Section 5: Socio-Emotional well-being of Palestine refugee students in UNRWA schools in Gaza and Syria Fields, 2017/18 Research Study

Brief: Syria Findings
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 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

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13 See the Theory of Change brief for more details.
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 Syria have reasonably positive perceptions of the UNRWA learning environment being child-friendly, safe and healthy (FA1, mean 1.09\textsuperscript{14}) but with some variation between Grades and gender (0.95 / 0.85 for Grade 9 males / females; 1.22 / 1.30 for Grade 4 males / females). Syria students generally have slightly positive perceptions of their school relationships with school staff and peers (FA2, mean 0.79), with little variation between Grades (Grade 4 / 9 means of 0.81 / 0.76), but with some gender differences (male / female means 0.60 / 0.99). Syria students’ mean score for the Focus Area on personal motivation and outlook on life was slightly positive and very similar to that for FA2 (FA3, mean 0.78), with little variation between Grades (Grade 4 / 9 means of 0.83 / 0.72), but some gender differences (male / female means 0.67 / 0.88). 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 Syria students was slightly positive (0.88), with females generally more positive than males (female / male means 0.98 / 0.78) and those in Grade 4 generally more positive than those in Grade 9 (Grade 4 / 9 means 0.96 / 0.79).

**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 6115 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 beyond investigating perceptions and providing descriptive statistics (as in the UNRWA Education

\textsuperscript{14} See Methodology section below for explanation of mean scores

\textsuperscript{15} Grade 4: 60 items. Grade 9: 61 items, with the addition of “I have suicidal thoughts”
Perceptual Survey\textsuperscript{16} to also use correlation and regression analysis to look at study-level associations and relationships between variables\textsuperscript{17}. This is where the Well-being Study analysis differs from that of the Perceptual Survey: for the latter, any correlations between variables and the extent to which they may matter were not investigated. While the “Perceptual 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 items\textsuperscript{18}. 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 Perceptual Survey; the remaining 37\% of items are exclusive to the Well-being Study]

- Syria teachers generally appear to educate students on personal hygiene, environmental matters, body changes, balanced meals, and to a lesser extent, healthy eating, with Grade 9 students having less positive perceptions towards the latter items. There is a negative perception regarding the schools’ provision of healthy food in the canteens.

\textsuperscript{16} See the Perceptual Survey & Socio-emotional Study Overview brief
\textsuperscript{17} Study-level findings can be found in the full report.
\textsuperscript{18} 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.
• Syria students are largely at ease and comfortable at school (female Grade 9 students are less positive), though Grade 9 students only just agree that they have sufficient space to work. Grade 4 students generally feel they have a chance to play with other children, although those in Grade 9 (particularly females) are less positive.

• Students are generally happy with teacher responses to school-based violence and know to whom to report disrespectful or violent acts, though Grade 9 students are less positive than those in Grade 4. However, students have less positive perceptions towards the existing school rules.

• Syria students generally feel safe at school, however challenges remain for females in Grade 9. There are also perceived safety concerns specifically regarding going to the bathroom, especially for Grade 9 students.

• Students in Syria feel that their school is reasonably clean (with females in Grade 9 less positive), 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]

• Syria students strongly agreed that they have friends in their class and at school, and they get on well with their classmates.

• Students in Syria generally feel that teachers know their name and respect them, though Grade 9 students (particularly females) were less positive regarding teachers respecting them. However, all students feel ignored by their teachers and are generally afraid to ask questions in class, particularly male Grade 9 students.

• Grade 4 students in Syria generally participate in school activities (less so amongst those in Grade 9), though only male Grade 4 students are very positive about voting in (or wanting to participate in) the School Parliament (with female Grade 9 students the least positive). Students somewhat agreed that students follow a Code of Conduct, though those in Grade 9 were less positive.
• 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 female Grade 9 students the least positive.

• 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). Female Grade 4 students were the most positive, but male students (particularly those in Grade 9) responded neutrally. 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.

• Harassment by fellow students on social media and verbal bullying appears to occur to some degree amongst all gender / Grade sub-groups, with female Grade 9 students suffering the least and male students, particularly those in Grade 4, suffering the most. Physical bullying appears to be most prevalent amongst male Grade 4 students, though also takes place amongst other gender / Grade sub-groups, with the exception of females in Grade 9; there were similar findings with regard to students witnessing bullying.

• Female Grade 9 students do not have experience of corporal punishment at school, but this is not the case for male students, particularly those in Grade 4.

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]

• Syria students are happy with their body and shape and generally feel satisfied with their life (though Grade 9 females are less positive towards the latter).

• Students in Syria 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 female Grade 9 students are less positive on this aspect.

• Syria students (and especially Grade 9 females) overwhelmingly look forward to continuing their education and generally like going to school. Female students haven’t generally considered leaving school earlier than they should, in contrast to male students (particularly those in Grade 4) who are more likely to have considered this. Students participate to some degree in community activities, with those in Grade 4 more involved.
• Students are hopeful for their own future and that of their community, and are hoping for a better future in 10 years (with Grade 4 students more positive than those in Grade 9). However, in spite of their hope for the future, nearly two-thirds of Syria 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.

• Grade 9 Syria students do not have suicidal thoughts (Grade 4 students not surveyed), with males more positive than females. Many students have negative feelings about their lives, varying with gender and Grade, and have strong feelings of anxiety, anger, sadness and loneliness (mean scores for all emotions (inverted scale) below the agreement score of 1 for Grade 4 females, and generally below the neutral response of 0 amongst other gender / Grade sub-groups ") . Anxiety appears the most common emotion and loneliness the least.

• Many Syria students face difficulties in sleeping, particularly those in Grade 4 and Grade 9 males, which may be linked to many also reporting having nightmares, especially Grade 4 males.

Overall Well-being

• The five items perceived the most positively by Syria students (means 1.63-1.50) are: having friends in class, being happy with their body and shape, having friends in school, liking going to school, and looking forward to continuing their education. The five times perceived the least positively (means -0.61 to -0.04) 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 having nightmares.

• The largest differences in mean scores between female and male students in Syria are associated with male students being much more likely to have experienced corporal punishment or physical bullying, considered leaving school earlier than they should, witnessed bullying, or been threatened with a beating by a teacher or School Principal. Male students in Syria had more positive perceptions than females on a range of issues, including receiving sufficient support to deal with their own feelings and feeling safe going to the bathroom in school.
• Considering Grade level, students in Grade 4 are much more positive than those in Grade 9 with regard to participating in activities (school, environmental, School Parliament), practicing emergency school evacuations and receiving sufficient school support to deal with their own feelings. However, there were also a large number of items where Grade 4 students were much less positive than those in Grade 9, such as having experienced corporal punishment, experienced and/or witnessed physical bullying, feeling harassed by fellow students on social media and having considered leaving school earlier than they should.

**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 predominately 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
Perceptional 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 Perceptional Survey.