

**In the Eye of the Storm:
Human Resource Practices for Educators in Times of Crisis**

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Abstract

Unfortunately, children are displaced in numerous places globally, and others live in conflict zones. These children deserve a good education, particularly because education is a key aspect of their social and emotional rehabilitation. However, good educators are required for a reliable educational system in crises. This article explores the qualities of these educators and the human resource (HR) aspects of recruiting, screening, training, and retaining them in the challenging circumstances of crises. Although research exists on refugee education, less is known about the HR aspects of the educators involved in teaching these students. This article provides practical recommendations based on the writer's role in recruiting dozens of educators after the October War broke out in Israel in 2023. It also includes insights from qualitative research interviewing over 60 educators in evacuation centers across Israel. These insights can serve community leaders and educators in times of crisis and routine. As the article's title implies, emergencies are chaotic, and many things happen simultaneously. A vital aspect of dealing with a metaphorical storm is determining the people to help deal with it, and learning how to choose them, train them, and help them thrive.

Keywords: refugee and IDP education, teacher recruitment, teacher retention, training, wartime education

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Background

On Saturday morning, October 7, 2023, Hamas terrorists invaded bases and civilian localities in the Gaza perimeter region and fired thousands of missiles at Israel. The State of Israel declared the Swords of Iron War against the Hamas terrorist organization in response to the surprise attack¹. As a result, over 60,000 people from the south and north of Israel were displaced from their homes after facing horrific trauma and loss. In American terms, that would be the equivalent of 2.2 million people. Most were evacuated to hotels that had overnight become refugee centers. The term many people use to describe these first weeks is “chaos”—chaos combined with uncertainty, fear, and grief. The hotels did everything they could to serve as a home for those communities for the next few months. However, it quickly became apparent that an educational system—a reliable setting offering children stability, a sense of belonging, and social and emotional support—must be in place for those from the affected communities to start healing from the trauma.

The first people who arrived at the hotels were nonformal educators who worked with or had belonged to youth movements. They were not only the first to show up when other citizens stayed securely home; they also created temporary educational settings. Some, aged 18 and members of gap-year² programs, transformed their original missions and moved into the areas of the displaced communities. Others held leadership roles as employees of youth movements or were retired educators seeking a way to help. All contributed their educational expertise where it was most needed.

These educators improvised based on the needs of the communities in the hotels and gave any aid necessary, such as organizing donations or helping older adults. Later, they set up formal activities for the children to distract them and give their parents time to understand their situation. Soon, these educators’ temporary efforts became formal, with scheduled times and locations, suitable equipment, and a solid team of educators serving hundreds of children and families. This paper discusses the educators who left their homes to lead an educational system for traumatized communities in hotel spaces that were not meant to serve as classrooms. It offers practical advice for finding and supporting these educators in their challenging and essential work.

¹ On that day, over 1,300 people were brutally killed, nearly 5,000 were injured, and more than 240 individuals—including infants, children, the elderly, women, and men—were kidnapped. In American terms, that would be equivalent to killing nearly 40,000 people—13 times more than the number of Al Qaeda victims on 9/11.

² In Israel, a gap year between high school and mandatory military service focuses on leadership training, volunteer work, and preparatory programs.

Literature Review

Research about educating refugees and internally displaced people in war zones and hosting communities has recently grown (Billy & Hinz, 2023; Cerna, 2019; Cohan & Honigsfeld, 2017; Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2017; Kovinthan, 2016). Researching this topic is essential because "most countries [are] not sufficiently prepared to accept and host such large numbers of asylum seekers and refugees who came within a short time period" (Cerna, 2019, p. 7). The existing research deals with other topics, such as providing access to quality education, educational policy, and practices to promote inclusion (Barber, 2021; Cerna, 2019); refugee students' experiences, such as post-traumatic stress, language barriers, cultural differences (Hamilton & Moore, 2004), and emotional difficulties; and educators' knowledge, skills, attitudes, and critical perspectives (Fearnley, 2022; Kovinthan, 2016).

When classroom space, teaching materials, and furniture are in short supply in refugee and emergency contexts, teachers are often the only resource available to students (Ring & West, 2015). Despite a growing body of research devoted to students, less research has been conducted on educators in temporary refugee or displaced persons settings. As Ring and West (2015) stated, "While teacher recruitment, selection, and deployment have been studied rigorously in developed nations—and to a slightly lesser extent in developing nations—there is a lack of literature on this subject in refugee or emergency contexts" (p. 109). A UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) report (2014) emphasized the importance of human resource (HR) aspects: "Teachers with clear roles and responsibilities, training and supportive supervision can ensure that schools are safe, protective spaces where children can regain a sense of normalcy following the trauma of displacement" (p. 1). That document discusses four steps for finding teachers to help refugees: assess the needs, recruit, train, and motivate. I found all four to be significant to the October War experience in Israel and address them in the following sections.

Research Methods

During the first 10 weeks after the October War broke out in Israel, I volunteered in the Dead Sea area. Using my educational experience and HR background, I helped recruit preschool educators for programs established by an organization called Dror Education Systems. Soon after, I became part of a qualitative research group that interviewed 60 educators in displacement centers all over Israel. We interviewed 22 young volunteers (18-24 years old), 24 supervisors (25-35 years old), and 14 senior managers (36–45 years old), with an equal number of male and female participants in each group. Participants were asked a series of questions to better understand their backgrounds and challenges, including: (a) Can you tell me about your educational background? (b) Where were you working when the conflict started? (c) How did you come to work with displaced communities? (d) What is challenging about your work? (e) What helps you succeed in these conditions? and (f) What recommendations would you make for those creating

educational systems during crises? The primary objective of this research was to document the experiences of educators during periods of conflict and to acquire knowledge and insights that can inform and address future needs. The interviews were transcribed and thematically analyzed. This paper integrates my experiences and insights from that qualitative research.

Findings and Recommendations

What kinds of educators should those establishing educational systems in crisis situations seek to recruit? How should they reach out to them and train them? Finally, what factors help these educators keep pace with the demanding but meaningful task and prompt them to stay?

Profiles of Educators in Crises

"We are like a mosaic of humans." (G, An early childhood educator)

Take a moment to think of what you would look for when seeking educators for a community traumatized during the war and evacuated to a hotel. You may have an image in mind, an educator you had met and who was the right person at the right time. First, even though educators could have qualities and characteristics that can help them succeed in this challenging and complex role, there is no such thing as the "perfect" or even "best" qualities. The reality in the hotels was chaotic. We needed educators who could embrace uncertainty and cope well with constant changes, educators who were flexible and adaptive. In addition, we were looking for self-efficacy—educators who felt up to the task. This feeling of competence sometimes (but not necessarily) comes from years of experience, especially in diverse formal and informal settings in Israel and abroad.

Given that the war in Israel was unique and affected everyone in the country directly or indirectly, we sought out educators who were emotionally and physically available to work and were resilient enough to cope with and be exposed to communities in great distress. The recruited educators' ages ranged from 21 to 65; what we expected from all of them—and what appeared essential—was their willingness to learn. Older educators saw that this situation differed in many ways from any in their years of experience, and younger educators felt competent and motivated enough to face the challenge. All realized that they would need to learn a great deal to address their students' needs. The last requirement was being available for at least 5 weeks. At that time, no one knew how long the situation would last, but we wanted stability and required a full-time commitment to relocate to the Dead Sea.

Reaching Out

Screening

"Everything is very fast compared to the routine, where there is a long process" (S, A team leader)

In peacetime, educational systems typically recruit using a long and well-structured process with a clear definition of the needs and a written description of the role. The recruitment process is usually multistep; it includes screening CVs, often a phone interview followed by a face-to-face interview with one or more people, or a group screening process. It usually entails some observation at the school or a trial lesson and recommendations. All of these steps are a luxury in times of crisis.

In our case, the primary screening tool was a phone call. Video calls using platforms such as Zoom are helpful but often impossible to coordinate due to the urgency and lack of time. In addition, one can learn a great deal through a phone interview. Interviews are a communication mode consisting of an exchange of data through questions regarding three times: past, present, and future (Table 1). For that exchange, it is vital that the interviewer be connected to the field, know what traits are needed from potential candidates, and provide accurate information to the candidates.

Table 1

Suggested Interview Questions: Past, Present, and Future

Questions about the past	Questions about the present	Questions about the future
Can you describe your educational background and previous experiences?	What will help you do this now? What do you need to succeed?	Where do you see yourself next?
Could you share a specific teaching experience or accomplishment from your past that you found particularly meaningful? Formal or informal?	What things will make it difficult to take on this role?	Do you have any specific plans for the upcoming months?
Name a place you enjoyed working in, and what did you like there?	What other commitments (personal and professional) do you currently have?	In what areas do you want to improve?

Start with the past; it is an excellent way to get to know someone. People are confident when discussing things they have done, so this can be a warm-up and help create rapport. Sample questions regarding the past include, "What experience do you have in education? What roles and where?" Educators with 20 years of experience might discuss their skills and competencies. At the same time, young educators talking about their work in summer camps abroad could indicate their ability to face uncertainty and adjust quickly. The past can be a strong indicator of potential performance in a crisis.

Next came one or two short questions about the future. They indicate the applicants' commitment, motivation, and future aspirations—especially in a crisis. In our recruiting process, checking future availability proved critical. At the start of the war, everyone wanted to help, and everything was closed, so people were available. However, in the following weeks, when most areas in the country returned to more normal operations, employees and students could not commit as they had expected. In addition, it is perfectly acceptable for people to see working with refugees or in temporary educational settings as a professional growth opportunity.

Questions regarding the present were also critical because the war affected everyone throughout Israel. For example, I interviewed someone who was experienced and might have been a good candidate. However, the army reserve called up her son. She was apprehensive about him and wanted to help care for his children. Therefore, she was physically and emotionally unavailable to work as an educator.

Sometimes, the interviewers still felt undecided about a possible candidate even after having spent time with them. To help them make their decisions, I suggested three techniques for obtaining more information, which I call a "Deep Dive," "Exploring Examples," and "Reciprocal Queries." A "Deep Dive" involves asking questions to dig deeper when needed. Like a spiral, it seeks more information on issues that worried the interviewer. For instance, if I was concerned about the interviewee's ability to regulate their emotions, I asked what helped them in difficult emotional situations. Another excellent way to get more information is through "Exploring Examples," letting the interviewee tell a story about what happened to them. Such anecdotes are often easier for the interviewee to tell and help the interviewer better understand their abilities, values, and perceptions. To learn about their resilience, we can ask about moments in their educational background where they faced a challenge and succeeded in overcoming it.

Another opportunity to gain more information is through "Reciprocal Queries." When the interviewers finish asking their questions, they then allow the interviewees to ask questions. This phase helps engage the candidates. It allows them to assess the role and creates a more balanced interview. Importantly, the candidate's questions can reveal a great deal about how they understand the role and about their hesitations. For instance, I interviewed a young educator who kept asking whether she could come with her friend, saying she would cope better with a friend beside her. I could not offer her friend a role in the same hotel, and I understood that the candidate needed more support than we could provide. In this final part of a brief 5- to 10-minute interview, when the candidates are less preoccupied with

presenting themselves, interviewers can obtain quality information regarding the candidates' motivations, insecurities, or hesitations to join. Similarly, a candidate with no questions can raise a new question for the interviewer: Did they understand what the job entailed and had they thought about it seriously?

Given that interviews in emergency times are succinct, active listening becomes critical. Part of active listening is listening to both *what* is said and *how* it is said. Voice and tone can provide a great deal of information. I highly recommend documenting all information and impressions from the conversations; write everything down during and immediately after the interview. Having organized notes to refer to later helps when you might make several calls in a row.

An interview is a subjective evaluation method. In urgent times, it is a quick, single-phase process. Occasionally, I interviewed educators with little experience who sounded competent, available, and highly motivated—and it worked. Sometimes, I interviewed educators who seemed to be ideal, but something did not feel right. I encourage you to trust your instincts and gut feelings.

In sum, interviews can be well structured, even if conducted briefly over the phone. Be open to different educator profiles but trust your experience and instincts. Factors such as confidence, the willingness to learn, teamwork, love of children, and resilience are critical.

A critical piece of the human mosaic in our teams was educators we did not need to contact or convince to relocate to the Dead Sea—because they were already part of the evacuated communities.

Educators among Community Members

"There is no distance; I am here full-time. I am having fun. I feel that I give of myself above and beyond. It takes me away from the news" (N, experienced preschool educator evacuated from her home due to the war)

In all of the displaced communities, among many other professionals, there were educators. Some used to work in their own communities, and some had worked in other areas. We made an enormous effort to invite educators from the evacuated community to join the staff. Sometimes, it was too much because they had to care for themselves and for their families. In some cases, it was the right place for them: for feeling useful, for being busy, for taking back control, and for doing what they loved. We had local educators on all of the teams, and their participation was vital. They knew the community well and understood firsthand the experience of being evacuated. The community trusted them, and they contributed those perspectives to the rest of the team. I salute them.

Training and Support

"When you help others, you must see how you are also helping yourself in the sense that you bring yourself to others; you must remain complete, and it does not empty you. In this sense, the story is about constantly caring for the teams. Make sure they are physically and mentally okay and see that they have everything they need. Not to abandon them, being very much with them in this thing." (E, A team leader)

In peacetime, induction programs and access to professional development are essential to retain educators (See et al., 2020). In wartime, there is a relationship between preparation and retention. Recruiting unqualified teachers and those who lack proper training leads to higher teacher turnover (Ring & West, 2015). Most educators had yet to gain experience working in crises, and, even if they had, the needs and circumstances were different. In the following sections, I share insights regarding their initial and ongoing training and support.

Induction

Induction involves introducing a new hire to the organization, its culture, policies, and role. In crises, the induction phase might be a day or a few hours. Although a great deal of training is needed, there can be too much training in the first days—in this case, more is not necessarily better. As one of the psychologists on our team advised me, "We should be careful not to intimidate new team members by presenting too many aspects of working with trauma. Avoid making them feel that they lack the proper knowledge or skills to work with kids in trauma."

Like trees in a storm, to ensure that they do not break, they must be flexible to move with the winds, and their roots must be grounded. Accordingly, the goal of the first training session was to give the new educators some confidence. We did so by helping them acknowledge their roots: what they had in their toolboxes, what they knew, and what they knew how to do well. The induction phase also included a segment indicating how vital the job they came to do was.

On-the-Job Training

"It's been a month, and it feels like half a year" (R, A preschool educator)

In the beginning, team meetings and training occurred at the end of each school day. They included processing, problem-solving, and communal support. There was no planned syllabus; instead, the team leaders listened carefully and planned a day or two according to the emerging needs. Training was held using outside resources, such as professionals specializing in trauma, and the internal resources of the team members. For instance, one educator was also a certified parenting counselor. She quickly became a resource for other team members to consult with when communicating with parents.

Being an educator in wartime and for refugees is challenging, and the working conditions are demanding. As such, the teachers need a great deal of training and support. As one team leader said, "This is a marathon, not a sprint." Accordingly, as we moved from the emergency phase toward stability, the training sessions and team meetings became more regular, allowing the educators and team leaders more crucial free time.

In addition to reminding the educators of their roots and providing confidence when they felt uncertain, we emphasized their sense of autonomy and flexibility. We wanted to allow the team members to solve problems, initiate, and expand what they were doing based on what would be needed (continuing the metaphor, to bend with the storm winds). For example, one educator had a background in agriculture as therapy, working with plants and soil in nature to heal. We leveraged what she knew, arranging an area with planters for her to practice with the children.

Another form of flexibility was in roles. One educator, who was also an artist, used her skills to work one-on-one with children outside the group activity to decorate the improvised classroom. For her, it was a place to thrive, and it benefited the children and the space. In general, the educational teams had a relatively flat hierarchy that allowed flexible roles according to abilities and needs.

Importance of a Team

"There is supposed to be a team night once a week, but we sit down every night, so every night is a team night. We try to stick to it and not lose each other; it's very important. You can't get through it, not alone. I wonder if I could have gone through it without my fellow team members" (K, A preschool team leader)

Another emphasis was on forming a team. We devoted time for the team members to get to know each other, learn each other's strengths, and create trust. Team meetings were always conducted sitting in a circle, encouraging the mutual sharing of stories and experiences from the day, sharing challenges, and

finding solutions together. Later, it included outdoor activities and workshops to foster personal connections and create a group that could learn and develop together and serve as a support. The educators mentioned the sense of belonging to a team as a source of resilience in this complex role. If summed up in one principle, it would be to treat the educators as though they were your class: Take care of them individually and as a group.

Well-Being

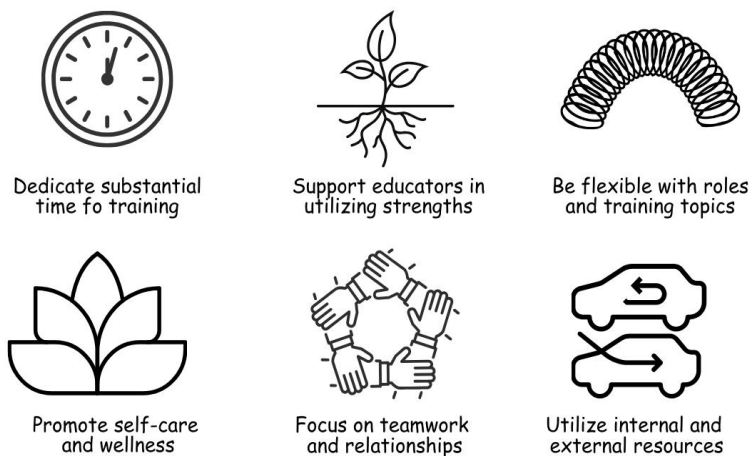
"We are all injured, even those who were not directly injured" (T, A preschool educator)

Working in education is always demanding; working with traumatized refugees in a community is even more demanding. It can cause educators to quit (See et al., 2020). Here are a few recommendations to ensure the educators' well-being. First, when possible, have an administrative team that can handle logistics, such as communicating with the hotel and community leaders or obtaining supplies. The educators should focus their attention and energy on the children and family needs.

Work during emergencies, especially in refugee camps, is intense. It often leads to a feeling of never-ending tasks and a lack of distinction between the personal and the professional. Encouraging educators to take breaks and care for basic needs such as eating and sleeping is crucial. After stabilizing the educational settings in the October War, we emphasized free time. We also created activities such as humor workshops, nature hikes, and arts workshops to allow mental relaxation. A summary of the insights and recommendations related to training and support is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Training and support for educators in times of a storm



Purpose: Having a Meaningful Experience

"We were treated here like oxygen for breathing. Really, I'm walking around here in the lobby as if I don't remember the last time I walked around, and I felt like it was so, so . . . significant" (R, a young educator)

After we recruited and trained the educators and made the educational settings work, our main challenge was to help these educators stay. In any setting, especially in communities that have gone through trauma, stability is very important. Children and their parents must meet the same educators at the same time in the same place every day. Most of the educators stayed for longer than they had committed to, due mainly to their sense of being involved in a meaningful task and having a purpose. One educator told me:

This is something I will be able to tell my children and grandchildren about in the future. During this war, I helped in hotels with these children and was there for them. I helped them and did activities for them, which was a meaningful experience. It's one of the most significant things I have had the chance to do.

Satisfaction also came from the children and parents, who were thankful for this educational opportunity during a time of crisis. Thus, in addition to the extensive training and support the teachers received, their feelings of satisfaction and sense of being involved in a meaningful activity played a major role in their decisions to stay.

Summary

"We know very little about how to effectively [re]build a teaching corps in emergency settings" (Ring & West, 2015, p. 109).

This paper aims to contribute to the growing HR knowledge and practices for those who choose, lead, and train educators in emergency settings. The findings highlight that, even during crises, careful attention must be given to all HR aspects, including outreach, screening, and training, with unique considerations required for working with displaced communities at every stage. Educators are the heart of any educational setting, especially in a storm. Seek educators who have worked in nonformal settings and are experienced with uncertainty and changes who are resilient, competent, motivated, and feel this is the right place for them. Seek educators who work well in a group and are willing to teach and support others. Pursue educators who are eager to learn and develop skills for working with trauma. When forming a team, allow for flexibility, encourage autonomy, and provide as much administrative support as possible. Design

induction training at the beginning and create a culture of team meetings in a circle for learning, support, and wellness.

Choose the right people and persevere together until the storm passes.

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