Research paper

"Students are bringing the revolution into the classroom!" teachers' and counselors' perceptions of the need for psychosocial support in crisis-affected classrooms in Lebanon

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ABSTRACT

The still-evolving situation in Lebanon is characterized by multiple crises that affect students' mental health and school functioning. This explorative study analyzes educators' experience of students' educational and psychosocial needs and their preparedness to deliver psychosocial support. Qualitative interviews were conducted with 19 public-school teachers and counselors in Lebanon. Educators reported that increased crisis-related stress levels among both Lebanese and Syrian students aged six to fourteen years, contributed to behavioral problems and impaired school functioning. They also noted teaching styles and strategies that were inadequate for dealing with crisis-affected students. Sensitization to psychosocial support has altered educators' perceptions of their students and encouraged exploration of new teaching roles. Implications for school-based psychosocial support are discussed.

Teachers working with students affected by crisis and traumatic experiences have noted the challenges involved in maintaining an effective learning environment (Chafouleas, Koriakin, Roundfield, & Overstreet, 2019) and reported disconnected relationships with their students (Berger, Bearsley, & Lever, 2021). Barr (2018) has argued that educators need a better understanding of the impact of traumatic or toxic stress on children; further, resources should be provided so that educators can incorporate this knowledge into their practices.

Psychosocial support (PSS) is an umbrella term for interventions that can be preventative, curative, or focused on promoting well-being (Global Education Monitoring Report, 2019). Most trauma-informed interventions draw on the understanding and concepts of trauma and its extensive implications (SAMHSA, 2014). A program, organization, or system is defined as trauma-informed when it acknowledges the impact of trauma and responds to its signs by consolidating the knowledge of trauma into policies, procedures and practices (SAMHSA, 2014, p. 9). They are based on psychoeducation, cognitive behavioral therapies, reconstruction of trauma experiences, and stress management skills (Fu & Underwood, 2015). In its Minimum Standards for Inter-Agency Network for Education (2018), Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (Inee) (2010), the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) established the ground for non-specialists to implement prevention efforts. INEE encourages schools and teachers to deliver preventive measures in crisis contexts, aimed at lowering students' stress levels to enhance their academic functioning and personal well-being.

Many studies have focused on the effects of school-based interventions (e.g. Forsberg & Schultz, 2022; Fu & Underwood, 2015; Shah, 2017). However, there has been less attention to perspectives of the educators who work in classrooms affected by crises and in particular, their motivation, preparedness and willingness to adapt their teaching style. The study aims to address these topics.

1. Setting of the study

In Lebanon, wars have significantly affected mental health (see e.g. Al-ghzawi, ALBashtawy, Azzeghaiby, & Alzoghaibi, 2014; Murthy & Lakshminarayana, 2006) and the country's political and economic stability (Rother et al., 2016). When the Syrian crisis unfolded in 2011, hundreds of thousands of Syrians sought refuge in Lebanon (UNHCR, 2020a). By 2020, of a population of 6.5 million, 915 000 Syrian refugees were registered in Lebanon, with estimates as high as 1.5 million (UNHCR, 2020b). The deteriorating economic situation has led to high levels of corruption, high unemployment rates, and political instability

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(United Nations, 2021). The situation peaked in October 2019, when the populace reacted through the *thawra* uprising, demonstrating against government corruption and fiscal policies that threatened access to health care and food (Sullivan, 2019). The Government of Lebanon and the UN (2021) estimated that, due to displacement and economic factors, some 450 000 vulnerable Lebanese and 690 000 displaced Syrians students were lacking access to quality education services and safe learning environments. The report further states that in 2019, only 219 455 Lebanese and 210 964 displaced Syrian students aged three to 18 were enrolled in formal education. Reasons for lower school attendance during the economic crisis included increased use of child labor, roadblocks during the protests, students' participation in protests, growing poverty, and from February 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic. After data were collected for this study, the economic crisis in Lebanon became a humanitarian crisis, triggered not least by the pandemic and the explosion in Beirut Port on August 4, 2020 (United Nations, 2021).

2. Conceptual frameworks

This study draws on the concepts of toxic and traumatic stress and trauma-informed interventions. Understanding stress and its consequences facilitates the comprehension of the constitution of PSS interventions. This theory basis provides a fundamental baseline for explaining educators' experiences of working with crisis-affected students.

2.1. Toxic and traumatic stress

"Toxic stress" is a term frequently used to describe stress responses to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), with incidents that include stressful or traumatic events such as abuse, neglect, violence, and parental stress. The pathogenesis of toxic stress is directly linked to higher risks of negative health outcomes (e.g. Bucci, Marques, Oh, & Harris, 2016). Yaribeygi, Panahi, Sahraei, Johnston, and Sahebkar (2017) found a positive correlation between increased stress levels and physical responses such as alterations of endocrine processes, decreased brain functions, suppressed immune system, and increases in cardiovascular diseases. Further consequences of stress include continuous physical tension, emotion dysregulation, aggression, and increased levels of anxiety (Morton & Berardi, 2018).

Exposure to direct or indirect traumatic events, like experiences of threatened or actual death and serious injury, can evoke post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) due to increased levels of traumatic stress (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The neuropsychological impact of traumatic stress can lead to poor cognitive functioning, including developmental delays (Malarbi, Muscara, & Stargatt, 2016), dysfunctional episodic memory functions, difficulties with attention and concentration (Scott et al., 2015) and emotional distress and behavioral changes (Pfefferbaum, Nitiéma, & Newman, 2021). Conflict-affected children may be particularly impacted by these reactions (e.g. Bendavid et al., 2021). Charlson et al. (2019) found high levels of severe disorders, including depression, anxieties, and PTSD, among conflict-affected young people. Similarly, Wilson, Turner-Halliday, and Minnis (2021) noted high risks of common mental health disorders and heightened levels of psychosomatic symptoms among Palestinian children living in conflict settings. In their systematic review of 28 studies of Syrian refugees living in Syria and neighboring countries, Hendrickx, Woodward, Fuhr, Sondorp, and Roberts (2020) showed the high mental health burden and limited access to mental health services. Displaced Syrian children in Turkey exhibited high levels of posttraumatic stress, anxiety and depression (Yayan, Düken, Özdemir, & Çelebioğlu, 2020). In the context of Lebanon, Farran (2021) has discussed the severe impact on collective mental health in Lebanon, noting the severity of adversities for young Lebanese people, and criticizing the lack of mental health services. Economic challenges and poor labor market opportunities affect their hopes for a positive future, and result in poor physical and mental health (Devonald, Jones, & Youssef, 2022). In a recent study, one in three Lebanese children showed at least one psychiatric disorder, but only 5% of those received psychological help (Maalouf et al., 2022). Among Syrian refugees in Lebanon, several studies showed high prevalence of PTSD, as much as 35.4% (Kazour et al., 2017) and 36.1% (complex PTSD, Vallieres et al., 2018), and even up to 45.6% in Syrian refugee children (Khamis, 2019).

2.2. Challenges in classroom management

Toxic and traumatic stress can impair school functioning. In a review of 83 studies, Perfect, Turley, Carlson, Yohanna, and Saint Gilles (2016) found that students' exposure to potentially traumatic events led to reduced working memory capacity, poor attention and concentration, and social-emotional-behavioral problems. Several studies have shown that teachers lack concepts and knowledge about trauma and traumatic stress, and thus require tools and strategies to meet the needs of affected students (see e.g. Berger et al., 2021; Dhahir & Mohammed, 2020; Hobbs, Paulsen, & Thomas, 2019). School principals in Turkey found issues connected to discipline, behavior and school culture for displaced students from Syria (Özkan & Çakmak, 2021). Bouclaous et al. (2021) reported the high prevalence of aggression among displaced Syrian adolescents in Lebanon. Also, Lebanese students showed higher emotion blindness, aggression and depression in comparison to students worldwide (Sfeir, Geara, Hallit, & Obeid, 2020).

However, educators feel that public schools in Lebanon lack 21st-century skills regarding teachers' professional development (Ghamrawi, Ghamrawi, & Shal, 2017). Ministry of Education and Higher Education (2021) has stated in their five-year General Education Plan 2021–2025 that permanent teachers must complete preservice training of three to 18 months, while contractual teachers are hired without any pre-service training. The report also confirmed the lack of an official baseline number of teachers having received formal teacher training. In her study of global citizenship education, Ghosn-Chelala (2020) found that Lebanese teachers lacked progressive teaching skills that could foster critical dialogues in the classroom. Similarly, a comparative study by Du, Chaaban, Sabah, Al-Thani, and Wang (2020) showed that student assessment in Lebanon used to be based solely on memorization tasks, challenging the teachers' experiences in active learning activities. Ghamrawi, Ghamrawi, and Shal (2019) found that teachers in Lebanon experienced a lack of supervision interventions. A report on schools, students and teachers in Lebanon (World Bank Group & Ministry of Education and Higher Education, 2021) showed that less than one third of the teachers in public schools had received training in classroom management and educational technology. Further, public schools lacked professional support from psychologists, school counselors and social workers. Teachers simply followed the set curriculum, without opportunities for student involvement. The 2021 report offers recommendations to improve teaching practices, provide follow-up for the teachers and train teachers in providing support for children with special needs. A recent study by Khansa and Bahous (2021) of Lebanese teachers working with refugee children supported these recommendations: teachers noted the positive impact of closer relationships with students on their academic and social well-being. Also, Franklin and Harrington (2019) highlighted the relevance of the student–teacher relationship and the teachers' responsibility to empower their students, to ensure a successful learning process.

2.3. Trauma-informed interventions

Greater priority should be accord to improving mental health and psychosocial well-being (see e.g. WHO, 2022), especially for children affected by emergencies (UNICE, 2022). Mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) is defined by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC, 2007) as support to protecting psychosocial well-being and preventing mental disorders. Most MHPSS interventions employ elements

of trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy (tf-CBT) such as psychoeducation, relaxation techniques, affect modulation, and enhancement of safety or development (Pfefferbaum et al., 2014). A systematic review by Burkey et al. (2018) established that PSS interventions seemed suitable and efficient in reducing disruptive classroom behaviors in low- and middle-income countries.

In a review of best intervention practices following collective crises causing traumatic stress, Hobfoll et al. (2007) identified five preventive principles for interventions in the immediate aftermath of a critical event and up to three months afterward: 1) establishing a sense of safety, 2) promoting calmness, 3) creating a sense of self- and collective efficacy, 4) fostering a sense of connectedness, and 5) instilling hope. These principles are reflected in such approaches as Psychological First Aid (PFA; Brymer et al., 2012) and Skills for Psychological Recovery (SPR; Berkowitz et al., 2010), as well as in specific trauma-informed PSS interventions. Several studies have showed the success of school-based PSS interventions (see Forsberg & Schultz, 2022; Fu & Underwood, 2015; Rolfsnes & Idsoe, 2011). Schonfeld et al. (2015) argue that professionals trained in PSS can support children in expressing their feelings and concerns while receiving coping skills and strategies to regulate their distress. Elements of successful trauma-informed school-based interventions include reaching into the school community, promoting a safe school environment, reducing barriers to health care services (Herrenkohl, Hong, & Verbrugge, 2019), as well as reducing levels of posttraumatic stress and employing trauma-informed interventions (Pfefferbaum et al., 2021).

2.4. PSS approach in Lebanon

The Lebanese approach to PSS became particularly relevant with the rise in mental health issues and the limited access to private healthcare services at the beginning of the Syrian refugee crisis in 2011. Ministry of Public Health (2015) recognizing the increased need for mental health services for Syrians and Lebanese alike, in 2015 the Ministry of Public Health launched the Mental Health and Substance Use Strategy for Lebanon, and created the Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Task Force in collaboration with WHO and UNICEF. This task force focused on training frontline workers in psychological first aid and on the provision of support to health-care workers (Karam et al., 2016). Further, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) created in 2014 the second version of the Reaching All Children with Education Plan (RACE II; Government of Lebanon & United Nations, 2021). RACE was introduced in response to low enrollment rates among both Lebanese and non-Lebanese students. As part of this plan, a two-shift mechanism was established. Lebanese students attended school in the morning during the first shift; Syrian students attended the second shift in the afternoon, supported by school counselors. Through weekly class counseling sessions, these school counselors delivered psychosocial skills to the students. Additionally, they detected and reported child protection cases to the child protection services. With this initiative, MEHE entered into collaboration with NRC Lebanon on large-scale implementation of the Better Learning Program (BLP) in Lebanese public schools. This decision was influenced by the promising implementation of BLP in the public school systems in Gaza and the West Bank in Palestine. Created as a global program by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) in collaboration with the UiT - The Arctic University of Norway, BLP-1 and BLP-2 involve universal preventive measures for traumatic stress reactions as described in Hobfoll et al. (2007) and components from cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2017, 2019). These are school- and classroom-based, teacher-led universal psychosocial programs consisting of: 1) psychoeducation and normalization of stress reactions, 2) relaxation techniques, 3) enhanced coping skills, 4) garnering social support, and 5) parent involvement. BLP-2 has the further goal of strengthening 6) pedagogical study skills, 7) academic and general self-efficacy, and 8) modifying the teacher role by providing more appraisals and greater

understanding of how traumatic and cumulative stress can cause student underachievement.

2.5. Capacity-building in BLP

In response to the emerging crises, MEHE and NRC decided to target both Lebanese and non-Lebanese students. In the second-shift schools, psychosocial counselors were trained in BLP, while public school teachers were trained in the first-shift schools. Capacity-building was the responsibility of master trainers employed by Lebanon's Center for Educational Research and Development (CERD), drawing on psychological and pedagogical theories and the implementation of exercises and techniques from the BLP manuals. From November 2019 to January 2020, MEHE's master trainers conducted BLP training for 76 selected teachers from eight first-shift schools and all 449 counselors from the 333 s-shift schools where grades 4 to 6 were taught. BLP-1 and BLP-2 were contextualized to the Lebanese school system, including the curriculum, and to the specific crisis setting, with the refugee crisis and the economic crisis. The same program was implemented for Syrian and Lebanese students: the focus was on including students affected by potential traumatic experiences from the war and students who were experiencing increased stress in the crisis context in Lebanon. NRC's global BLP supervisors participated in the process. NRC and MEHE merged the two programs into 10 structured 45-min sessions over a 10-week period based on BLP-1: 1) how to calm down, 2) regulating stress, 3) body/mind connection, and 4) getting rid of unwanted thoughts. These four sessions included psychoeducation on stress and stress reactions, techniques for controlling emotions for better stress management, and fostering the ability to concentrate in class and engage meaningfully in the learning process. The next six sessions, on the BLP-2, aim at improving study skills through learning about the following topics: 5) planning and organization, 6) time management, 7) time management and attention, 8) working memory, 9) and 10) task initiation and perseverance. The Lebanese version of the BLP is detailed in the two handbooks for BLP-1 and BLP-2 (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2021a; 2021b). BLP implementation started in February 2020, but has been interrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic since then.

The present study explores teachers' and psychosocial counselors' experiences of working with crisis-exposed students, their perception of students' psychosocial needs, and their views on the role of educators working with students affected by crisis. The focus here is on how educators understand crises and the impact on students, on classroom management experiences prior to PSS training, and their motivation, preparedness and willingness to adapt their teaching style after being sensitized to psychosocial support. Research participants were teachers and psychosocial counselors working in public schools with Lebanese and Syrian students in Lebanon.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

Of the 341 schools participating in the BLP implementation project, nine public schools were selected for this study through strategic sampling by MEHE: four first-shift and 5 s-shift schools from five regions across Lebanon. The aim here was diversity in socioeconomic status, urban and rural backgrounds, and school size, as these factors can produce variations within teaching conditions due to differences in socio-economic backgrounds, geographic settings, and professions. From these nine schools, ten teachers from first-shift schools and nine psychosocial counselors from second-shift schools were invited by the school principals to participate in interviews. All had recently attended BLP training. The selected teachers worked in the first shift with Lebanese students and the counselors in the second shift with Syrian students, so both populations were reflected. This enabled examination of potentially traumatic refugee experiences as well as the increased stress

levels of both student groups in light of the deteriorating crisis in Lebanon. Further, the study design offered insights into how both professions experienced their work prior to BLP training, and how their perceptions altered after sensitization in psychosocial support.

Eighteen females and one male were interviewed. In fact, most teachers and school counselors are female; for instance, in 2020, 88.6% of primary school teachers in Lebanon were female (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2021). Counselors held university degrees in psychology, sociology or social work, whereas only one teacher had formal teacher education. At the time of the interviews, all participants had at least two years of practice in their profession. All of them have been trained in PSS and have started to implement PSS activities in their regular classroom activities. Due to school closings in many regions and the increasingly compressed curriculum in spring 2020, only nine of the 19 educators were able to implement the first two of ten BLP sessions prior to the interviews.

Two additional educational advisors from MEHE were interviewed for relevant background information regarding the training and implementation process.

3.2. Procedures

The study was formally approved by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) as well as the Center for Educational Research and Development (CERD) in Lebanon and received approval from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD). Official access to the field was authorized through MEHE; direct contact with the teachers and school principals was facilitated by NRC Lebanon.

Data collection took place in March 2020, one to three months after the 19 teachers and counselors had participated in BLP training. The data consist of qualitative interviews using a semi-structured interview guide, to gain an in-depth understanding of the perspectives and experiences of the participants. The interviews were constructed and conducted in line with the seven-stage model of Brinkmann and Kvale (2015): the choice of topic, study design, interviewing, interview transcription and analysis, double-checking for validation, and the final report. Brinkmann and Kvale's (2015) guide provides an extensive step-by-step handbook to conducting interviews that aligned with the doxastic interviewing approach of this study. Participants were informed of the purpose of the research; their participation was voluntary participation, and they could withdraw at any time. Each participant was asked to sign a letter of informed consent. Interviews took about an hour and focused on four thematic areas: the interviewee's background, role as a teacher/counselor, views on students' needs, and the BLP training. They were asked to describe their motivation for becoming a counselor/teacher, the challenges they encountered in their work, and their students' behavior before and during the crisis.

Interviews were conducted with three experienced interpreters from Lebanon with educational backgrounds; they also served as cultural interpreters, in line with the concept of interpreters as cross-cultural mediators (Bassnett, 2011). The participants spoke Arabic, and the interviews were translated between Arabic and English. As the researchers were less familiar with the context, the interpreters provided support with translation as well as explaining contextual comments made by the participants.

The interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed with the qualitative data analysis software NVivo12. The data analysis is based on the seven phases of thematic analysis developed by Clarke and Braun (2014). In the first phase, to familiarize ourselves with the data set, we transcribed the interview materials, re-read and discussed them. Next, interview transcripts were coded through line-by-line coding in NVivo. These codes were merged several times until they created the themes. In this process, the codes were several times connected, reviewed, and refined. Finally, various queries were conducted through NVivo, including word frequencies; and matrix coding was used to gain a holistic understanding of the complexity of the data. During this third phase, recurrent themes in the data were detected. The entire process was based on an inductive approach, reflecting on the frequency of patterns in the data (see e.g. Azungah, 2018; Thomas, 2003). In the fourth phase, the two co-authors of this study separately cross-checked the transcripts, codes and themes, to ensure the validity of the results and the connections between the data and the findings. The common themes detected in the data were finally defined through describing, comparing and relating to other themes as well as to the research context. Preliminary analysis of the data was presented to and discussed with NRC and MEHE. The conceptual framework was guiding the analysis through theories of education, stress and traumatic stress, but the work with the data was an inductive process leading to the following selected themes shown in Fig. 1.
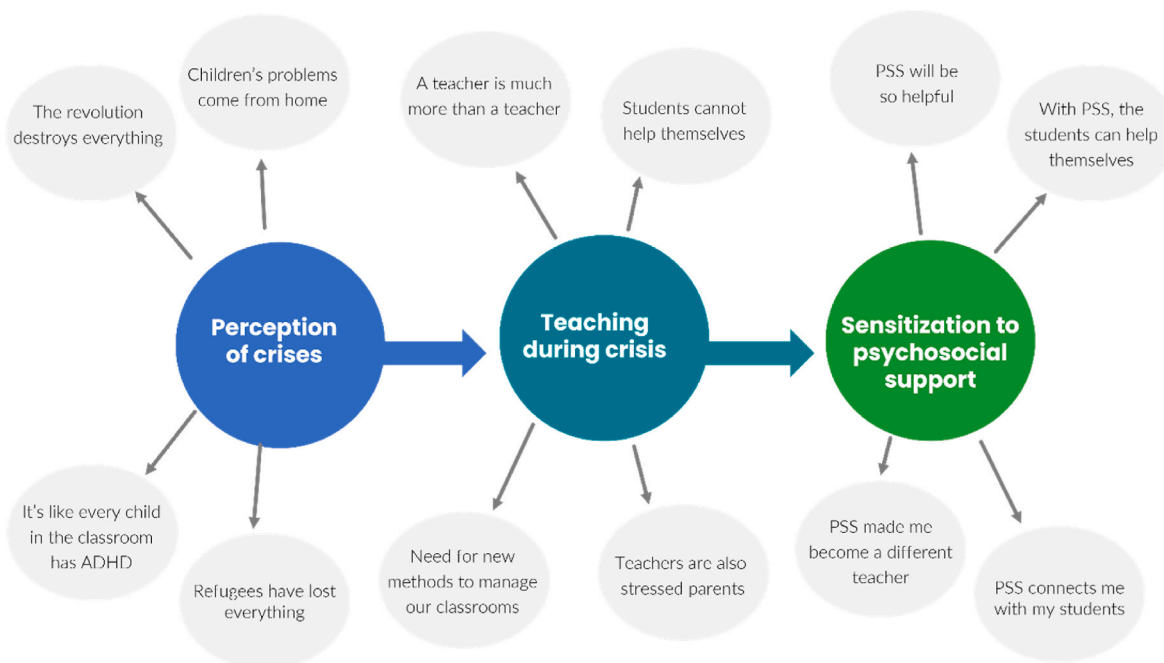

Fig. 1. Overview of the analytical themes and underlying topics.

4. Findings

In this section, we highlight the findings of the three presented analytical themes (Fig. 2) that reflect teachers' and counselors' perceptions of working as educators in a crisis setting: (a) understanding crisis from an educator's perspective, (b) teaching in a crisis-affected setting, and (c) educators' perceptions on the provision of PSS to students. Fig. 2 presents an overview over the themes and sub-themes that were condensed from the underlying topics. We use the terms "educators" and "participants" when they apply to both teachers and counselors (see Fig. 2).

4.1. Crisis perceptions from the educators' perspective

4.1.1. Social instability reflected in the classroom

Our interviews showed a considerable focus on the challenges that participants faced in their classrooms that directly linked to the ongoing crises in Lebanon. Considering the roadblocks and school closures during the revolution, teachers and counselors reported longer periods of closed schools and student absenteeism in October 2019 and February 2020. During the weeks when students were able to attend school, the country's social instability was reflected in the classroom in terms of behavioral problems and impaired school functioning. First, the educators described a general increase in behavioral issues and learning difficulties among their students in comparison what they had experienced prior to the crises in Lebanon. They observed problematic behavior among students, and low participation and attention during lessons. Aggression and violence were observed and described as fights, threats, and bullying among the students, disruptive behaviors in class, and threats and physical aggression towards teachers. A majority of the teachers could mention at least one case of "serious aggression" that had recently been referred to the school counselor. To cite two counselors:

> Students don't tolerate much from each other. They start fighting immediately. Some of them keep on shaking their legs or moving their body all the time, and some constantly keep their hands clenched tight as fists. (Counselor 3)

> There is no discipline in this school, the students don't even know the meaning of discipline. It's like all they are all on top of each other, they don't know how to line up, they don't calm down, it's as if all of them have ADHD. (Counselor 5)

Teachers note the lack of concentration and focus among students, who tended to "daydream" and did not seem to "listen to the explanations" during lessons. Counselors also reported high levels of aggression and violence, both between students and against the school staff. As one teacher put it:

Perception of crises
- Social instability reflected in the classroom
- External factors contributing to behavioral problems
- Increased stress levels among educators

Teaching during crisis
- Dealing with political topics in class
- Change in teaching style
- A new supportive role

Sensitization to psychosocial support (PSS)
- Training in PSS responding to expressed needs of educators
- PSS techniques and methods for better classroom management
- PSS expands educators' roles

Fig. 2. Overview over the themes and sub-themes.

Students are bringing the revolution into the classroom. (Teacher 2)

4.1.2. External factors contributing to behavioral problems

Educators reported various external factors that appeared to lead to increased stress levels and could explain behavioral problems in the classrooms. These included economic instability, lack of parental support, domestic violence, child labor, and previous traumatic experiences among refugee students. We describe these factors in further detail below.

Teachers specifically noted the negative impacts of the economic crisis and the revolution. They reported lack of stability, fears for the future, and heightened levels of anger and violence.

Further, teachers pointed out that the economic crisis affected everyone in Lebanon, including families, teachers, and the students themselves. They considered the students to be affected by the impacts of the social instability surrounding them. This led to an increase in behavioral issues and learning difficulties, but also to lower student motivation. As one teacher observed about the future facing the students:

> Some of them are motivated to study and get out [of Lebanon]. Others don't have such motivation, so they don't care to study or leave the country. They say that they won't have a future either way. (Teacher 7)

The second external factor highlighted by teachers and counselors alike was the lack of parental support. They recognized high stress levels among parents and reported that many were not able to take proper care of their offspring.

> Some parents say they don't know how to deal with their kids. They say that all they can is to beat them. (Counselor 7)

With high stress levels at home, many participants also reported higher levels of domestic violence. Although such violence occurred between the parents, their children witnessed these incidents and experienced difficulties in staying focused at school. The counselors also reported an increase in reported incidents of violence and sexual abuse against the students. Here they raised the problematic issue of approaching the parents, thereby risking more punishment for the young people:

> If a child approaches me to tell me that her dad is hitting her, and I approach the parents, that just creates more harm for the child. (Counselor 8)

Moreover, participants reported an increase in child labor among their students. Due to high parental unemployment and economic pressures, many families were forced to send their children to work on the streets. Teachers saw the impact of this both in the exhaustion of their students and their lack of time to study after or before school:

> I have a 10-year-old boy in my class who gets up early to go to work with his father, and after that he comes to school. He often falls asleep in school and can't learn. He doesn't even know how to write or read, not even basic literacy and numeracy. (Counselor 3)

The final external factor concerned the traumatic experiences of refugee students and/or their parents. The counselors recognized the impact of potentially traumatic experiences on children's well-being, as well as the discrimination these second shift students experienced in the host community:

> Refugees have undergone extreme experiences – they've seen war, been displaced from their origin country, they're living under tough conditions, poverty, and this affects their education process and learning abilities.(Counselor 5)
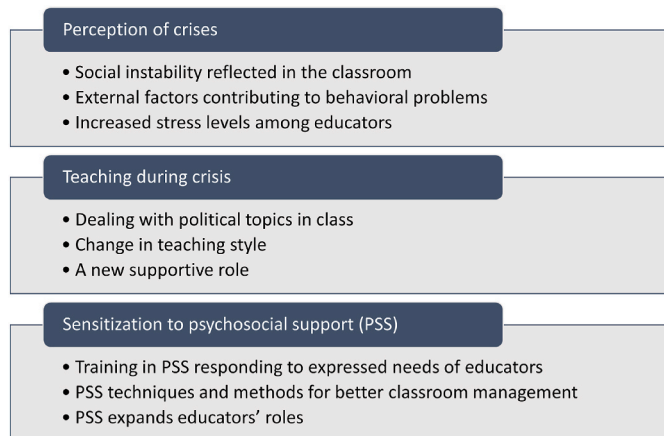
Refugee students feel that they are inferior here compared to the host community. In Syria they used to live in proper houses, and now they live in tents. (Counselor 1)

The counselors emphasized that for refugee students, the social instability in Lebanon came on top of other stress factors. However, the educators also perceived the impact of Lebanon's multiple crises on the academic functioning of students as being as negative as the impact of traumatic experiences on refugee students. Teachers highlighted the negative impacts of the ongoing crisis on students' well-being and stress-management capacities.

4.1.3. Increased stress levels among educators

Further, educators noted their own increased stress levels due to the ongoing multiple crises and their difficulties in keep their private and work lives separate. They described high stress levels, due in particular to economic pressures in the country, which undermined their own social stability through high unemployment rates in their families and delayed salary disbursement for teachers.

Teachers are stressed because teachers are parents too and we have responsibilities, too. We were asked to put boundaries between our lives, our personal life and our working life. They should not affect each other, but in the end, we are human beings, and we cannot control it all the time. (Teacher 4)

Finally, educators emphasized that these increased stress levels affected their students as well: everyone was struggling with the current situation. They reported difficulties in remaining calm and supportive in the classroom, which in turn made it harder for students to calm down.

4.2. Teaching during crisis

4.2.1. Dealing with political topics in class

The second analytical theme that emerged was teaching during crisis. Teachers noted an increase in political topics, such as the revolution and the economic crisis, during their lessons. They were divided on how much to deal with the social instability at school. Some teachers considered it challenging and feared conflicts among students. They explained there would be "different opinions," and they were frightened about handling such situations in class:

When they try to talk about it, they have different opinions. I stop them, because their opinions differ, and that will lead to problems and I will lose control. (Teacher 2)

However, some teachers felt they had a responsibility to prepare their students for the possible effects of the revolution, and should teach them about their civil rights. One teacher said:

I try to give them hope by telling them, "You are the upcoming generation, and we are counting on you in order to change the system and to fight for your rights in order to restore our Lebanon." (Teacher 5)

Another teacher sought to teach both the positive and the negative sides of the crisis, but took care to limit the topics in order to avoid heated arguments among students. However, other teachers declared that most children did not understand what the revolution is about, and said many of them even enjoyed the "extra vacation" when schools are closed.

They're kids, they don't feel worried about it [the revolution], oh no. (Teacher 1)

They aren't divided between who is for the revolution and who isn't. All of them are for the revolution because then school can be closed and they can have a long vacation. (Teacher 7)

Overall, teachers and counselors experienced an increase in behavioral problems and learning difficulties among students, but they recognized the external factors that led to high stress levels. However, they were unsure about how to deal with political topics in their already stressed classrooms.

4.2.2. Change in teaching style

Our second finding under this analytical theme was that teachers identified changes in their approach to teaching that required new methods, a revised curriculum, and greater pedagogical competence. The teachers participating in this study saw themselves in general as caring and loving towards their students. They viewed a teacher as "taking care of the children" (Teacher 2), "a patient and understanding person with a loving attitude" (Teacher 6), and "someone who makes the children feel safe" (Teacher 1). However, this was a recent change, as the teachers compared their new teaching style with the typical old teaching style. The old style was a more one-way direction of teaching where students merely received information from the teacher. Now, most teachers stated that children should be at the center of learning and that the teaching style should be adapted to them. This was described both as a change between generations and as a change within the teachers themselves. As one teacher explained:

I used to control the class actively. I often raised my voice and shouted at them. And I was not emotionally present for the children. But nowadays, I feel that, whenever I'm calm and speak in a calm voice, it works better than shouting in the class. And I feel closer to my students, I feel I can give them emotional support. (Teacher 6)

This self-reported change was described as a result of the increase in disruptive behaviors in the classroom. Teachers noted a change in their students during the economic crisis and the increase of social instability in their surroundings. The old teaching methods no longer seem to work anymore, and they felt the students needed a different kind of teacher role, one that could respond to their issues and problem, rather than just delivering a curriculum. One teacher explained that she used to believe that, as a teacher, she did not have the responsibility to talk with students about their personal issues (Teacher 8). Now, she realized that students do need support and skills for dealing with challenges, and can improve their academic functioning by releasing their stress. Another teacher confirmed this:

You have to know the problems they're facing from outside, from their homes, in order to deal with these issues with the kids. (Teacher 1)

Teachers added that the current curriculum was a challenge. They tried to adapt the content to make it more interactive and enjoyable for the students; on the other hand, they needed to deliver the general content, to prepare their students for exams. Teachers also complained that the curriculum did not include stress-releasing possibilities like artistic or physical activities, and they felt they lacked the competence to help and support students who were experiencing challenging situations or had learning difficulties. They felt the need to provide emotional support, but felt they lacked the tools to do so.

4.2.3. A new supportive role

Our interview data from the counselors showed that school-based counseling was a new and unfamiliar concept in Lebanon. However, counselors perceived themselves as having a clear role of being supportive to their students. In general, they spoke of "being there" for students and about spreading love and peace among them. As one counselor described her position:

My job basically focuses on listening and supporting. And that is exactly what I do. So, I listen to the students and their problems, and I try to work on increasing their self-confidence – that's is the most important thing. (Counselor 9)

They stressed the importance of counseling sessions, as their students were experiencing many stressful situations and needed someone who

could support them. They described the group sessions as aimed at teaching techniques for communicating better and sharing their feelings and struggles with others.

Educators saw themselves as having a new role in supporting students, but they struggled to implement this, role due to official procedures of reporting cases and their feelings of lack of competence. For teachers, the main issue concerned the lack of professional teachers' education. Many described teaching as a "poor profession," as no formal teachers' training is required to work as a teacher in Lebanon. Teachers noted that they needed more activities and techniques for dealing with the increased stress levels in their classrooms and to support the students in their learning.

However, counselors described their frustrations at feeling incapable of actually helping students. They said they could only "be there" for the students in the sense of listening to them. If they discovered child protection issues, they could refer the child, but they did not feel that reporting such incidents had any effect. According to one counselor:

> I've referred a lot of cases for many organizations, but no one responds. I notice cases, I refer them, but no action is taken. Eventually, the children lose trust, because they come to me and tell me their problems – but then nothing happens. (Counselor 6)

Another issue highlighted in the data was students' lack of motivation for counseling sessions. Counselors experienced difficulties in engaging students in these sessions and felt that they were not eager to participate. One counselor asked for tools or techniques to increase student interest and engagement:

> I need something to motivate the children to get involved and speak up. They love to play. I need some techniques to grab their attention, to motivate them to interact, to speak, to get involved more. Education through play, something like psychosocial support. (Counselor 1)

4.3. Sensitization to PSS

The final analytical theme focuses on the on the preparedness of using PSS and the recently attended training in PSS. As most of them have been able to implement only the first session in their classes, the results presented here focus on experiences from the training and on changes in their views on providing support to students as they've started to integrate the learned tools into their general teaching. Firstly, BLP training was considered helpful and a positive experience. Several factors here included the interactivity of the training, its relevance for students and themselves, and the use of new methodologies. They reported that the training was implemented at a time they needed to know more about stress and how to handle their classes under conditions of social instability. Thus, the PSS training was seen as responding to the needs described in the previous sections here.

Participants described BLP as a program that taught students how to "improve their academic performance" (Teacher 2), "overcome stress, anger, and sadness" (Teacher 3), and "feel safe in an environment that is not safe for them" (Counselor 3). They reported having learned new techniques and methods for communicating better with their students and dealing with their problems in the classroom. They specifically mentioned psychoeducational tools like understanding stress, stress reactions and exercises to calm down. The training made the participants aware of the importance of focusing on the well-being and stress levels of their students, instead of only trying to tackle behavioral problems in class. They recognized the need to understand their students in order to be able to help them reduce stress and achieve greater well-being and better academic functioning.

All participants were eager to start the program with students. As one teacher put it:

> I'm really motivated to start BLP. I want to see the impact. Why didn't we start with it years ago? (Teacher 7)

Participants expected the program to have positive results, especially in the current Lebanese situation with heightened stress levels. The educators described the program as a platform for the students to identify stress reactions, causes of stress and to implement stress relieving exercises in order to sharpen their academic functioning. The ten-week, 1-h sessions were expected to give the students a break from their daily stress, and allow the class to open up and discuss topics not covered in regular teaching.

Although the methods and activities were seen as something new, educators embraced the program. Teachers in particular found the techniques to be very different from their typical teaching methods, and believed this would help students to take part in the program.

> Now we do things in class we weren't allowed to before. Like doing physical exercises, or listening to music, for example. And our students love the music. (Teacher 1)

> Traditional teaching is so stressful for them. When we teach them PSS, we help them to overcome their stress. (Teacher 5)

Some of these BLP-methods were close to or similar to what some informants described as "modern" teaching with more teacher-student involvement. Such interaction and dialogue are closer to a more "modern" student-centered teaching approach. Participants explained that their regular teaching methods focused on delivering the content of the curriculum, without including any physical activities or calming exercises. By contrast, BLP provided a routine for each session which helped students to relax before the actual teaching session started. Most participants considered the content of BLP to be new and very beneficial for their teaching, involving methods to engage the children and break the monotony of everyday teaching. Some said they were already aware of the activities taught in the BLP training, but had not applied them in the classroom. They saw the training as reminder and motivation to start using their own knowledge for their class.

Moreover, BLP seemed to expand teachers' roles, complementing a trend already present. They explained they wanted to support their students emotionally and provide them with self-help techniques. They saw the tools and methods they learned in the training as used not only during the 1-h weekly session, but also in their normal teaching classes. In the interviews, they reported integrating the knowledge from the BLP training into their regular teaching:

> I use the BLP techniques even in my regular classes, so the students can be more relaxed in the learning process. (Teacher 3)

> In my teaching, I used to be emotionally supportive for students who were facing challenges. With BLP, I am not only emotionally supportive: I can give them techniques for dealing with their problems themselves. (Teacher 6)

Thus, the teachers saw the BLP training as more than a one-off program for students: such techniques could help students in everyday life as well as in their school lessons. Many educators noted the benefits of being trained in BLP and being able to support each other. They also reported that other teachers who had not been involved in the training were curious and had begun to request this kind of training for themselves. School principals were described as being supportive and as recognizing the need for such training.

Thus, all participants saw the BLP training as being very positive and much needed. They found the techniques to be different from their regular teaching methods or counseling style, but embraced them and were positive. However, a level of partly superficial understanding was identified among the participants. Several educators addressed specific PSS activities as "gymnastic exercises" and "simple breathing" and did not communicate deeper understanding of the activities and their underlying concepts. Further, the short and somewhat abrupt training

period led to insecurities among the educators. Two counselors questioned whether the program would work for all students. They mentioned students' different learning types and personalities and were concerned whether BLP would fit each of them. A few participants reported some uncertainty before implementing the first session and stated that they would have preferred more training before starting the implementation. Due to the pandemic, the limited three-day basic BLP training was not followed up with the planned two-day training for discussion of practical experiences.

5. Discussion

Participants in this study had reported increasing behavioral problems in their classes, whether Lebanese or Syrian classrooms. Heightened stress-levels due to external factors were seen as the cause of these issues. Many of the Syrian students had lived through traumatic war experiences, but both student groups were currently living in a high-stress context in Lebanon. Here the educators mentioned the economic crisis and its consequences as a main cause for both stress among both groups of students. With the ongoing refugee crisis, research in Lebanon has focused mainly on the effects of traumatic stress on displaced Syrian students (e.g. Khamis (2019), Vallières et al. (2018), Kazour et al. (2017)). However, recent years have seen more research such as studies from Sfeir et al. (2020) and Devonald et al. (2022) on the effects of the crisis and stress on Lebanese students as well, showing increased aggressive behavior and mental health issues. These findings confirm the increased stress levels reported by our educators among both student groups, and also indicate a likely increase in behavioral issues at school. Study participants noted the economic crisis and the revolution as causes of behavioral issues and poor schooling, with an abbreviated curriculum and stress among learners and teachers alike. Educators had to deal with the rise in behavioral issues caused by the stresses of social instability in Lebanon and their own worries about their own well-being. The findings from Ghosn-Chelala (2020) on the lack of progressive teaching skills were confirmed in our study: teachers described their lack of pedagogical skills and reported obstacles in dealing with topics such as the revolution and the protests. Indeed, the students brought the revolution into the classroom – through the increased stress levels and by wanting to discuss with their classmates and teachers topics that were relevant to their daily lives, which teachers were to a large extent unable to deal with.

The sensitization in psychosocial support has evoked a change in educators' perceptions of students' needs and the reasons for their behaviors. Times of crises may spur educators to want to be emotionally available and supportive for their students. These findings support the study from Khansa and Bahous (2021), challenging the teachers' role in current teaching practices. Also in Liberia, another post-conflict setting, the perceived traditional agency of teachers has changed towards more of a peacebuilding, counseling position (Adebayo, 2019). The teachers' role had been to deliver the curriculum and the content of the lessons, focusing on the lecture-based instruction rather than on the students and their needs. The study from Du et al. (2020) showed both an emphasis on knowledge transfer and a lack of experience with active student learning were observed among their participants, the teachers reported willingness to expand their knowledge and become more confident in such methods. This observation has been confirmed by interviews with the educators in this study, showing how the methods and concepts learned in the PSS training have helped teachers and counselors to a better understanding of their role and their teaching styles in the classroom.

Further, interviews have shown the lack of trauma-informed concepts and practices among teachers. Participants expressed the need to reduce this knowledge gap. Several studies proved the teachers' lack of concepts and knowledge about trauma and traumatic stress (e.g. Berger et al., 2021; Dhahir & Mohammed, 2020; Hobbs et al., 2019) As Alisic, Bus, Dulack, Pennings, and Splinter (2012) described in two studies on the experiences of teachers supporting children after traumatic

exposure, even formally trained teachers express lack of confidence and considerable insecurity about their role in supporting their students. The BLP program provides educational personnel with psychoeducation and tools to recognize and manage stress (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2021a; 2021b). The knowledge that teachers gain about stress and stress reactions helps them to support student recovery through implementation of the five principles established by Hobfoll et al. (2007). The educators' reflections in this study regarding external factors showed their awareness and understanding of the sources of student stress and their wish to provide support to improve student well-being.

Thus, increased stress levels and teachers' desire to be more emotionally present for students have created opportunities for educators to learn new concepts and tools that could contribute to their relationships with students and improve classroom well-being. We hold that PSS can provide educators with the concepts and tools for understanding the causes of heightened stress levels and for support their students in reducing these levels. As Schonfeld et al. (2015) argue professionals trained in PSS can foster coping strategies and monitor the child's development over time, especially when implemented at school. After the PSS training, our educators reported a change in their perceived needs: from managing the classroom, to understanding the children and helping them to regulate their stress. They understood the relevance of supporting their students, and expected this to lead to reduced stress levels and thereby a decrease in behavioral issues. These aspects will be used by the educators in their PSS sessions, as well as in their everyday teaching in formal school subjects, ensuring a successful learning process as suggested by Franklin and Harrington (2019). Moreover, cultural responsiveness from teachers and active engagement of students are likely to foster less disruptive behavior within the classroom (Gaias, Johnson, Bottiani, Debnam, & Bradshaw, 2019).

We would hold that sensitization through PSS has stimulated the educators' awareness of their own need and those of their students, helping to equip them to deal with disruptive classroom behaviors. Capacity building in PSS can be an efficient way to supply educators who lack official teacher training with the tools for managing disruptive classrooms in crisis settings. In their Guidance Note on Psychosocial Support, INEE (2018) recommended integrating PSS in schools, both for teachers' management of their own stresses and to provide activities to promote good classroom management. This can help teachers and counselors to be prepared to take care of their students and themselves during times of increased stress levels. In Lebanon, Khansa and Bahous (2021) found a change in teachers' perceptions of their students when they became more involved with them. Several studies have underscored the need for better formal training of teachers in Lebanon (e.g. Ghosn-Chelala, 2020; Karami-Akkary, 2019; Karkouti, Wolsey, Bekele, & Toprak, 2021). Further, Karami-Akkary (2019) has described teachers' challenges with outdated curricula and the traditional Arab school context. A direct link between teachers' professional development and teaching quality has been found by Karkouti et al. (2021), who emphasize the need for pedagogical knowledge and effective school leadership. However, it is arguable that more in-depth training of the educators could be beneficial for teaching and maintaining a sustained effect of the PSS intervention. In particular, untrained teachers might benefit from a deeper understanding of the psychological concepts that are underlying PSS activities. With the already existing lack of supervision of regular teaching activities in Lebanese schools (Ghamrawi et al., 2019), teachers might gain more confidence and abilities in their delivery of PSS activities if they were followed up by a skilled supervisor.

The educators in our study accorded high relevance to the program due to the authority coming from the ministry level. Teachers had reported restricted teaching methods and curricula that constrained them in their teaching practices. Thus, the relevance of a new, progressive program backed by the ministry can open new opportunities. Similar findings have been reported elsewhere as well. In Uganda, Malunda, Onen, Musaazi, and Oonyu (2016) highlighted the relevance of adequate supervision of teacher students to augment pedagogical

competencies. Thus, we hold that further collaboration between the authorities and the educators working on the ground is necessary to establish educational policies that give the freedom and resources to implement new teaching practices.

5.1. Strength and limitations of this study

This study has provided unique qualitative insights into the perceptions and experiences of teachers and counselors working in crisis-affected classrooms in Lebanon, and how PSS-training expanded their understanding of the consequences of stress and their students' needs. A further strength of this study is the inclusion of Lebanese as well as refugee students, as much recent research has focused on the experiences of students and teachers in Syria.

However, a few limitations should also be noted, such as the purposive sampling and the small sample size, which limit the generalizability of our results. The qualitative research design, the design of the study and the selection of participants presents limitations as regards evaluating the effects of the intervention. Due to school closures, study participants had little practical experience with implementing of PSS and BLP. Finally, this study has focused on educators and their experiences, not students and their perceptions.

6. Conclusions

This study has explored the experiences of teachers and psychosocial counselors working in crisis-affected classrooms in Lebanon, their perceptions of their students' psychosocial needs, and, after PSS training, their altered understanding of these needs. The study also explored teachers' motivation, preparedness and willingness to adapt their teaching style after being sensitized to psychosocial support.

After the basic training, the educators in this study demonstrated a partly superficial understanding of relevant key concepts of PSS. The educators would benefit from more follow-up to gain a wider understanding of their practice of school-based PSS. However, the majority of the educators were highly motivated and willing to adjust and adapt their teaching style towards integrating PSS in their teaching.

Interviews further showed that the basic training had nevertheless provided sensitization to PSS that seems to have led to a deeper understanding of stress, and reinforced educators in their goal of being emotionally supportive of their students. Study participants observed students' increased stress levels through behavioral problems and impaired school functioning, with the societal instability in Lebanon as an external factor affecting classroom management. Previous teaching styles and roles were deemed inadequate for dealing with increasingly disruptive classroom behavior. The PSS training provided methods and activities that were seen as new and different from regular teaching or counseling style. However, educators embraced the PSS perspective as a necessary supplement. Further, the sensitization in psychosocial support evoked a change in educators' perceptions of students' needs and the reasons for their behaviors. The evolving crisis in Lebanon and the PSS sensitization created a willingness among the educators to adapt their teaching and counseling style. Teachers reported a change in their teaching role: from strictly managing the classroom through disciplinary actions, towards teaching recovery techniques helping their students to regulate their stress. The PSS concepts and techniques aligned with their wish to connect with and support their students in their recovery process of increasing wellbeing and regain their impaired learning capacity.

After this study was completed, the situation in Lebanon deteriorated further. A humanitarian crisis emerged, due to the worsened economic crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the August 2020 Beirut Port explosion (see e.g. Abouzeid, Habib, Jabbour, Mokdad, & Nuwayhid, 2020; UNHCR, 2020b; United Nations, 2021). These factors led to continued school closures, and by March 2022 children in most public schools had been out of school for over two years. When schools finally reopened in late 2021, teachers in public schools were on strike due to economic

difficulties and unaffordable transportation costs. Previous studies in Lebanon had noted high levels of aggression, discipline referrals, and absenteeism among students affected by persistent stress (e.g. Chafouleas et al., 2019; Saklan & Erginer, 2017). In their multi-level case study, Bahou and Zakharia (2019) linked violent behaviors in Lebanese schools to higher rates of poverty. Economic instability can have tremendous impacts of the mental health and well-being of children (see Francis, DePriest, Wilson, & Gross, 2018; Hughes & Tucker, 2018). Students and teachers are increasingly affected by heightened levels of crisis and chronic stress (see e.g. Farran, 2021; Khamis, 2019).

6.1. Implications of this study

Given the intensified Lebanon crisis, systematic provision of school-based PSS seems indicated, both to help affected children to recover, and as a preventive measure. Much of the teaching force in Lebanon has completed little formal teacher training. A structured PSS-package that offers concepts for understanding stress/traumatic stress and how to regulate stress-reactions might serve as a much-needed response to the ongoing crisis, helping to improve conditions for school functioning. Incorporating trauma-informed concepts and abilities based on PSS in the formal teacher education may equip and prepare Lebanese teachers to manage crisis-affected classrooms. A provision of implementation support, in particular for educators without official teacher training, should entail follow-up to widen the basic understanding of school-based PSS.

More research is necessary to investigate the further implementation of PSS and the resulting changes in educators' perceptions. Their altered understandings should be monitored during the implementation process and how PSS and trauma-informed teaching is integrated in the adapted teaching and counseling style. It would be advantageous to include the experiences of children and parents, to provide a comprehensive picture of how school-based PSS is received in the Lebanese context.

7. Contributions of the co-authors to this research project

Steffi Schenzle: Conceptualization, methodology, validation, formal analysis, investigation, data curation, writing: original draft; review & editing, visualization. Jon-Håkon Schultz: Conceptualization, methodology, validation, resources, writing: original draft; review & editing, visualization, supervision, project administration and funding acquisition.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests: BLP has been developed in collaboration involving UiT, The Arctic University of Norway (UiT), and the Norwegian Refugee Counsil (NRC). The second author (Schultz, JH.) has led the development of BLP that underpins this study. However, BLP is distributed free of charge and is not subject to commercial use. Beyond this, the authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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