

The importance of teacher well-being for student mental health and resilient education systems

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Teachers play a paramount role in providing MHPSS to their students and in sustaining resilient education systems – and supporting teachers' own well-being is essential if they are to fulfil this role.

In conflict-affected and forced displacement contexts, education provides life-saving and sustaining skills. Formal and non-formal schools are important sites for delivering mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) to affected children and youth, and teachers are at the centre of this work.

Yet teachers in emergency, chronic crisis and early recovery contexts receive minimal if any MHPSS support themselves, nor are they provided with initial and continuous professional development to safely nurture their students. This may be because the idea of teacher well-being remains elusive and

interventions that support teacher well-being are in their infancy, contributing to inadequate MHPSS provision to teachers.

The Education Equity Research Initiative's Conceptual Framework for Teacher Well-being in Low Resource, Crisis, and Conflict-Affected Contexts¹ (referred to in this article as the Conceptual Framework) provides a structure to assess the MHPSS needs of teachers, design policies and programmes that meet these needs, and evaluate the efficacy of such policies and programmes in improving teacher well-being. The Conceptual Framework's accompanying recommendations are actionable steps for policymakers and practitioners to enhance teacher well-being and ensure that education systems are resilient, for the benefit of the MHPSS needs of both teachers and students.

Teacher well-being is context-specific and encompasses how teachers feel and function in their jobs. There are four outcome-based concepts that are critical to consider when measuring teacher well-being – self-efficacy (their belief that they are able to elicit desired outcomes for their students), job stress and burnout, job satisfaction, and social-emotional competence.² In our Conceptual Framework we apply a socio-ecological approach to identify four levels of support for teacher well-being: individual, school, community, and national-regional-global. This approach is particularly relevant for teachers working amidst conflict and forced displacement given the different roles they play in and outside school; for example, teachers often act as para-social workers for children and youth, or as leaders in their community given their respected role as educators. A broad socio-ecological framing recognises the interrelated environments, interactions and relationships that contribute to teacher well-being, and can offer guidance on multiple intervention points for practitioners and policymakers to consider when designing and implementing sustainable and contextually appropriate MHPSS programmes and policies that aim to support teacher well-being.

The recommendations below align with the findings underpinning the

Conceptual Framework and with the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies Minimum Standards.³

Individual support: recognise and value diverse teacher profiles

The factors to consider in terms of teachers' individual characteristics are gender, displacement status, level of education, coping mechanisms, employment status, teaching experience, content knowledge and cultural competence. These factors can guide rapid needs assessments to understand teacher profiles as well as the communities in which they work, and should also inform teacher professional development (TPD) programmes and policies so that these take account of teachers' inherent skills and strengths. Taking an 'asset-based' approach such as this can help build teachers' self-efficacy and job satisfaction, contributing to their overall well-being. This approach is also essential when providing training in MHPSS interventions that teachers will deliver to students, since the efficacy and quality of such interventions will rely, at least partially, on teachers' own well-being. TPD can provide adult-specific tools, such as mindfulness, stress management and self-care strategies that teachers can practise to support themselves, while then adapting the approaches for their students. This approach allows teachers to build on their own social-emotional competence, to reduce their own stress, and to model effective social-emotional behaviours and strategies for students.

School support: invest in peer relationships and protective environments

School culture, safety and resources influence teachers' well-being and ability to provide effective MHPSS to students. The four school-level factors to consider are teacher-student relationships, peer relationships, school leadership and school resources. Policymakers can develop national standards for equitable teacher-student ratios, fair distribution of classes among teachers, and adequate teaching and learning materials for schools. Policymakers and practitioners working together

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can ensure these standards are put into practice, particularly in contexts of forced displacement where there may be an influx of students alongside teacher shortages and limited school infrastructure and resources.

The school-level factors also provide guidance for TPD policies and programmes, particularly those for school leaders who play a central role in promoting positive school cultures and peer collaboration. Practitioners can design professional development for head teachers, ministry inspectors and supervisors that includes concrete strategies to create safe and nurturing schools, provides opportunities to demonstrate positive leadership, and supports school leaders to create participatory school management systems that elevate teachers' voices in school decision-making. For head teachers, TPD can focus on strategies for cultivating peer relationships and communities of practice among teachers. Teacher collaboration helps improve outcomes that contribute to well-being while reducing stress and burnout.

Supporting these outcomes, while decreasing stress and burnout, is especially critical given the many additional roles that teachers play for students in forced displacement contexts, such as counsellor and para-social worker. Practitioners and policymakers must recognise these multiple roles and implement school-wide and integrated approaches that equip teachers with the knowledge and skills to identify and respond to signs of distress among students. Practitioners can work across the education and child protection sectors to strengthen referral mechanisms and follow-up for child protection and MHPSS concerns in the school and the community. Policymakers and practitioners must also ensure that school leaders and district education offices are provided with professional development to set up and use referral pathways for teachers and other education personnel and children who require specialised services.

Community support: strengthen partnerships

Context is crucial in understanding and responding to the MHPSS needs of teachers. The three community-level factors – access

to basic needs, respect and recognition, and responsibility and duty – provide guidance for practitioners and policymakers to understand community context and teachers' relationships with community members. Mapping community risks and resources can help to identify formal and informal structures, resources and individuals that may be assets or obstacles for MHPSS. It is particularly important to understand teachers' ability to meet their basic needs for food, water, shelter, transportation and security. In conflict-affected contexts, assessing physical security risks is critical as schools and teachers are often targets of attacks. Real and perceived threats of violence can increase teachers' stress and burnout so efforts should be made to ensure that there are contextually relevant and responsive mechanisms for teachers and students to report threats to their physical, social and emotional well-being.

Teachers' relationships with community members, especially their students' caregivers, are also vital to consider. Building positive relationships is an important, and often under-utilised, approach for meeting teachers' MHPSS needs through enhancing their job satisfaction, social-emotional competence, and decreasing job stress. To enhance these relationships, practitioners can establish and provide training for Parent Teacher Associations and School Management Committees on the importance of education and the role of teachers, and mobilise members to provide support for non-teaching tasks at school.

National-regional-global support: prioritise teacher well-being in policy and practice

The potential to improve teacher well-being as well as to increase teacher retention, improve gender parity, and promote inclusion among under-represented groups in the profession can be increased through interventions relating to five policy-oriented factors: teacher management, the right to work, compensation, TPD and certification.

At the national level, policymakers can include teacher management policies in education sector plans as preparedness measures for responding to crises and



A primary school teacher leads a class at Makpandu refugee camp, Western Equatoria State, South Sudan, where parents have helped build new classrooms for the overcrowded school.

displacement – for example, rapid deployment of teachers or recruitment of contract teachers to high-need areas. These policies should promote gender equity and inclusion of displaced teachers and others from under-represented communities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the indispensable role of teachers and compounded the risks they face in carrying out their work. Many national governments, particularly those hosting large numbers of refugees and/or internally displaced people (IDPs), have included MHPSS to teachers in their national COVID-19 response plans (such as Uganda, Colombia and Nigeria). In order to operationalise these plans, policymakers and practitioners can use the Conceptual Framework to guide policy conversations, identify intervention points for enhancing teacher well-being, and select evidence-based factors for measuring the impact of interventions.

Beyond COVID-19 response plans, however, policymakers must institutionalise support for teacher well-being and MHPSS in permanent education policies, with collaboration on budgets and financing across Ministries of Education, Health and Finance. For example, these line ministries

can collaborate on budget and financing for personal protective equipment and safeguarding measures for schools, alongside training costs for community-based MHPSS assessments or PSS programming in schools. In contexts of forced displacement, the Ministry of Interior should also be included in order to ensure that refugee and IDP teachers have access to the same services as their non-displaced peers. At the regional level, particularly in areas affected by forced displacement, policymakers can strengthen or establish regional frameworks to promote the inclusion of displaced and returnee teachers into national education systems; this will help ensure that displaced teachers have access to compensation and benefits, essential rights, and employee protections, all of which contribute to supporting well-being. One example of a regional policy that prioritises the MHPSS and well-being needs of displaced and host community teachers is the Djibouti Declaration adopted by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development in the Horn of Africa.⁴

At a global level, practitioners, policymakers, donors and researchers must generate more evidence on teacher well-being in conflict-affected and forced

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displacement settings and garner increased attention and support to teachers in these contexts. Global education stakeholders should collaborate with teachers who work in these settings to build evidence on good practice for supporting teacher well-being and meeting teachers' MHPSS needs. Finally, education stakeholders must amplify teachers' voices by including teachers in local, regional and international forums where teacher well-being and MHPSS policy and programming are discussed.

Conclusion

Providing MHPSS to teachers, children and youth affected by conflict and forced displacement is the collective responsibility of the global education community. While teachers are the ones tasked with identifying and responding to their students' MHPSS needs, we cannot expect them to do so alone. Prioritising teacher well-being in education policy, practice and research is necessary

if we are to build education systems that promote the socio-emotional health of teachers and students, retain teachers in the profession, and enable teachers to provide safe and equitable education, including MHPSS, for all children and youth.

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1. Education Equity Research Initiative (2019) *Landscape Review: Teacher Well-being in Low Resource, Crisis, and Conflict-Affected Contexts* (the visual representation of the Teacher Well-being Conceptual Framework is on p10) bit.ly/EERI-landscape-review-2019
2. More information on these are in Section 4 (p. 11) of the Landscape Review: see endnote above.
3. www.ineesite.org/en/minimum-standards/translations
4. bit.ly/Djibouti-declaration-2017

