Section 4: Socio-Emotional well-being of Palestine refugee students in UNRWA schools in Gaza and Syria Fields, 2017/18 Research Study
Overview

The UNRWA Education Reform Strategy (2011-2015) committed the Agency to strive to achieve quality, equitable and inclusive education for Palestine refugee children, with an emphasis on child-centred approaches and the overall well-being of the child. The Medium Term Strategy reiterates the same principles with the aim to “embed, enrich and sustain” the achievements of the Reform. Although much progress has been made in this regard, it was felt that the measurement of the impact of efforts towards children’s well-being could be enhanced. The focus of this study was therefore to explore another dimension of measurement, i.e. student perceptions of their own socio-emotional well-being. In this regard, UNRWA recognises that there are many variables to be taken into account here, particularly as the approach in the education programme to socio-emotional well-being is a systemic one, with no single intervention alone being seen as leading to it’. Given this challenge, and building on the Education programme system of measurement already in place, UNRWA undertook this pilot study to gauge the perceptions of children in conflict-affected UNRWA Fields, i.e. Gaza and Syria, with regard to their own socio-emotional well-being. The study was funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea (KOICA) and was undertaken in December 2017 (Gaza) and March 2018 (Syria).

Summary

The study of children’s perceptions of their own socio-emotional well-being was targeted at Palestine students in Grades 4 and 9 living in Gaza and Syria Fields. In order to try and measure students’ overall well-being, the study first looked at students’ perceptions of their learning environment and to what degree they felt it was child-friendly, safe and healthy (Focus Area 1, FA1). Many aspects of this Focus Area are at the ‘output’ programmatic level and are under the relative control of UNRWA, e.g. provision of health and environmental education, safety at school, cleanliness, opportunities to play and the school canteen. The study then moved on to look at students’ perceptions of their relationships with school staff and peers (Focus Area 2, FA2). These are partly under the control of UNRWA but are more dependent on individual behaviours and other factors, e.g. friendships, teacher

7See the Theory of Change brief for more details
behaviour, emotional support, corporal punishment, verbal and physical abuse and bullying. These could be considered at the ‘outcome’ programmatic level. Finally, the study asked students to respond to items related to their personal motivation and outlook on life (Focus Area 3, FA3), the ‘impact’ programmatic level, where UNRWA is just one of many influencing factors. Aspects examined in this Focus Area included emotions such as hope, happiness, loneliness, anger and worry. The different programmatic levels of these three Focus Areas were then pulled together to give an overall indication of the socio-emotional well-being of UNRWA students in Gaza and Syria Fields.

Students in Gaza have positive perceptions of the UNRWA learning environment being child-friendly, safe and healthy (FA1, mean 1.278), but with some variation between Grades and gender (0.91 / 1.09 for Grade 9 males / females; 1.45 / 1.63 for Grade 4 males / females). Gaza students generally have positive perceptions of their school relationships with school staff and peers (FA2, mean 1.12), but there is considerable variation across gender (male / female mean scores 0.90 / 1.29) and Grade (Grade 4 / 9 mean scores 1.37 / 0.88). Gaza students’ mean score for the Focus Area on personal motivation and outlook on life was the least positive of the three Focus Areas (FA3, mean 1.03), with male students and Grade 9 females having mean scores below the ‘agreement’ score of 1 (0.88-0.98) and female Grade 4 students being the most positive (mean 1.24). Pulling together responses on 60/61 items into a single mean obscures a lot of information, however, the figure does provide a general indication on the overall well-being of students. The overall survey mean for Gaza students was positive (1.14), with females generally more positive than males (female / male means 1.26 / 0.99) and those in Grade 4 generally more positive than those in Grade 9 (Grade 4 / 9 means 1.36 / 0.94).

**Methodology**

The study, designed and implemented by UNRWA, surveyed 1,437 Grade 4 and 9 students from Gaza and Syria Fields (Gaza Field 59.4%, Syria Field 40.6%). Students completed a questionnaire which included 60 or 619 items on three Focus Areas: (1) Child-friendly, safe and healthy learning environment; (2) School relationships (school staff and peers); and (3) Personal motivation and outlook on life. A five-point scale measured the level of respondents’ agreement with the item stems, ranging from -2 (“strongly disagree”) to +2 (“strongly agree”), with 0 being “neutral”. This study expanded

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8 See Methodology section below for explanation of mean scores
9 Grade 4: 60 items. Grade 9: 61 items, with the addition of “I have suicidal thoughts”
beyond investigating perceptions and providing descriptive statistics (as in the UNRWA Education Perceptonal Survey10) to also use correlation and regression analysis to look at study-level associations and relationships between variables11. This is where the Well-being Study analysis differs from that of the Perceptonal Survey: for the latter, any correlations between variables and the extent to which they may matter were not investigated. While the “Perceptonal Survey” gave mean and standard deviation scores, the Well-being Study helps to provide a more complete picture of these perceptions. In other words, rather than analyzing key factors in isolation, the Well-being Study seeks to understand the relationships between them. By including correlation coefficients and a number of multi-variate regressions, it enables UNRWA to look deeper into the effects of certain variables on the Focus Area mean scores, as well as on the interaction between the Focus Areas themselves. These correlations can help UNRWA gain a general understanding of the state of the socio-emotional well-being of the sampled students. The associations and relationships are important because an individual’s sense of ‘socio-emotional well-being’ can be difficult to assess through a population-wide survey, given the many nuances and underlying factors, only some of which UNRWA (or other service provider) can control. This research study attempts to overcome this by asking for students’ responses to a range of items12. The research will be used to identify key messages for evidence-based advocacy in order to improve the socio-emotional well-being of Palestine refugee children in Gaza and Syria, and to inform future UNRWA priority areas to address children’s socio-emotional needs.

Findings

Focus Area 1: Child-friendly, safe and healthy learning environment

[Note: 63% of FA1 items overlap with the 2016 Perceptonal Survey; the remaining 37% of items are exclusive to the Well-being Study]

- Teachers in Gaza generally appear to educate students on personal hygiene, environmental matters body changes, balanced meals, and to a slightly lesser extent, healthy eating.

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10 See the Perceptonal Survey & Socio-emotional Study Overview brief
11 Study-level findings can be found in the full report.
12 More in-depth studies by experts in the field of psychology – including longitudinal research studies observing perceptions of a cohort of children over time – would yield more robust insights and would allow UNRWA to make stronger inferences.
However, there is a less positive perception regarding the schools’ provision of healthy food in the canteens.

- Gaza students are largely at ease and comfortable at school, although female Grade 9 students are notably less comfortable in their classroom environment and feel that they have insufficient space to work. Students generally feel they have a chance to play with other children, although male Grade 9 students are less positive.
- Students are generally happy with school rules and teacher responses to school-based violence, with female students and those in Grade 4 having the most positive perceptions.
- Gaza students generally feel safe at school, however challenges remain for those in Grade 9, particularly females. There are also perceived safety concerns specifically regarding going to the bathroom, especially for Grade 9 students where males feel slightly more unsafe than females.
- Students in Gaza feel that their school is generally clean, but that more attention is needed to improve the cleanliness of school bathrooms.
- Most students agree that they have practiced emergency school evacuations, though with the exception of males in Grade 9.

**Focus Area 2: School relationships (school staff and peers)**

(Note: 55% of FA2 items overlap with the 2016 Perceptual Survey; the remaining 45% of items are exclusive to the Well-being Study)

- Gaza students strongly agreed that they have friends in their class and at school, and get on well with their classmates.
- Students in Gaza generally feel that teachers know their name and respect them, though Grade 9 students were less positive regarding teachers respecting them. Grade 9 students had relatively neutral opinions as to whether they were ignored by their teachers, whilst female Grade 4 students had more positive perceptions. Students, particularly Grade 4 males, are sometimes afraid to ask questions in class.
- Gaza students generally participate in school activities and vote in (or would want to participate in) the School Parliament. Students generally follow a Code of Conduct, though with the exception of male Grade 9 students; female Grade 4 students agree with this item strongly.
• Grade 4 students feel more supported than those in Grade 9, in terms of there being adults at school they felt they could talk to when they had problems, with females in Grade 4 having very positive perceptions.

• Many students face verbal abuse and threats from teachers or School Principal (e.g. being shouted at, being called bad names, or being threatened with having marks deducted), with the exception of female Grade 4 students. Female students agree that they have not been threatened with a beating by a teacher or School Principal, but male students are much less positive, suggesting this is not uncommon for boys.

• Male Grade 9 students have the least positive perceptions of being physically or verbally bullied by other students or being harassed on social media. Physical bullying appears uncommon amongst other gender / Grade sub-groups although verbal bullying occurs to some degree among both genders, and some social media harassment takes place amongst female students. Male students (particularly those in Grade 9) are much more likely to have witnessed bullying than females.

• Corporal punishment occurs to some extent at school, particularly for Grade 9 male students.

Focus Area 3: Personal motivation and outlook on life

[Note: 10% of FA3 items overlap with the 2016 Perceptual Survey; the remaining 90% of items are exclusive to the Well-being Study]

• Students are happy with their body and shape and are generally satisfied with their life.

• Students in Gaza are generally proud of their school. Grade 4 students trust their fellow students more than those in Grade 9, and male students are generally more trusting than females. Students tend to look up to the adults in their school, though male Grade 9 students are less positive on this aspect.

• Gaza students overwhelmingly look forward to continuing their education and generally like going to school. Students haven’t generally considered leaving school earlier than they should, though male students are more likely to have considered this than females.

• Students are hopeful for their own future and that of their community, and are hoping for a better future in 10 years (though female Grade 4 students are noticeably more positive than male students, particularly those in Grade 9). However, despite their hope for the future, nearly two-thirds of Gaza students agree or strongly agree that they are worried that there will never be peace in their country. This item (inverted scale) has the lowest mean score of the survey,
with all gender / Grade sub-groups scoring below a neutral score of 0, and female Grade 4 students scoring below the disagreement score of -1.

- Grade 9 students do not have suicidal thoughts (Grade 4 students not surveyed). Many students have negative feelings about their lives, varying with gender and Grade, and have feelings of anxiety, anger, sadness and loneliness (mean scores (inverted scale) for all emotions are below the agreement score of 1), with anxiety appearing the most common emotion and loneliness the least. Overall, female Grade 4 students were the most positive.

- Gaza students face difficulties in sleeping, which may be linked to many also reporting having nightmares, with male Grade 4 students have the hardest nights.

**Overall Well-being**

- The five items perceived the most positively by Gaza students (means 1.74-1.63) are: personal hygiene education, having friends in class, having friends in school, environmental education, and teachers’ knowing their name. The five items perceived the least positively (means -0.69 to 0.57) are: not being worried that there will never be peace in their country, provision of healthy food in the school canteen, not having witnessed corporal punishment, not feeling anxious or worried, and not being afraid to ask questions in class.

- The largest differences in gender-specific mean scores in Gaza are associated with male students being much more likely than females to have witnessed, been threatened with, or experienced corporal punishment, or have witnessed bullying.

- Considering Grade level, students in Grade 9 were much more likely than those in Grade 4 to have been threatened with having marks deducted by a teacher or School Principal, feel angry about life, have witnessed corporal punishment on fellow students, or feel ignored by teachers. However, Grade 9 students were more positive regarding peace in their country and the future of their community, and had fewer nightmares and sleeping difficulties.

**Implications**

**Focus Area 1: Child-friendly, safe and healthy learning environment**

There are perceived safety concerns regarding going to the bathroom. Further research to address safety issues or reassure students that they are safe would therefore be useful. In addition, there appears to be a gap in emergency procedures. Although most students agree that they had practiced
what to do if they ever need to quickly leave the school premises in the event of an emergency, this was not the perception of male Grade 9 students. Particularly in light of the wider situation, it is important to ensure that all students are not only aware of but also practice emergency procedures. Finally, more attention is needed to improve cleanliness in school bathrooms.

**Focus Area 2: School relationships**

In Focus Area 2, “School relationships (school staff and peers)”, items are partly under UNRWA’s control (programmatically, the ‘outcome’ level) but are predominantly dependent on teacher and student behaviours towards each other. In this area, UNRWA has had reasonable success (in terms of mean scores), but not to the same extent as students’ positive perceptions of their learning environment (FA1). Although UNRWA, as an organisation, can provide policies, structures and awareness, it is up to individuals at school as to how they behave towards each other.

There are two key aspects of Focus Area 2 where improvement is needed. One is the behaviour of teachers towards students (especially males) with regard to threatening, shouting, calling them bad names and corporal punishment, and the other is the behaviour of students towards each other. In-line with the emphasis of UNRWA Education on well-being, it is important that all students receive sufficient psychosocial support. Further investigation may be needed to determine the reasons why Grade 9 students are not accessing the services that appear to already exist within schools.

Challenges remain with teacher-student relationships as students generally feel ignored by their teachers. It would be useful to triangulate the findings on teacher-student relationships with class-size in order to determine if an underlying issue is one of teacher time, or whether there is another factor. More work is needed to support teachers in interacting appropriately with their students.

**Focus Area 3: Personal motivation and outlook on life**

UNRWA has little direct control over the items included in this Focus Area. As a large proportion of FA3 can be ‘explained’ by Focus Area 2, the Agency should therefore focus on issues covered by FA2 such as changing the behaviours of teachers and students (with regard to abuse and bullying), as well as addressing the provision of psychosocial support. The Agency should also ensure that the general school atmosphere and the key messages that are portrayed and discussed are positive.
Overall Well-being

The UNRWA provision of education services (i.e. learning environment) is similar in both Fields, so it is wider, external factors that contribute to differences in students’ perceptions of school relationships and personal motivation.

Conclusion

Although the focus of this study was on Palestine refugee school students in Gaza and Syria, UNRWA needs to also keep in mind the situation for children and young people who are unable to attend school perhaps due to disability or family economic pressures. Consideration should be given to specifically understanding their socio-emotional well-being and wider situation in more detail so that specific interventions and support can be provided.

Looking ahead, it is important that UNRWA continues to measure both the many school factors that contribute to students’ psychosocial well-being (as included in this study), as well as the combined impact of these factors, i.e., well-being itself. In order to reduce any concerns about future potential duplication in surveys, items related to the learning environment (FA1, the ‘output’ level) and school relationships (FA2, the ‘outcome’ level) could be integrated into the existing Agency-wide Perceptonal Survey questionnaires (where they do not already exist). Items related to students’ personal outlook and motivation on life (FA3, the ‘impact’ level) could be further developed into a specific well-being questionnaire, to be analysed alongside the Perceptonal Survey.