

Guidelines for Effective and Positive Parent and Teacher Communication

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These guidelines are intended to provide guidance to international NGOs, local NGOs and practitioners working in education with host and refugee communities, specifically in areas where there is recognized limited interaction between parents and teachers.

Introduction

The right to education is basic and fundamental. Importantly, this has been understood as a right regardless of one's migratory status and includes refugees. This was made clear in the Incecho Declaration most recently. In situations of emergency response and protracted displacement, multiple and various challenges exist in ensuring the actualization of this right. This is an ongoing and serious issue for all actors involved in humanitarian response.

Humanitarian situations, now, too often protract. And displacement no longer is contained to camps with refugees dispersed throughout cities. The presence of large populations of refugees in host communities inevitably strains available resources and puts pressure on education facilities. This impacts the quality of education for host community and refugee children. While acknowledging the array of challenges that are presented in host community schools – from major infrastructural problems and insufficient resources - research suggests that there is one simple strategy that can serve to improve the quality of education of children: enhancing parent and teacher communication and collaboration.

Ensuring access to quality education for all children, whether from the host community or refugee, is a part of ARDD-Legal Aids accountability and protection mandate. We know that refugee children in school is one form of protection; and ensuring all actors involved in the education process – whether teachers, parents, humanitarian agencies or government – feel responsible and ownership over the education process will benefit the overall quality of education. The specific endeavor of improving communication between parents and teachers can create a deeper sense of responsibility and

ownership over the process of education and this can lead to better education outcomes for children. It is one initiative amongst many others, but if conducted in coordination quality education can be a reality for all.

Purpose

The purpose of these Guidelines is to assist practitioners in the field to develop and implement positive sites for communication between parents and teachers. They have been written to be culturally appropriate in the Middle East context and in line with the core principles of child protection, accountability and quality education in mind. The guidelines offer strategies that attempt to work within stressed environments and with people who are not currently engaged due to a variety of reasons, whether teachers or parents. The Guidelines outline potential approaches to be taken and the concerns that should be considered with each approach. The guidelines are an introductory resource and should be used as a tool that can spark inspiration, not close down new or context specific ideas. The key is considering the environmental concerns in your context; the pressures that face both parents and teachers and finding common positive ground for them to talk and work together.

Background

These Guidelines are the product of reflection on the issues that were presented in the field in Mafraq governorate in Jordan where a large population of Syrian refugees live alongside their Jordanian neighbors, many of whom come from lower socio-economic backgrounds. In this context it was observed that teachers and parents rarely talk and generally only for negative issues. Once identified as a significant issue, a comprehensive overview of parent and teacher communication strategies in other parts of the world was conducted and read in light of the challenges identified in the Mafraq context. The initial drafting of these guidelines was synthesized here in the form of

practical guidelines for other partners in the field in Jordan and elsewhere, who too are committed to improving the access to quality education for all children.

Guidelines for Effective and Positive Parent and Teacher Communication

Guideline 1: Understand the Educational Environment and the Challenges for Both Parents and Teachers

Guideline 2: Think Beyond Education. Think Broader Community Engagement

Guideline 3: Make the Switch from Passive to Positive Communication

Guideline 4: Dedicated Inclusion

Guideline 5: Encourage Parental Involvement in the Learning Process

Guideline 6: Let Them Come (Back) to School

Guideline 7: Encourage Collaboration and Relationship building

Guideline 8: Send the Message

Guideline 9: Face to Face Communication

Guideline 10: Set Expectations from the Start

Guideline 1: Understand the Educational Environment and the Challenges for Both Parents and Teachers

No communication can occur unless people are ready to talk. In many situations deep frustration and resentment stops teachers and parents from even getting this far. On top of this, many parents are faced with significant economic barriers, including lack of accessible transportation. Teachers may feel that their efforts within the classroom are unsupported by parents and the institutional backing does not exist to support them manage this. The importance of understanding the situation of both groups is essential. It is only from this basis of understanding that potential pathways of communication can be broached.

Practitioners note: The starting point is simply to listen and identify grievances, whether common or different between the two groups, and from this basis potential points of engagement can be identified.

Practical Tools:

- Needs assessments
- Focus group discussions
- Attendance at Parent Teacher Association meetings

Guideline 2: Think Beyond Education. Think Broader Community Engagement

Considering the significant challenges which affect the lives of both parents and teachers in major refugee hosting urban areas or impoverished areas, it is important to provide a 'site' where people can come together to address broader community issues where they can work together to identify and solve issues or simply to enjoy a social event. This platform of engagement may assist to address the issues that are impeding

education, but not directly related to the classroom. Focusing on community issues that are shared and common will open space for dialogue in the future on the specific challenges in the classroom and how parents and teachers can work together.

Practical tools to achieve this could include:

- Community picnics to start the discussion
- Trainings on civic engagement with parents and teachers
- Community gathering at Town Hall to highlight common issues to decision makers

Guideline 3: Make the Switch from Passive to Positive Communication

So much of the time, parents come to teachers in instances when their children are being harassed, bullied, or feel as though they are not doing well in the class. In other cases, only those parents whose children are doing well in the classroom stay in contact with teachers.

Having this as the primary, and in many instances only form of communication, does not build a relationship or partnership between teachers and parents. Efforts must be made to 'switch' how parents and teachers engage with each other, especially if they rarely interact. Making this switch is not easy. It must start from a position of understanding and with community building in mind.

Practitioners note: Counselors can play this role in activating parents to be involved. In Jordan, by law all schools should have a counselor and they have a role to play in facilitating communication between parents and teachers and students. Dig into the education laws of your context to find if such a provision is available there as well and advocate to authorities to activate this provision in practice.

Guideline 4: Dedicated Inclusion

Many parents do not feel capable of being involved in the education process because of their own limited education background or are restricted from doing so because of cultural barriers such as women not feeling comfortable to speak with male teachers. All parents can contribute in positive ways to support their children through the education process. Creative pathways of communication must be explored to ensure that these parents are not excluded simply because of their education or cultural background

Practical tools:

- Awareness raising amongst parents that they ALL have a right to be involved in their child's education and ALL can contribute
- Psycho-social support (PSS) sessions to build the capacities and confidence of parents
- Trainings to strengthen communication skills
- Encourage parents of each school year to nominate one parent to stay in direct and regular contact with teachers who can raise issues of other parents.

Guideline 5: Encourage Parental Involvement in the Learning Process

Parents play an important role in encouraging their children's behavior. This is especially the case with attitudes of children towards their education as well as respect for teachers. This is a form of accountability as parents take increased ownership of their child's learning and in so doing supports the work of teachers in the classroom. Studies have shown that parents can contribute to the education of their children despite their own educational background.

Practical tools:

- Training on Positive and Effective parenting techniques, including positive reinforcement and modeling behavior

Specifically this could be to:

- Encourage parents who can to oversee their children's homework
- Encourage parents to use positive reinforcement if children are doing their homework
- Encourage parents to talk to their children about what they learned in the classroom each day
- Encourage model behavior and respect for teachers and the important role they play in society

Guideline 6: Let Them Come (Back) to School

Parents can often feel that the teachers are not providing quality education to their children. One way to show them the important work that teachers are doing is by letting them actually come to schools. This could be achieved by encouraging teachers and schools to invite parents to an open day once every term, where they can attend classes with their children but they are not allowed to interrupt or interact with the class. This provides the opportunity for parents to observe the teachers as well as how their child performs in the classroom.

Things to keep in mind:

- Consult with parents, school principals and Ministry of Education to ensure this would be beneficial
- Could a lunch be organized at the end of the visit? This could potentially be a site for further casual communication between students, parents and teachers.

Guideline 7: Encourage Collaboration and Relationship Building

Teachers often face resource restraints and lack of relief. Collaboration between teachers and parents can potentially serve to address this deficiency. This is especially pertinent in the case of refugee families who may not have employment. Whatever their background, parents have skills that they can contribute in the classroom through extra-curricular activities.

This could include:

- Setting up a community garden
- Providing English classes
- Teaching group music lessons
- Initiating Clean up days
- Providing Computer classes

Practitioners note: advocacy is often necessary as a first step. Talking to parents and teachers about how this could benefit the overall education process.

Based off their willingness, it is of course important to set clear expectations between parents and teachers of what they want to achieve through this collaboration to ensure that it does not create a new workload for teachers. Make sure this conversation happens before collaboration takes place.

Further, to ensure that parents from all backgrounds can attend, efforts should be made to ensure that some incentive can be provided. This could include: covering transportation costs, providing lunch as well as the materials needed for the activities.

Guideline 8: Sending the Message

The basis of communication between parents and teachers must be one of trust and support. With this relationship set, it is possible then to introduce or strengthen existing efforts for one-directional communication with the simple intention of transmitting information.

Practical tools:

- homework diary,
- notes
- text messages,
- whatsapp voice mail

Practitioners note: Many of these communication methods may already be in use. The key is to highlight all of the available methods for teachers to communicate with parents. Another major consideration when deciding the methods of communication is that it does not place further pressure or significant work load on teachers.

Guideline 9: Face to Face communication

Sending information is only one form of communication and it is necessary for parents and teachers to come together for the clear intention to speak about what is happening in the classroom. This can occur in the form of parent-teacher associations, or one to one parent and teacher meetings about students' performance. The key here is to activate the PTA if it already exists and if not encourage parents and teachers to set one up.

Guideline 10: Setting Expectations from the Start

Through all of the different methods of communication- whether face to face or one-directional- it is important for teachers to set expectations of how often and when they will be in contact with parents and with what methods of communication. This expectation should be set at the beginning of each term through either a note sent home or an initial meeting with all parents. This will ensure that parents understand how, when and, even, if they can contact teachers and may serve to reduce tension between the groups.