

# Putting children in the picture

by Jason Hart

## How can children-focused research enhance understanding of the role and impact of educational provision in conflict and post-conflict settings?

Most research into education and conflict focuses on the school system rather than on children. The general failure of educationalists to engage with the reality of children's lives has serious implications for the timing, design and evaluation of educational initiatives.

Much recent literature on education and conflict pays scant attention to children. Analysis is often shaped by the 'threat' or 'promise' mindset: young people are either potential threats to stability – should they engage in military or criminal activities – or an important potential resource for development and reconstruction. Statements are made about the young when we should be producing knowledge with them.

The constrained nature of discussion about the impacts of war on children is in sharp contrast to the extensive analysis of the impact on education systems. Attention to the experiences, roles, needs and aspirations of young people in specific conflict zones is rendered impossible by an approach that assumes 'trauma', 'vulnerability' and 'victimhood' as defining and universal characteristics of children who have lived through war.

A children-focused approach to research in conflict settings does not assume uniformity in the psychological, material or social situation of children. It instead seeks to discover the complex ways in which conflict affects different children's lives, creating opportunities as well as new challenges. Conventional, school system-focused research tends to assume vulnerability as an inherent property of children in conflict zones but what we need is an approach that seeks to understand how vulnerability – as a condition – is produced and mitigated.

Children-focused research assumes that the impact of conflict on each child will be different. The Canadian

general Roméo Dallaire,<sup>1</sup> for example, has argued against programmes which ignore the special needs of children who have been leaders within military groups. Such ex-combatants cannot simply be inserted into a system that treats them as no different from their peers.

Children-focused research implicitly rejects the notion that children's ideas, experiences, needs and aspirations are adequately articulated by adults, however well-intentioned. The role of the researcher should be to enable young people to participate in research as fully as they wish, sharing

their views safely and to their own satisfaction. That even young children are fully capable of articulating important insights into their lives has been amply demonstrated in numerous research settings.

I am not dismissing the value of the currently dominant approach to field research. Rather, I am recommending that such study and the interventions that it helps to shape would be greatly enriched by engaging more seriously with children themselves. Understanding the situation of children more fully would enable the content of schooling, the mode of delivery and timing and location of activities to be designed in a way that ensures the greatest relevance and therefore greatest uptake.

*Former child soldier Mohammad Amin, now 18, is shown posters illustrating different trades during a job-counselling session. Bagram, Afghanistan.*



Where the situation of children is properly understood, innovative programmes can be developed that provide meaningful learning opportunities. During the Lebanese civil war the UNICEF-supported Sawa project engaged children in active learning by means of a magazine with entertaining and amusing articles, games, exercises and problems. Rather than the children coming to school, SAWA took the written word, pictures, amusement and messages of solidarity to the children and was able to reach young people stranded in their homes during the height of the war. In Afghanistan the BBC and UNICEF overcame Taliban restrictions on education by a radio series – Radio Education For Afghan Children (REACH) – which stimulated curiosity by helping children to ask questions about the world, understand the events shaping their lives and Afghanistan’s traditions, culture and history, as well as receive information about mine awareness and health education.

Both these examples come from settings where conditions prevented the conduct of ‘regular’ school-based activities. Agencies involved were compelled to take innovative steps in accordance with the children’s situation. Although the circumstances may be less extreme elsewhere, such willingness to innovate in order to

ensure relevance should be replicated. Unfortunately, however, the general trend appears to be toward ‘one size fits all’ in terms of curriculum, teacher training and mode of delivery. Much of the current abundance of advice and material on peace education appears to have evolved without much understanding of children’s perspectives, knowledge or concerns.

I have been particularly struck by these shortcomings through my research with Palestinian children. In recent years the international community has made considerable efforts to teach young Palestinians about rights, peace and tolerance. For some this is motivated by the wish to counter the presumed efforts made by teachers or the Palestinian media to encourage children to hate Israelis. Generally absent from the studies supporting this view – and equally absent from the design of interventions – is serious engagement with children themselves. From what I have seen, efforts to impart, for example, the principles of International Humanitarian Law or to encourage conciliatory attitudes towards Israeli peers often fail to have any impact.

The overriding reason for this failure seems clear: such initiatives pay no attention to the experience of children. They fail to appreciate, for example, that the tense and unpredictable

passage through Israeli checkpoints on the way to school may impart more profound lessons than anything that is taught in the classroom. Since children are not usually involved in meaningful evaluation of interventions, this failure rarely comes to light. Faith in the efficacy of educational strategies often designed far away from actual conflict zones remains apparently unshaken.

Conflict changes young people’s lives in many ways that must be understood if education is to be relevant, meaningful and productive. Post-conflict education specialists make much of the need to understand the impact of educational initiatives but fail to realise that this cannot be done without understanding the lives of the children who are the intended beneficiaries. Only by understanding children’s lives in an holistic way – their experiences, attitudes, aspirations, as well as their everyday roles and responsibilities – can we design more relevant activities and identify the indicators that might be used to evaluate genuine impact.

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1. Interviewed in FMR 15, [www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR15/fmr15.3.pdf](http://www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR15/fmr15.3.pdf)