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By Tassilo Teppert

BETHLEHEM, State of Palestine, 24 March 2017 - Palestinian students living in Bethlehem are among many who suffer from violence in different aspects of their lives.

A 2014 UNICEF study revealed that more than 90 percent of children age 1-14 years living in the State of Palestine had experienced psychological aggression or physical punishment during the previous month.

Violence affects children’s physical and mental health in many ways, both in the short and long term. It impairs their ability to learn and to socialize, and it hinders their transition to adulthood, which can have numerous consequences later in life. However violence can be overcome. There are solutions which come through connecting and engaging with people to tackle the roots causes so that everyone can be committed and involved to prevent harm from happening, and to address it when it does.

“Promoting violence-free learning environments is very important to the Ministry and definitely one of our priorities going forward,” said Mohammad Hawash, Director General of Counselling and Special Education at the Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE).

Now Palestinian adolescents themselves are raising their voice and taking action to make ending violence against children a collective responsibility in their communities.



This week the students of Al Tamura and Al Rashidin Schools in Bethlehem presented the artwork and student-led initiatives they prepared to advocate against violence and promote violence-free learning environments to a delegation from the Government of Spain.

UNICEF and the MoEHE have been working hand in hand with students, teachers and parents at the two schools to implement the Non-Violence in School policy adopted by the Ministry in 2014. Thanks to generous funding from Spain, the two schools are part of 50 pilot schools in the West Bank and 40 in Gaza which are benefiting from strengthened school-based conflict resolution mechanisms. These were built through workshops for teachers and school counsellors, and awareness-raising sessions in students' communities.

At Al-Tamura Secondary Girls School, the project focused on the use of art and drama to capture the underlying reasons and manifestations of violence. To better avoid those challenges in the future, students, teachers and parents formed discussion groups to jointly explore new ways to better understand each other and promote violence-free schools.

"Since the UNICEF programme started, we have had a lot of positive dialogue between the teachers, our parents and us students. The initiative really helped bring all of us together and better understand how we can resolve our conflicts together without violence. Now, we think before we say bad words. Now, we know about our rights and we feel closer to our teachers and peers," says 16-year old Gaidah, a student.

Mothers and teachers also felt the positive impact of the initiative and pointed to increased recognition of the issue, not only at school but also at home.

"In our household it's always very busy, but now I prioritize making space for discussions with our children when there are problems. My husband and I sit down with the kids and we try to find solutions jointly. We have really been focusing on positively encouraging the children to do the rights things, and now our son is doing better at school," says one the mothers who participated in the initiative.

A few kilometres to the south-west of Bethlehem, students and teachers at Al-Rashidin Secondary Boys School in Al-Dawha also teamed up in groups and explored together the causes of violence in guided discussions. Focusing on verbal violence as an entry point, the adolescents developed leaflets, posters and videos portraying the negative impact of violence and used them to spread the message not only in the school but also in their community.

To strengthen conflict resolution within the school, students and teachers also established mechanisms to jointly discuss issues through initiatives such as breakfast gatherings between students and teachers, which are now taking place regularly. Tackling violence can only be done in a holistic manner – not only at school, but also in the broader environment children live in.

The project also promotes pro-social behaviour and positive discipline for young children. With Spanish support, UNICEF is currently targeting 51 kindergartens in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, training teachers and raising awareness among parents on non-violence.



“We address violence through a lifecycle approach and work on interventions that ensure children are protected from harm and learn conflict resolution and cooperation from an early age to the adolescent years,” said Maida Pasic, UNICEF State of Palestine Chief of Learning for Development.

The project is part of UNICEF’s efforts to ensure that Palestinian children no longer experience violence on a daily basis, but can feel safe at home, at school and in their communities.