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# COACHING-OBSERVING-REFLECTING-ENGAGING: AN INTERVENTION FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHER WELLBEING

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## ABSTRACT

*Support to improve teacher wellbeing is scarce in almost all contexts, but especially so in low- and middle-income settings in which teachers face both professional and personal challenges (Kirk and Winthrop 2007; Mendenhall, Gomez, and Varni 2018). In this field note, we discuss War Child's development of Coaching-Observing-Reflecting-Engaging (CORE) for Teachers, an intervention that focuses on improving teachers' wellbeing. CORE is grounded in acceptance and commitment therapy and in the social-emotional framework of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. It also draws from current research, including Jennings and Greenberg's (2009) prosocial classroom model. CORE aims to have a positive influence on classroom climate by providing teachers with the skills and knowledge they need to create an enabling, impactful, and safe learning environment for their students. In this field note, we outline the background on the development of the CORE intervention, including a literature review, the development of a theory of change, and field testing conducted in Chocó, Colombia. Having been field tested and adapted, CORE now is ready for further studies to determine its feasibility and effectiveness.*

## INTRODUCTION

Violence weakens education systems, which subsequently require restoration and investment in replacing or creating new infrastructure. Without competent and emotionally healthy teachers, implementing changes to an education system will be less effective and could limit children's opportunity to learn, thrive, and heal (Mendenhall, Gomez, and Varni 2018; Winthrop and Kirk 2005; Akresh and de Walque 2008). Increased attention is being paid to the human and economic costs of deprioritizing

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support for teachers' wellbeing and their social-emotional competencies (SECs), not only for the teachers but for the children in their classrooms (Wolf et al. 2015; Hoglund, Klingle, and Hosan 2015).

In this field note, we discuss the development, testing, and adaptation of Coaching-Observing-Reflecting-Engaging (CORE) for Teachers, an intervention that focuses on teacher wellbeing by helping teachers manage their emotions, reduce stress, identify self-care strategies, and build SECs. We detail the literature-informed background on teacher wellbeing, consultations with teachers, the outcome of a field test conducted in Chocó, Colombia, and the modifications we made to the intervention.

## **RATIONALE FOR AND DEVELOPMENT OF CORE**

Stress can have a significant impact on teachers' physical and mental wellbeing. When combined with familial and other external pressures, it can reduce teachers' cognitive and emotional capabilities. This is particularly prevalent among novice educators, as is evident in their attendance and attrition rates, pedagogy quality, and classroom environments. It also affects student outcomes and education systems overall (Falk et al. 2019). The SECs teachers develop are a key element in improving their wellbeing. Their ability to manage emotions and stress can result in a better classroom environment, positive social-emotional role modelling, and improved cognitive, social, and emotional support for their students (Sharp and Jennings 2016; Wolf et al. 2015; Jennings and Greenberg 2009). Teachers in crisis-affected contexts often face challenging environments that include poor resources, overcrowding, community breakdown, and traumatized children. Well-planned support for teachers' wellbeing is crucial to mitigate these issues and retain a healthy workforce that provides quality education.

While there is a growing body of evidence in high-income countries on the importance of support for teacher wellbeing (Hascher and Waber 2021), this has yet to be replicated to any extent in low- and middle-income countries, or in contexts affected by crisis and conflict. Many of the few teacher wellbeing interventions that have been evaluated in low- and middle-income countries were included as modules within a more expansive teacher professional development effort (D'Angelo, Mansour, and Walker 2021). War Child developed the CORE intervention to address the limitations of existing wellbeing initiatives, which often prioritize pedagogy over teacher wellbeing. This unique intervention is specifically tailored to address teacher wellbeing in contexts affected by conflict and crisis, and to ensure that teachers receive ongoing mentoring and support.

## BACKGROUND ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF CORE

Development of the CORE intervention was informed by current research, as noted above, and drew from best practices in teacher professional development (Burns and Lawrie 2015), wellbeing (Jennings et al. 2013), and coaching (Pas et al. 2015; Kraft, Blazar, and Hogan 2018). A recent analysis of the teacher wellbeing gap (D'Angelo et al. 2021) detailed the gaps in both quality interventions and in the research in this area. A number of key points were of particular relevance: the importance of teachers' involvement in their own growth and wellbeing, and the recognition that teachers do not exist in a vacuum and are part of their communities outside the school. The analysis emphasized the need for teacher wellbeing methodologies specifically tailored to address the needs of teachers, and for teacher coaching that is focused on enhancing teachers' self-efficacy and on enabling them to implement new ideas and skills independently.

CORE is informed by the theoretical underpinnings of acceptance and commitment therapy (Hayes et al. 2013) and the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning framework for social-emotional learning (Goleman 1994). Acceptance and commitment therapy promotes psychological flexibility through acceptance, mindfulness, commitment, and behavior-change strategies that enhance teachers' overall wellbeing. It focuses on living in the present moment, clarifying personal values, and taking committed action. Social-emotional learning can contribute to a safe and healthy school environment, one that has good student-teacher relationships, job satisfaction, and less teacher burnout (Jones and Kahn 2017). Acceptance and commitment therapy also helps teachers to lower stress, anxiety, and depression, to improve their cognitive and emotional functioning, and to identify their personal values, especially those related to being a teacher. By helping to improve teachers' SECs, the Collaborative's framework enables them to take committed action to create an enabling classroom climate.

CORE is designed to be delivered by nonspecialist coaches who are from the local intervention area, are qualified teachers, and have at least two years' teaching experience. The coaches are trained and supervised by War Child to provide teachers with full-time, intensive, in-school support. Coaching as an instructional and pedagogical practice has been proven to be effective in improving instruction quality and student academic outcomes in high-income countries (Kraft, Blazar, and Hogan 2018; Wehby et al. 2012), but evidence of its impact in crisis- and conflict-affected contexts is scarce.

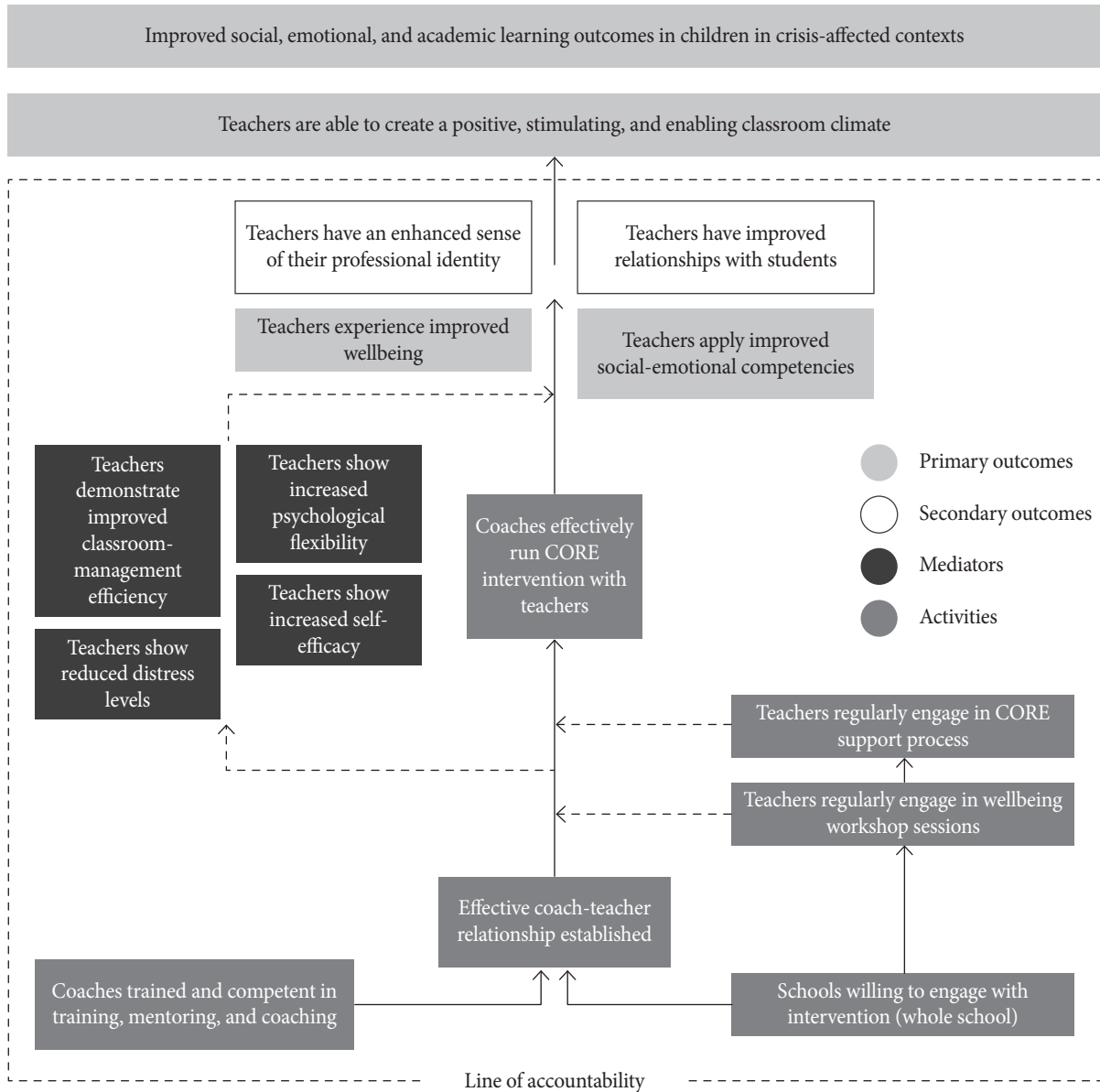
## METHODOLOGY DEVELOPMENT

### DEVELOPMENT OF THE THEORY OF CHANGE

Our theory of change was developed through the following process: (1) we conducted intervention development workshops with 20 teachers in Colombia, (2) we held two technical workshops with education and mental health specialists, and (3) we offered a workshop after the field test to review and incorporate feedback from the participants in Colombia.

Figure 1 shows War Child's theory of change for the CORE intervention. It shows the proposed relational pathway between the activities for teachers leading to impact, as outlined by the primary and secondary outcomes. While we theorize that there is a direct link between and effect on these outcomes if the teachers' activities are completed, we also propose the idea of four mediators—teachers show reduced levels of distress, teachers show increased self-efficacy, teachers show increased psychological flexibility, and teachers show increased classroom management efficacy. If shown to have changed teachers, these mediators will enhance the impact on the primary and secondary outcomes. While the purpose of this field note is to draw attention to these likely meaningful pathways, we also see the need to study these effects rigorously through future research.

Figure 1: War Child’s Theory of Change for CORE



DEVELOPMENT OF THE CORE INTERVENTION

The CORE intervention was developed over 12 months through a collaboration between education, mental health, and psychosocial support specialists from five countries—Colombia, Lebanon, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Uganda, and the Netherlands. Workshops exploring stress and wellbeing issues were held for 20 teachers in Chocó, Colombia. The participants provided feedback after the workshops to ensure the intervention’s technical quality and theoretical coherence, to identify what adaptations were needed to ensure that the intervention was contextually relevant, and to make implementation more feasible.

The initial CORE intervention consisted of six group-based wellbeing sessions of two hours each that focused on managing stress and self-care, dealing with difficult thoughts and feelings, and resolving conflicts. This was followed by the in-school CORE support cycle made up of six modules, each lasting two weeks. The modules focused on building SECs and on implementing stress-reduction and self-care strategies in the school environment. Teachers participated in an iterative process of learning, implementing SEC activities, attending sessions on personal reflection, and being observed by the coaches in their classroom.

## FIELD TEST OF CORE

A three-month field test was completed in Chocó, a town in western Colombia where War Child was already established in the schools. Chocó is an area of economic fragility, high internal displacement, and a population living with the consequences of more than 50 years of conflict between the Colombian government, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, and gangs centered around the drug trade. Teachers in Chocó are working with some of the most vulnerable communities in Colombia, operating within an education system that is highly divided economically and racially, and facing escalating threats of violence. War Child believed that CORE would be able to support the teachers to improve their emotional regulation, reduce stress, and create a conducive learning environment.

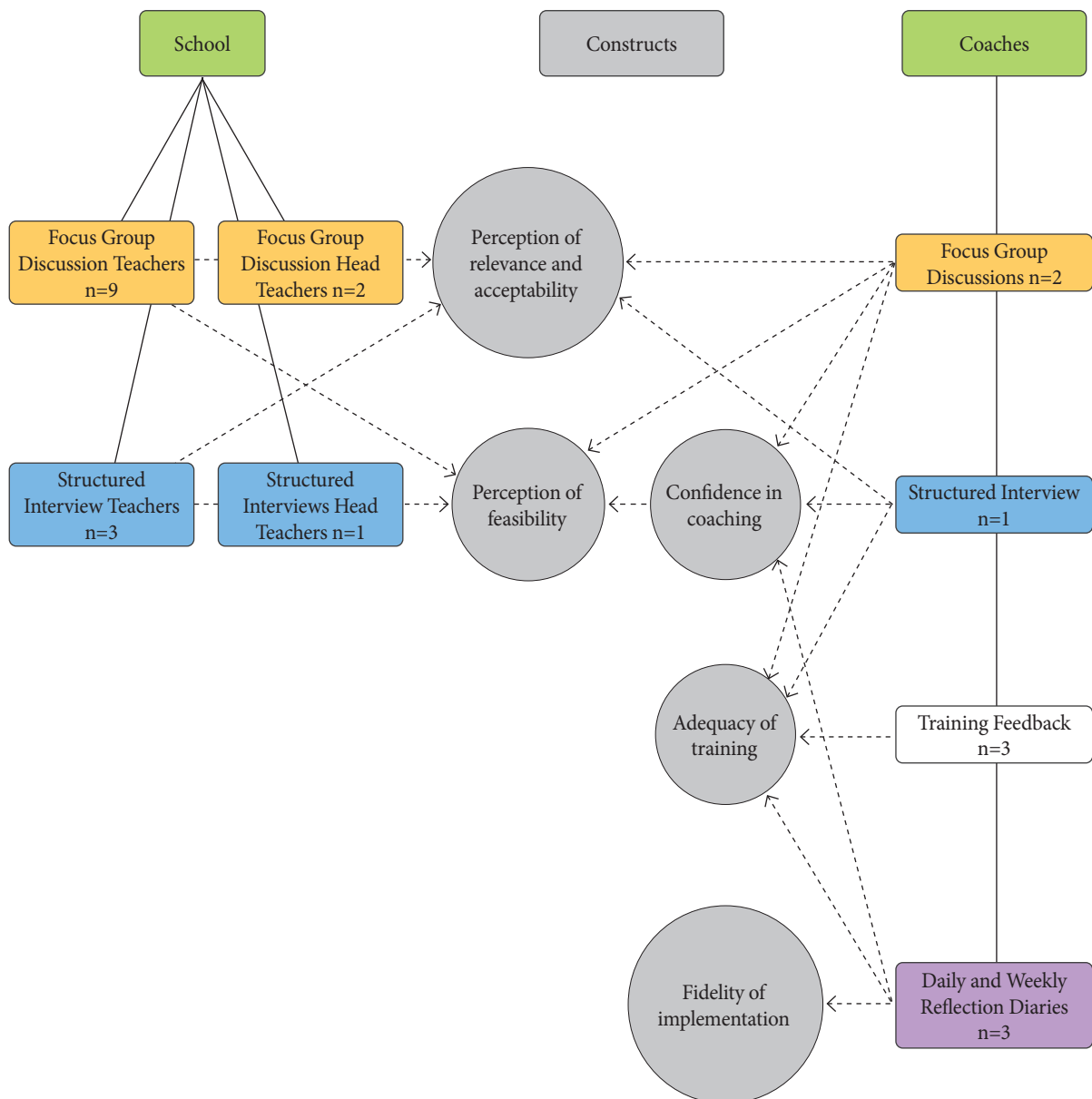
We implemented three elements—the coaches' training, the wellbeing workshop, and in-school modules—to gain a preliminary assessment of the relevance, acceptability, and feasibility of the methodology. We recruited three coaches, who were offered short-term contracts funded by War Child. They all had a teaching background and personal experience teaching in Chocó for at least two years, which gave them a unique understanding of the local teachers' stressors and wellbeing needs.

Phase one of the intervention was the three-week training for the coaches. This was followed by phase two, a monthlong in-school CORE support cycle that was held in three schools with 18 teachers. Each coach focused on two modules, which allowed us to test all six modules. During phase three, all the teachers from phase one engaged in the six-session wellbeing workshop, which was held over three weeks.

The coaches kept daily and weekly diaries to record their reflections and provide feedback on the process, their feelings of preparedness, and their engagement with the teachers. Their reflections were self-reported in Spanish and translated into English. The focus group discussions and interviews facilitated by the Colombian education specialist were recorded and translated verbatim from Spanish into English.

Figure 2 outlines the qualitative data collected and the constructs measured. We used the qualitative data collected from the teachers, head teachers, and coaches to assess the effectiveness of the training, the fidelity of the implementation, the coaches' confidence, the feasibility of the intervention, and the end users' perceptions of the methodology's relevance in meeting the professional and wellbeing needs of the teachers in Chocó.

Figure 2: Overview of Data Collected





Two independent coders used inductive and deductive thematic framework analysis (Gale et al. 2013) to analyze the information gathered during the field test. Once this was completed, specialists in education, mental health, and psychosocial support from five countries attended a three-day workshop, where they reviewed the methodology, content, and process of CORE, based on the data from the field test. This resulted in recommendations for adapting CORE.

## **RELEVANCE, ACCEPTABILITY, AND FEASIBILITY OF CORE**

### **RELEVANCE**

The teachers recognized the importance of emotional regulation, stress management, and positive self-care strategies. The wellbeing workshop provided a space for them to learn and practice these skills. The activities focused on the teachers' personal needs, rather than on how to use the activities with the children in their classrooms:

The [wellbeing] workshop has been really important, very beneficial, for me because I have been through some quite difficult times, and when I went to the workshop, when they chose me for the training, well I felt like one of the luckiest, because at this time I was going through quite a hard and difficult time, and it was like I was drowning, and it was like, I was ill from the stress, the exhaustion...Now I can say that I feel more relaxed and calmer. (teacher, female)

### **ACCEPTABILITY**

The field test for CORE was crucial in assessing the teachers' acceptance of the methodology, including content such as mindfulness, the language used, and working with the coaches. The teachers valued school support for everyday issues and to minimize their burdens. Only one out of 18 teachers dropped out, due to his reluctance to be coached by a female. Most of the teachers appreciated the coach-teacher relationship, decisionmaking, and identifying teachers' specific needs:

One of the most striking key factors is the teachers' attendance at the sessions. This demonstrates their interest in and commitment to the methodology, showing their openness to learning new techniques to achieve the proposed objectives in a personal and professional context. (coach, female)

## FEASIBILITY

The coaches' training used various methodologies that enhanced their learning and their engagement in the coach training itself. The coaches expressed their positive reactions to the training, intervention content, and methodology, and the coach trainers in turn reported that the coaches were fully engaged in the training sessions. There was some difficulty about the amount of material they needed to master, but the coaches displayed a generally high level of confidence in their ability to implement the CORE intervention. They admitted facing some challenges during the implementation, such as having issues with some teachers, managing their time, and implementing all the activities within the school day. However, they also reported being able to mitigate these issues and to get support for how to handle them during the fortnightly group supervision sessions:

Coming up against these situations that you hadn't expected to be in—that makes you feel something. It makes you nervous. For me it seems like a valid reaction, yeah, it's normal to face those challenges and in the end, it's gratifying to have succeeded, and I did, and it felt good.  
(coach, female)

The teachers' reactions to the field test were mixed; most of them completed the wellbeing workshop and school support cycle. Some faced logistical challenges, such as transportation costs and child care, while others wanted more time to study or found the amount of time needed to engage in CORE too onerous alongside their other teaching commitments. The lack of a staff room or other quiet area made it difficult for the teachers to practice the stress-reduction techniques in a private and safe space, as reflected in these comments: "For me, the only negative was the time" (teacher, female). "We couldn't do breathing exercises. This is another challenge. There is no area for the teachers to have peace and quiet" (teacher, female).

## REFINEMENT OF THE FINAL CORE MODEL AND CONTENT

We made four key adaptations to the CORE intervention, which were built on recommendations made in the post-field-test workshop:

1. Limiting the wellbeing workshop to five sessions to reduce the demand on the teachers
2. Improving the coaches' training in building relationships and working with teachers who do not wish to engage
3. Adding a module-specific training for the coaches before the start of each module to focus on content of the module and provide a space for group supervision and peer-support efforts
4. Discussing logistical issues, such as creating private spaces for wellbeing sessions

Figure 3: Overview of the Final CORE Model

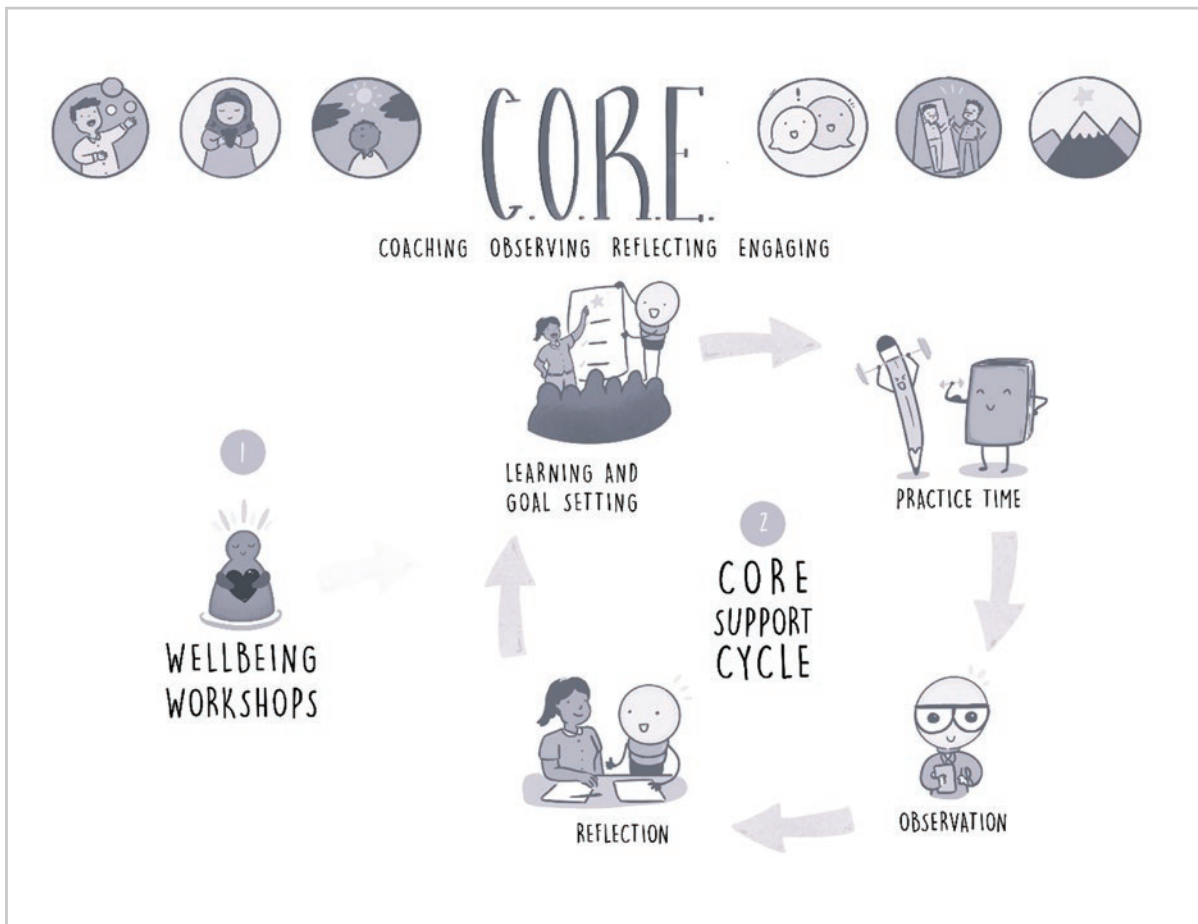


Figure 3 shows the final model of the CORE intervention, wherein all elements are delivered by the coaches. The intervention begins with a five-session wellbeing workshop that is focused on group-building, stress management, self-care, emotional regulation, and conflict resolution. The content is integrated into the iterative in-school CORE support cycle, which enables teachers to implement stress-reduction and self-care strategies in the classroom while also creating a positive learning environment to build their own and students' SECs. Table 1 describes the process by providing a detailed description of the CORE elements, from the group workshop to the modules implemented in the CORE support cycle. Although head teachers are not directly involved in the sessions, ongoing communication between them and the coaches is crucial for collaboration and sustainability.

*Table 1: Overview of the CORE Components*

Phase	Activity	Time
<b>Wellbeing Workshop</b>	Group workshop in which teachers explore stress-management and self-care strategies, and identify personal values	Five 2-hour sessions, outside of school hours
<b>CORE Support Cycle (repeats for each module)</b>	Module-specific learning and goal-setting session to enable teachers to understand social-emotional competencies and identify learning	1.5 hours every two weeks, outside of school hours
	Activity practice time	8 days, during school hours
	Coach observation session, in which coaches focus in particular on teachers' social-emotional competencies	Two observations, during school hours
	Reflection session, in which the coach and teachers reflect on the module	20-30 minutes at the end of each module, outside of school hours

Table 2 details the content of the six two-week modules implemented during the in-school CORE support cycle, and their links to SECs. The CORE intervention is seen as a catalyst for providing teachers with skills and knowledge that will enhance their SECs. Each module focuses on key attributes related to a particular competency.

Table 2: Overview of the CORE Modules and SECs

Module	Description	Social-Emotional Competencies and Key Attributes
<b>Module One: Stress Management and Positive Decisionmaking</b>	Focus on different types of stress and burnout, and the impact on the teachers, their practice, and interactions in the school	<p><b>Self-Awareness:</b> Successfully regulate thoughts and behaviors in different situations</p> <p><b>Self-Management:</b> Recognize strengths and limitations, situational demands, and opportunities, and use problem-solving to identify and use stress-management strategies</p> <p><b>Responsible Decisionmaking:</b> Evaluating the consequences of actions, achieve goals and aspirations</p>
<b>Module Two: Self-Care and Respectful Engagement</b>	Focus on self-care strategies to prevent and address stress and burnout, and on building relationships	<p><b>Self-Awareness:</b> Take initiative, show concern for the feelings of others</p> <p><b>Social-Awareness:</b> Seek or offer support and help when needed, problem-solving</p>
<b>Module Three: Emotional Management and Improved Self-Confidence</b>	Manage emotions more effectively by promoting a positive emotional environment in the classroom	<p><b>Social Awareness:</b> Linking feelings, values, and thoughts</p> <p><b>Self-Management:</b> Manage emotions, build a sense of confidence, reflect on role in promoting personal, family, and school wellbeing</p>
<b>Module Four: Conflict Resolution and Relationship-Building</b>	Address conflicts, engage positively with staff and classroom children, and foster respectful interactions	<p><b>Social-Awareness:</b> Identify and understand one's own values, how they influence behavior</p> <p><b>Relationship Skills:</b> Establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships, demonstrate empathy and compassion</p>
<b>Module Five: Building Self-Belief and a Reflective Mindset</b>	Reflect on personal practice and values and their impact on the teachers, their classroom environment, and student/staff engagement	<p><b>Self-Awareness:</b> Link feelings, values, and thoughts, consider others' perspectives, sense of confidence</p> <p><b>Relationship Skills:</b> Examine prejudices and biases, cooperate with others, and work collaboratively</p>
<b>Module Six: Optimism, Motivation, and Goal-Setting</b>	Help teachers overcome fears and adapt their behavior based on the situation and their own value system	<p><b>Responsible Decisionmaking:</b> Communicate clearly, listen actively, cooperate, anticipate and evaluate the consequences of one's actions, achieve one's goals and aspirations</p>

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As this field note describes, CORE was developed through an iterative approach that incorporated valuable insights from multiple contexts and stakeholders. This included teachers who voiced their need for wellbeing support, especially support focused on their needs alone. During the focus group discussions, the teachers said they felt that many of the CORE elements addressed those needs, the coaches said they felt well-equipped to translate their training into effective practice in the schools, and both teachers and coaches said they felt their relationships were positive.

Our experience rolling out CORE in Chocó, Colombia, suggests that it has the potential to address the gap in wellbeing support for teachers in settings affected by crisis and conflict. Future evaluations of CORE can add to the evidence on its effectiveness and may inform the work of researchers in the field of implementation science who study teacher wellbeing. The teachers' positive response to the coaches' role in terms of both quality and relationships indicates the need to continue to invest substantially in training and support that increases the capacity of nonspecialist coaches to support the implementation of CORE. The field test and the reflections of the teachers who participated in CORE show how important it was that they were the primary focus of CORE and their wellbeing the main outcome. To promote children's improved learning and wellbeing outcomes, it is imperative to establish a robust foundation in schools and to foster an enabling classroom environment. This requires healthy teachers and a culture that normalizes the importance of teacher wellbeing. After being developed, field tested, and adapted, CORE now is ready for a feasibility study and effectiveness evaluation. Future testing will be needed to determine its effectiveness and make the necessary adjustments. The information gained through the field test primarily reflected the teachers', head teachers', and coaches' voices, opinions, emotions, and lived experience of taking part in some elements of CORE. The small sample size of the pilot test and the lack of representation of teachers, head teachers, and coaches in the adaptation workshop is seen to be a limitation in the final development of CORE. Future studies will address these issues by involving both teachers and school leaders in identifying the adaptations needed so they will be able to create school environments that promote contextually relevant teacher wellbeing.

In order to foster their personal and professional growth, teachers and coaches need support when they are implementing new strategies and navigating challenges. As War Child proceeds with testing and adapting the CORE intervention, it will be crucial to explore how to expand school leaders' roles while maintaining a personal approach, and how to protect confidentiality when addressing stress, self-care, and wellness issues. Issues surrounding the quality and sustainability of the teaching workforce, as well as the impact and scope of education in emergency programs, are relevant to education institutions, policymakers, governments, and donors. If proven

effective, CORE could be implemented in a multitude of education environments and diverse education systems. We believe that this makes CORE well-suited to provide centralized supervision and management in large-scale education systems. It is assumed that investing in teachers' wellbeing and SECs will have a positive effect on the quality of teaching and on teacher satisfaction, retention, and recruitment, and will ultimately enhance learning opportunities for vulnerable children.

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