

School based psychosocial work with children affected by terrorism and other violence: examples from a local organisation in North Ossetia, Russia

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This field report describes the activities of a local, nongovernmental organisation attempting to strengthen the system of psychosocial support available in schools in North Ossetia, Russia. This semi autonomous republic in the Russian Federation has been plagued by terrorism and the influx of internally displaced and refugee children. The activities described aim to address the mental health needs of the children, their families and caregivers, and foster healthy psychosocial development within the school system.

Keywords: Beslan, North Ossetia, school based interventions, teachers, terrorism

Background

Schools have an important function in the lives of children and their families. For children, schools can be a positive place where they can play and make friends, and experience academic achievements. However, a teacher's task is not only to fill their students' heads with knowledge, but also to prepare them to live self sufficiently within society, and to impart the principles of peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity. This becomes even more crucial for those children referred to as '*children in challenging circumstances*'. This is defined in Russian law as '*those children whose everyday life is affected by external circumstances and are unable to overcome the situation on their*

own or with their family's help' (Russian Federation, 2007). This includes children who fall into one, or more, of the following categories: do not have parents or are neglected by them, are disabled, have survived armed conflict(s), are refugee or displaced children, and/or victims of abuse. The school system in the Russian Federation is currently undergoing significant change; new governmental requirements to improve educational results, strengthening the professionalism of teachers, as well as changes in financing mechanisms. These changes impact teachers, and can create feelings of insecurity in relation to their livelihoods and future. Within this context, teachers may become irritated or experience discontent and, as a result, develop stress related health problems. Also under these circumstances, children can be impacted, as school can cause psychological distress if they do not feel safe and secure.

In North Ossetia, where the authors work, the effects of violence and terrorism accompany these developments. This negatively impacts the wellbeing of the children, the teachers, and the atmosphere in the school. This field report documents the experience of setting up a project to strengthen the psychosocial support system within schools, in order to address the mental health needs and healthy psychosocial development of the children and their caregivers.

North Ossetia

The Republic of North Ossetia–Alania¹ is an autonomous republic within the Russian Federation, with an estimated population of just over 700,000 (according to the 2010 census). As part of Russia, the people of North Ossetia have lived through the challenges of recent history and, as part of the northern Caucasus, it is also a region with a long history of armed conflict and terrorist activity. Additionally, the people in North Ossetia have been indirectly affected by the violent conflict in the neighbouring Republic of Chechnya, which led to a refugee crisis. In other neighbouring countries, it was also impacted by the armed conflict fought between Georgia on one side, and the unrecognised Republic of South Ossetia and Russia on the other side. As a direct result of the latter conflict, numerous refugees fled to North Ossetia, including many children. Teachers from schools nearby taught refugee children, on a volunteer basis, in the refugee camps.

However, extreme violence also struck North Ossetia directly; on 1 September 2004, a terrorist attack on a school in the town of Beslan drastically altered the peaceful life in this small Republic. During the attack more than 1200 people were taken hostage. Eventually, 334 people were killed, the majority of whom were children. Another 126 people were severely disabled, of whom 70 are still undergoing rehabilitation.

Despite safety measures, terrorist attacks have continued ever since. One particularly violent incident was the bombing of a market in the centre of the North Ossetia capital, Vladikavkaz, on 9 September 2010. This attack, which killed 16 people and injured 40, occurred next to a school campus. These tragic events, and others, have underscored the urgent need for local teachers to acquire psychosocial skills.

Many children and their caregivers have suffered loss of loved ones or been witness to violence, and therefore have also experienced destabilisation, displacement and ongoing insecurity. This exposure to traumatic experiences has had negative consequences, impacting the psychological and social wellbeing of these children, as well as their caregivers, including: destruction or weakening of social and family supporting structures, lasting fear and anxiety, grief, sadness, and hopelessness. Displacement, violence and insecurity causes destruction to the spheres of support and safety that surround children, including their families, communities and valued institutions, such as schools. It is therefore very important to strengthen the caregivers and structures that support and protect children throughout their growing years, into the future. While doing this, it is also important to build on the strengths of North Ossetia, such as a strong heritage of multiculturalism, respect for older generations, mutual helping and strong extended family networks.

The psychosocial project

As of 2005, the North Ossetian nongovernmental organisation (NGO) *‘Dostizhenia’* (Achievement) has been implementing an ongoing, large, school based psychosocial project for teachers and school psychologists. It is financially and technically supported by the Dutch NGO, War Trauma Foundation (WTF). *Dostizhenia* is a leading local NGO in North Ossetia, conducting various educational programmes for school children, and working in cooperation with the Teachers’ Training Institute of North Ossetia. After the terrorist attack in Beslan, many Russian and foreign NGOs arrived, and provided psychological assistance. However, few of these NGOs remain, although the need for assistance continues.

The school based programme for psychosocial work is still highly relevant due to the fact that all children aged 7–15 should attend school. Additionally, it strengthens the role of the school as one of the protective factors for psychosocial wellbeing and the development of children. The project aims to strengthen the capacity of teachers to provide psychosocial support within their work with children and parents.

A large part of the project is educational: workshops for teachers, school counsellors and psychologists led by international trainers; school based seminars for teachers and parents, organised by local trainers; and individual support sessions, conferences and round tables where aspects of psychosocial work with teachers, students and parents are discussed. The project is based on the teacher training methods and techniques of Anica Mikuš Kos, a child psychiatrist and international psychosocial trainer from Slovenia (Mikuš Kos, 2005).

Since the project was rolled out in the Republic, about 300 teachers from 63 schools and educational centres in North Ossetia have attended trainings on school based, psychosocial work. The project seminars include not only how to work with children affected by terrorist attacks, but also how to deal with children in other challenging circumstances. The teacher's role when working with such children is of vital importance, and as a result of the project, teachers have become more confident and empowered. Terrorist acts usually impact the whole family, and parents are not always aware of relevant psychological and educational techniques that can help protect their children. After the workshops and seminars, teacher should be able to identify children affected by severe life circumstances, and provide psychosocial support to both children and parents.

How teachers can help affected children

Children who were victims of the Beslan tragedy were very diverse: boys and girls, preschool, first graders and high school students. Those who survived were hurt in varying degrees, some had burns and physical injuries, and some did not. Almost all of them were injured psychologically. In the aftermath of the tragedy, they all received intensive medical, psychiatric and psychological help from health providers and humanitarian agencies. The vast majority of those affected no longer require medical help, but may still need additional psychological or psychosocial assistance. A large number of people, including the school children, were affected indirectly as a result of emotional ties to the victims (i.e. relatives, neighbours or classmates). This group also often needs psychosocial support. Also, in the case of children, even listening to the terrorist attack announcements and updates on radio or television can cause an intensive emotional response, even if they live far away from the site of the tragedy. Many other residents of Ossetia, who witnessed the tragedy and empathised with the victims, also require support, because they were very frightened. The Beslan tragedy also seriously impacted teachers in all other Ossetia schools. While they had to provide psychosocial help to children and their parents, many felt unable to do so and, in fact, frequently were in need of support themselves.

It is therefore important that teachers are able to identify students who need help. Other adults, such as school psychologists, social workers and parents, can also be helpful in drawing attention to children who need psychosocial assistance. However, quite often a school does not have school counsellors nor psychologists, and when they do, these professionals often need additional

skills to better support children in the aftermath of terrorism and violence. Moreover, parents do not often have sufficient psychological and educational competence, and may deny a problem exists. Teachers also often felt they had no one else to rely on. Hence, the competences of teachers to provide psychosocial help and support each other needs be strengthened. During the project's seminars, teachers shared experiences of the reactions they observed in children affected by terrorist attacks. Many teachers noticed that the children often exhibited a lot of fear, of being unprotected, or for new attacks. They also presented with feelings of helplessness, rage toward the terrorists and their compatriots, and an increased sensitivity to sudden sounds like alarms, flying planes or loud noises.

While discussing real examples of psychological trauma in children, teachers learned that the symptoms often depend on age. Lev Vygotsky (1896 – 1934), a renowned Soviet psychologist, formulated that one should only demand of children what they

are capable of, at that particular age, and within given opportunities. Older children have a different 'zone of proximal developments' (the range of tasks a child can complete), than younger ones. Stress may negatively affect this development in children (Gamezo, Petrova, & Orlova, 2003).

Usually, younger school children are inclined to worry about their own safety and need to be physically close to their parents. Older children also get scared and are worried, but more often show signs of disorganisation, or indifference. How long traumatic events continue to affect a child's life depends on various factors. Some children recover surprisingly quickly after tragic events, with their emotional and psychosocial wellbeing remaining stable. This, however, does not imply that they were not affected. Traumatic events, such as terrorist attacks, can leave life long traces and cause serious psychological problems. Box 1 shows some of recommendations given to teachers on how to work with traumatised students.

Box 1: Recommendations for teachers working with traumatised children

- Create a safe environment for children, with no physical or emotional violence.
- Make diagnostic observations of children through activities, such as writing a story, drawing, exercises and playing games. These activities will encourage children to freely express their emotions and pain.
- Strengthen the trust in children and teenagers that they are in a safe environment.
- Avoid discussing traumatic experiences with younger children.
- Provide information about the event, and how to cope, to older children.
- Pay attention to children's fears, in particular to the fear of death.
- Let children and teens freely express their emotions.
- Be prepared for children to be somewhat absent-minded and/or irritated.
- Encourage children to continue participating in social activities, sports or games.
- Provide soothing activities, like reading aloud to younger children or listening to music with teenagers.

Source: Khusein & Kholcomb (1997)

Collaboration between teachers and parents

In order to succeed in educating children, teachers should work with both children and their parents. This is especially important when dealing with psychologically traumatised children. The teacher should remain in ongoing contact with parents, provide them with psychosocial help if needed, and assist in building relations with their child. Some schools have a well established process of psycho educational support for parents. At times of crisis, children may ask a lot of questions and may process information in their own ways, sometimes wrongly. This is why parents and teachers should ensure that children understand events and situations correctly. Therefore, while children should receive a lot of information, at the same time, they should not be overwhelmed by it. Parents need to know when to seek professional help, for example when their child is crying for a long period of time, has long and recurring bouts of anger, demonstrates drastic changes in behaviour, loses interest in friends or classes that he/she used to like, develops sleep problems, such as nightmares or loses interest in life.

In our work in North Ossetia, we have learned that it works best when a team, consisting of a senior teacher, a psychologist, a social worker, and someone from the school management, jointly develops a programme to work with affected and vulnerable families. These activities entail all forms of work with the family and the child, including specifications of who is doing what, and what are the expected results. Activities can include; individual work with a child, attending classes with the child in order to collect insights, monitoring out-of-school activities and encourage parents to attend classes. It can also include organising summer camps for children and teenagers, and helping them to find part-time jobs, if needed.

Some concrete examples of psychosocial help given to children in challenging circumstances, caused by armed conflicts, are given in the case studies below.

Case description 1: from a teacher participating in the project

September 2010. It was one of those usual warm days in Vladikavkaz. All of a sudden, the awful sound of an explosion cut through the air, and ended the calm routine of school hours. The clock fell off the wall, freezing at that dreadful moment.

A bomber, right in front of the main entrance to the market, blew up a car. The terrorists planned to blow it up in the street in front of the school, near the market. It was the fourth explosion at the market, with the first one, back in 1999, killing 52 people. All these explosions occurred very close to the school building. Luckily, all four times our school remained untouched, if you don't count the broken windows caused by the last explosion. Curtains on the windows blocked the broken glass. God saved the children.

We, as teachers, tried to control our emotions, as we understood that the children were seeking help and rescue in our eyes. We gathered everyone in the backyard of the school. We had no idea what would follow, having the hostage taking in Beslan in our minds. We prevented the children from seeing the injured people and dead bodies being carried away from the market.

One frantic mother was trying to get through the crowd of children to reach her own child, and stepped on another child, who fell on the ground. The panicked mother just kept screaming out her child's name. Until that moment, the children had remained calm, but now they started to cry. Children started desperately looking for their mothers. A 10-year-old boy held tight to his teacher, saying that he did not want to die because he was too young. . . How horrible it is to hear such words said by children.

The mass panic was stopped quite quickly. Children calmed down, and were taken home by their parents. It was a relief to see how the students helped each

other; older children were helping younger ones to leave the building, brothers and sisters were looking for each other in the crowd, and those who met would stay together. . . Children became aware that adults would always be there for them. It was only in the evening, after the parents took all the students home, that teachers could let their emotions go and hug their own children, who also went to that school. . .

And on the next day. . . it was a new day. And many more followed. Our rooms are again full of dear children, who have already learnt so much. In the next weeks, we as teachers organised special sessions with parents to discuss how to react during terrorist attacks, and how to deal with the children affected by it. The aim of the meetings was to provide psychological assistance and to give them instructions on how to be more attentive to their frightened children, and more aware of everything and everyone around them.

Case description 2: from a teacher participating in the project and in August 2008 assisted South Ossetia refugees

In an improvised camp in the North Ossetia Alagirsky region, refugees from South Ossetia were allocated in a hurry. We, as the Ossetian helpers, worked together with colleagues from Moscow and St. Petersburg. We would move around the camp from time to time, in order to identify and prevent (signs of) panic and hysteria in the refugees. One of my colleagues from Moscow mentioned that in one tent was a woman with children who looked very scared, and did not make any contact. They kept a distance from everyone, and when someone approached their tent, they would stop talking.

When I visited their tent I observed the woman, with her children who sat in the corner. I noticed that the children were softly speaking Georgian to each other. Knowing several languages really helped me in that situation. I approached them and starting speaking in Georgian. It turned out that during the registration, an Ossetian mother from the same group had overheard them speaking Georgian and had screamed out; "these bastards follow us even here!"

and had threatened them. Ever since, they were afraid to leave the tent, even to get food! After some time speaking in their native language, they became more responsive. I took the children and we went to pick up some toys, gifts and clothing. We also could make phone contact with the eldest son of the family, who had remained in South Ossetia, and about whom they were all very worried.

These practical measures helped to make the family feel more safe and connected. We also talked to the Ossetian woman who had shouted at the family. Later on, both women with their children had meals at the same table, and got on well with each other.

Conclusion

In any country there can be children in a class who have witnessed or experienced violent events. Such children need special attention. Teachers working closely with children and families give them the opportunity to identify those in distress, and provide basic psychological and social aid. However, only an emotionally and psychologically stable teacher can provide this assistance. One of the tasks of our project is to prepare teachers. When we evaluated the activities of the project, teachers were very positive and told us that they were better able to understand what the affected children go through, and felt empowered to assist such children. Moreover, several teachers told us that they like their jobs better, and felt more positive about them.

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¹ For this article, the term 'North Ossetia' actually refers to the autonomous republic known formally as: 'The Republic of North Ossetia–Alania'.

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