Effectiveness Testing of a Multi-Layered Model of Psychosocial Support Within School in Conflict-affected Eastern Ukraine

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Summary

This article presents an example of how academic partners working with government, UN, or other implementing agencies can fill critical gaps in education in emergencies data and evidence. The psychosocial support intervention in Eastern Ukraine presented here made a significant difference in the well-being of affected children in part through systematic reflection on qualitative and quantitative research findings.

Keywords

Psychosocial support
Conflict-Affected Children
School Psychologist
Teachers

Introduction

The military conflict between the Ukrainian Army and Russia-supported separatist fighters has been going on in Eastern Ukraine since 2014. Five years of armed confrontation has negatively affected children, teachers, education facilities, and the wider education system (OCHA, 2019). Over 400,000 children live, learn, and play near the front line where shelling occurs every day. According to the Education Cluster, within the 20-kilometer "contact line", 60% of schools observe the impact of the conflict on children's ability to learn and/or on their wellbeing, making the availability of psychosocial support even more important (OCHA, 2019).

Apart from the immediate physical dangers facing children and educators, educational professionals face new challenges associated with the rapid increase in the number of children suffering from psychological trauma and a demand for new teaching approaches to meet the psychosocial needs of these children (UNICEF, 2018). Fortunately, the Ukrainian educational system has professional psychological services available within schools; almost every educational facility has a school psychologist on staff (Panok, 2005). However, these specialists are not always trained in evidence-based psychosocial interventions for emergencies.

In the first days of the armed conflict, the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy (NaUKMA) in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine (MoES) and the UNICEF Office in Ukraine joined efforts to address the

aforementioned challenges. This fruitful cooperation resulted in the development and implementation of an effective multi-layered system of psychosocial support in education facilities built upon the existing psychological school aid network (Bogdanov et. al., 2017a).

In 2014, NaUKMA researchers started to explore psychosocial problems and coping strategies of conflict-affected children. Eight focus groups with 50 school-aged children and two focus groups with 27 parents were conducted in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts (regions). The children reported having the following difficulties: sleep disruption, nightmares and disturbed dreaming, waking up in cold sweat or with screaming, fear of being left alone, high temperature when nervous, frequent urination, stuttering, rudeness, aggressiveness, emotional instability, weak memory skills, whining, and nervousness. Being fearful was the most prevalent problem among all parents. Various coping mechanisms were used by children in order to overcome stress, namely listening to music, reading books, physical activity, creative art activities, interacting with peers, pursuing the support of close relatives and friends, and having meaningful and emotional conversations. These qualitative results were used to guide the development of a multi-layered package of educational and psychosocial intervention to help teachers (Bogdanov et al., 2017b) and school psychologists (Bogdanov et al., 2017c) support learner's well-being. The model includes training teachers on resilience strengthening at the first layer and training school psychologists in the SAFE SPACE methodology (Bogdanov et al., 2017c) of creating and running recovery groups at the second layer.

Effectiveness of Teacher and School Psychologist Interventions

It was hypothesized that teacher training sessions would positively impact the well-being of children. The participatory training enabled teachers to acquire skills of emotional communication, understanding psychosocial stress reactions, and building trusting relationships with affected children. Overall, 3,842 teachers from five districts in Eastern Ukraine were trained.

The practical support for children and educators was imbedded within a research design that used representative samples of school classes in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts during the period of February-March 2016. The study used a repeated measures design, and the second wave of data was collected after the teacher intervention in November 2016. Teachers were randomly selected for training and outcomes were evaluated for students. Sixteen classroom teachers of children (N=314) from the treatment group underwent training sessions, whereas thirteen classroom teachers of children (N=372) from the control group did not.

Relative to the control group, children in the treatment group showed statistically significant[1] improvement in prosocial behavior, emotional comfort, relationships with peers and behavioral problems. However, the study has found no statistically significant difference in levels of traumatic stress between children from control and treatment groups after the intervention.

The effectiveness of the SAFE SPACE intervention was measured in another study from January-March 2015. We evaluated the psychological condition of students who had been referred to a psychologist for support at baseline and after they had participated in seven group sessions provided by trained school psychologists. On the baseline level, the more psychologically-affected students from Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts were selected based on the psychologists' assessment of their stress level and present functional difficulties. From the 1,365 children who participated in these group sessions, 130 children were randomly selected for follow-up outcome measurement.

After the intervention, the number of children with high levels of traumatic stress symptoms and hyperactivity decreased. Similarly, the number of children who scored low on 'prosocial behavior' slightly decreased.

Promising Practices in Data and Evidence Related to Psychosocial Support Interventions in Schools

Here we summarize some of the practical aspects of the research approach applied by NaUKMA researchers:

1. Applying qualitative research methods for investigating children's socio-ecological context, understanding of their psychosocial problems, and coping strategies. This strategy is in line with findings from a 2013 meta-analysis of resilience strengthening programs among children that suggests considering local cultural resilience characteristics and the dynamics of conflict instead of coming in with a fixed set of resilience determinants and trying to adopt diverse local contexts to existing tools (Tol, Song & Jordans, 2013). Using this approach helped to ensure that the intervention was addressing an existing need and built support from the community, schools, and management partners.

2. Using existing evidence-based approaches for psychosocial program development. Using evidence-based approaches helped to build support and led to the success of the project. The focused group intervention SAFE SPACE (mentioned above) incorporates common components of cognitive behavioral therapy including cognitive coping, relaxation, and behavioral activation

(Berkowitz et al., 2010; Murray et al., 2014; Bryant & Harvey, 1995), and provides social support to affected children, which is also an effective strategy in reducing traumatic stress.

3. Experimental and quasi-experimental research design for testing program effectiveness and for continual program improvement. This approach allowed implementers to combine ethical aspects of psychosocial support in emergencies with conducting research that meets high scientific standards. The project was developed to provide access to services for children in need; however, we were also able to use this project to conduct research investigating the effectiveness of these interventions in the local context. Additionally, available trained mental health professionals, as well as well-established data collection procedures in schools, contributed positively to obtaining critical evidence.

4. Mixed-methods approach based on the use of qualitative and quantitative research methods. Using this approach is in line with the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) recommendation on monitoring and evaluation of psychosocial programs in emergencies (IASC, 2017) and allows researchers to benefit from the advantages of each type of method at different stages of program development, piloting, monitoring, and evaluation in emergencies.

5. Applying validated instruments to collect data. Using the Ukrainian version of the global Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 1997) helped to ensure the validity of our results. Other measures for studying post-traumatic stress like the widely used Children's Revised Impact of Event Scale (CRIES-8) (Perrin et al., 2005) were also used to gain a holistic understanding of the experience of psychological trauma, its impact on mental health, and coping strategies of children and families.

Conclusion

The approach presented is one example of how academic partners working with government, United Nations (UN), or other implementing agencies can fill critical gaps in education in emergencies data and evidence. Both interventions within the model (the teacher training and school psychologist training) proved effective at reducing the numbers of children with difficulties related to the stress and trauma of living in a conflict zone. These results provide evidence for a model of effectively integrating quality education and psychosocial support in emergency settings. The synergetic effect of positive and emotionally safe school classroom environments, where children are actively supported by trained teachers and with more targeted school psychologist interventions, made a significant difference in the well-being of affected children and opened

new perspectives for their personal growth. Such synergy was possible because both interventions were developed and tailored through systematic reflection on qualitative and quantitative research findings. This mixed-methods approach provides an in-depth understanding of contextual information, highlights the strengths of each intervention, and assists in developing referral mechanisms between the two service levels. Utilizing partnerships between Ukrainian universities and international organizations, implementing evidence-based approaches, and conducting quality mixed-methods research has proven to be an effective approach to meeting some of the mental health needs of the children along the conflict line in Ukraine and could be adapted to carrying out future projects in this region.

Endnotes

1. Despite the fact that the presented study applies a clustered randomized trial design, analyzing multi-level regression or clustering standard error were not used to examine the effect of the teacher intervention on continuous variables, because of the limited possibility to control the size of school classes across the initial sample which varied from small (less than 10 students) to large (more than 30 students).

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