centre can acquire to give better access to education.

In these trainings, it is important to clarify that learning challenges have nothing to do with the intelligence of the student. The duty of protection colleagues is to guide teachers and provide them with concrete material and tools to help them avoid speculation or judgment on how to best help the students who have certain needs. Following up with the team of educators through continuous trainings is essential.

What can educators do

First, the educators' role is key in maintaining a safe space for students who struggle in class. A teacher can do several things before he/she would give up on a child. Teachers can discuss cases with specialists present in learning centres and avoid sharing these cases as funny moments or jokes. As mentioned in the third learning paper, teachers can approach the student positively, alleviate their struggles, involve parents and prepare a range of activities in class in which all students can participate.

Teachers can also develop action plans for students that can guide both educators and caregivers in supporting the child overcome certain challenges. To perfect these action plans,

teachers can collaborate with the monitoring and evaluation department, and check how child friendly the tools they have access to are. A weekly plan and a daily journal can be executed with a close supervision by the adults surrounding the child in class, during break and in the morning before class or at the end of the day after class. These are teaching moments as well and although these moments are the responsibility of the centre supervisor, the teacher can still find ways to supervise, guide the supervisor or even step in individually and have a small chat with the student.

The teacher needs to have support; some teachers might not be aware that they can ask for help if support is not so accessible or if there is so much paperwork to report for instance. In such cases, one can get tempted to ignore the problem instead of taking it to another department. Also, while planning for their teaching sessions, teachers need to make sure all student learning styles are considered. Teachers need to also be prepared to flexibly adapt the lesson plan in class depending on the situation and reactions of students. It is always a good idea to have a plan B especially when teachers are not fully sure about what to do with a specific student.

Building a bond with caregivers

Communicating openly and professionally with caregivers contributes to creating a strong bond which will eventually support the student. This can be done through awareness sessions for parents with regards to violence against children. Another concept is positive masculinity and fatherhood which can be addressed with caregivers, bringing the family to more cohesion around the protection of the child.

Mainstreaming child safeguarding in non-formal education (learning note 4)

Respect of diverse cultures and accepting the others is a precondition for ensuring child safeguarding in learning centres in Lebanon. This was highlighted by educators in FLCs whose students were refugees from different areas of Syria. However, besides individual openness and acceptance, additional steps are needed to ensure that children are protected from violence, exploitation and abuse.

Involving teachers in protection

Learning centres are run by NGOs and usually have child protection policies in place. These policies regulate the process of referring safeguarding concerns to a child protection specialist for investigation, reporting, response and referral. While existing mechanisms help address abuse and neglect, and child protection trainings are provided to learning centre staff, teachers need further guidance, training and empowerment to intervene in cases of bullying. By engaging teachers to develop a guidance or a standard operating procedure to addressing bullying, management and protection staff can not only encourage teachers to act when they witness or hear of bullying among students. It also allows the teachers to determine themselves what they should and should not do, before referring a bullying case to the protection team.

This mechanism can help reinforce the referral channels; for example, when educators are valued and play their role in and outside class, children can easily report incidents, call for help or ask discreetly for support. The action research conducted by Alert's team in the Bekaa learning centres showed students reported bullying only when they trusted the adult and believed that the adult would respond and act upon the complaint. Centres should therefore empower the teachers to create trust-based relationships with their students and reassure students that any concern related to bullying or other forms of violence deserves attention, no matter how minor it may seem. While the protection specialists remain the focal points to whom exploitation and abuse is reported, teachers are often better placed to intervene and stop bullying incidents when they happen in the classroom or the corridors, receive complaints from students and initiate discussion and activities to help prevention.

Community approach to child safeguarding

It is everyone's duty to maintain safeguarding policies in and around schools. Participants stressed the value of knowledge and support needed by everyone around the child, including other children. The safeguarding principles need to be shared, explained, clarified and discussed as well as constantly reviewed by all stakeholders in the centre and outside: students, officers, educators, caregivers, drivers, volunteers and visitors.

The greatest focus for all those involved should be on discretion and confidentiality: while it is not healthy to teach children to keep quiet and hide incidents, it is equally

unhealthy to share information on incidents around the community. Referrals should follow discreet pathways. Ensuring confidentiality will protect future survivors as well as those who would feel encouraged to react.

Recommendations to prevent violence against children in learning centres

Better classroom management

Learning centres can use funds to develop and incorporate with students a nonviolent education through communication and specific guidelines on how to express one's feelings, needs and interests. This can be through conducting circles of reflection on emotions, workshops with educators from different centres and trainings involving all the teams building their capacity and checking with them the efficiency of such programmes.

Teachers who are asked to supervise the space where students are should also know how to identify violence before it even occurs. Teachers need also to monitor their own behaviour and sometimes their own biases. Violence can be avoided and it concerns each one of us.

Enhancing teachers' wellbeing

Learning centres should ensure educators' wellbeing by providing them with decent working conditions, a supportive environment and opportunities for professional development and personal growth. Considering the attachment theory and the relationship children have with caring and loving adults, educators' presence in the life of children contributes highly to their learning and growth. NGOs would serve children better if they made sure educators are happy at work and are receiving enough incentives that would keep them from leaving and opting for better career choices. Having the same adults around the child all throughout implementation of a learning cycle is valuable.

Supporting a safe environment for children with learning challenges

Raising awareness of the different learning challenges can get teachers to help these children instead of judging them. More knowledge leads to more confidence and more trust.

Mainstreaming child safeguarding in non-formal education

Centres should ensure that all learning spaces are safe from

hazards, welcoming and engaging. Following up on the safeguarding/protection policies through refresher trainings is also necessary to continue protecting children. Moreover, organisations need to update and review their policies depending on the arising needs and the current situation. Trained educators need to be always alert so as to notice and flag physical and/or mental states of children.

Using posters about the child safeguarding policy with bullet points on actions to take and other clear messages in the centres can maintain a safe environment. It is essential that all the posted material is presented in a child-friendly manner. Centres can also provide their staff with guidance booklets that include all the information they need to be aware of. To help in being transparent, the centres can have a complaint box for teachers and children that is put in a discrete spot with a clear procedure of logging complaints, investigating and taking action.

One key finding shared in the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies' *Guidance note on teachers' wellbeing* is: "Too few of the available resources employ whole-school approaches or leverage the roles school leaders and community actors play in fostering a culture of wellbeing, professional learning, and peer-to-peer support and collaboration."

The Safe to Learn project designed a safe space for reflection and dialogue with teachers, inviting them to regular FLCs reviewing their own practices and assessments of the violence against children, while bringing back the conversation to teachers' own growth and living experience. Peer-to-peer support was initiated in the idea of the FLCs, and looking at the request to continue these cycles regardless of the duration of the Safe to Learn project, International Alert confirms the need for such networks of professionals reflecting together in a whole school community in protecting children against violence but most importantly, in designing a safe learning environment.

Increasing teachers' professional development and capacity to prevent violence against children

Trainings and workshops need to build on the educators' concrete experiences in the field especially that many have long experience teaching refugees and other marginalised groups. Follow-up sessions should complement trainings including the teachers who were involved in the implementation of recommendations based on the trainings.

Essentially, reflection sessions with clear objectives help learning and improved practice; engagement with colleagues working in other NGOs in the area can help generate broader learning on creating a safe environment for children.

Management needs to push for better communication between trainees and staff members who do not attend trainings. There is a duty in keeping communication going between, for example, a strong management team which is well trained and a less strong teaching team who might be more involved in the field but not necessarily in training sessions.

While some staff members may be involved in reflection circles, management needs to ensure talent retention through follow-up sessions and support to make sure the team remains motivated instead of looking for different opportunities and not engaging in bringing change to the organisation.

A learning centre working on trainings can also invite other organisations who work in the same area and share expertise during exchange visits and learning events. Contributing to a whole community approach helps create a safe environment for teachers and students.

Conclusion and next steps

Teachers' wellbeing is an area that can affect the classroom environment and can contribute to the eruption or elimination of violence. Preserving the teachers' and the students' wellbeing can help in focusing their energies on learning and growing as well as forming healthy relationships. The learning centres have a duty to make sure educators have a clear idea on how they look at their own career path and enjoy a personal life which is not delayed by overtime and stress. FLCs helped highlight opportunities to prevent violence against children in education through the eyes of the teachers. Using such participatory methods will help teachers play a pivotal role in the safeguarding and protection of children and in the prevention of violence.

Learning centres can start looking at the framing of future educational programmes with a different lens. In fact, participants explained they felt the need to specifically target peace and prevention of violence as educators. These goals need to accompany education. When designing an educational programme, a necessary effort to raise awareness of social stability challenges in the context can

improve the quality of the programme. Educators work in an environment where tensions exist between children, between families and between communities. Therefore they need the skills to navigate such an environment and leave a lasting positive impact on children and caregivers. An important starting point is to involve teachers in discussions and analysis of the social tensions in the learning centre and the surrounding community. This can be done through conducting sessions on context challenges and familiarising educators with key concepts such as conflict, violence and social stability. An awareness of the context and how it affects children's attitudes and behaviours guides teachers efforts to prevent violence. And while violence prevention starts with the choice of a safe space, professional classroom management and effective safeguarding, it needs an extra step. Teachers committed to violence prevention can merge their subject content, art and the development of psychosocial skills that help students deal with stress and emotional problems and resolve conflicts without violence.

Additional sources

Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies, Teacher wellbeing guidance note, May 2022.

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Endnotes

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

International Alert
London, United Kingdom
+44 (0)20 7627 6800
info@international-alert.org
www.international-alert.org

Registered charity no. 327553

