

Every Child has a Right to Education

Haitham is a 16-year-old boy living in Tulkarm Camp in the West Bank. By all accounts he is an exceptionally bright child from a family that looks after its children's education. He was failing in school and had dropped out of eighth grade. His academic future would improve drastically following a chance encounter with an UNRWA Operations Support Officer (OSO), and a subsequent intervention.

The OSO convinced Haitham's family to have him attend an UNRWA remedial class and it was soon discovered this bright boy was illiterate. Following further testing by UNRWA's only learning disabilities specialist, Haitham was diagnosed with phonetic dyslexia.

Recognizing that this case may not be unique, the headmaster of Tulkarm Camp Boys' school (where up to 805 of the boys are described as weak or failing) agreed to have 25 of the weakest students tested for learning disabilities. The results were astounding. Out of 25 children, 13 were dyslexic and 12 had developmental asphasia. All 25 boys started treatment in UNRWA's Speech and Slow Learning Programme (SSLP) which began work in 2003 to identify children with learning disabilities through the local camp committees. After completing a two-month course, seven of the 13 dyslexic students were able to read at Grade 2 level and should soon be reading at the age-appropriate Grade 4 level if they continue.

Another group of 68 academically weak girls from Al Amari Camp Girls' School (West Bank) were also tested. Eighty-five % were found to have some form of previously undiagnosed learning disability which could be corrected through special education. Some 60 % of the children improved considerably after the first round of treatment and the remaining 40 % will be able to attend regular classes following a second round of treatment.

Specialists from UNRWA's SSLP suspect that

up to 20 % of students in UNRWA schools may suffer some form of learning disability and that the initial tests only identified what was sure to be the tip of the iceberg. Severe under-funding of the programme, however, limited the scope of the identification and treatment of the students.

Working in partnership with UNRWA for the short term, a Canadian NGO, HumanServe, has agreed to extend the programme to 13 camps in the West Bank for a period of one year, covering the cost of 13 additional staff members, thus providing 1900 treatment slots. Should further testing confirm that some 20 % of students have some form of special education needs of this sort, UNRWA's traditional remedial teaching programme may not suffice to address the problem and the SSLP should be integrated into regular programming of the Education Department through the General Fund.

Haitham himself had this to say about the change in his life: "Before I took the classes I couldn't read a word... If my mother asked me to go to the shops for her, it was as if I was lost in my own town. I couldn't read the signs and I always had to ask people for help. Now I'm independent, I can go by myself."

Haitham's good fortune to have had his disability diagnosed and addressed is almost accidental as it followed a chance encounter with an UNRWA staff member. His story is a clear indication of why UNRWA needs a policy on Special Education needs to ensure that every refugee child gets an education.

