

Risking protection through education?

by Amalia Fawcett

Education in emergencies as a tool for protection is a popular advocacy argument – but is there hard evidence to support this statement? Can education programmes also place children at risk?

The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement reiterate binding documents that guard the right to education in all contexts. It is assumed that education protects children by establishing a routine and sense of normalcy, by communicating essential life skills and hope for the future. It is dangerous, however, not to acknowledge that education can also place children at risk – culturally, psychosocially and physically.

Discriminatory curricula

It is known that during conflicts involving severe ethnic tensions, school curricula may be biased in favour of the dominant ethnic, political or religious group. This can act to undermine the cultural integrity of other ethnic, political or religious identities within a society, leaving children feeling suppressed and disadvantaged within the education system which in turn can exacerbate existing tensions.

Alternatively, one way of enhancing community participation in the school and encouraging feelings of pride in the child's cultural background is to use a particular group's language in as many areas of schooling as possible. The Guiding Principles are one of the few rights documents that explicitly state the right to use one's own language. Languages of certain groups can be left out of national curricula as part of state-driven discrimination. However, education in emergency programmes tend to use local curricula. For children displaced due to violence and discrimination, the continued application of curricula that were in use prior to displacement may reinforce that discrimination. It is important for education in emergency programmes to note this risk and wherever possible to incorporate

the child's mother tongue into educational activities and be aware of possible discrimination within local curricula.

Role of community

Despite the lack of consensus regarding the shaping of ethnic identity and prejudices among children, it is clear that they are formed early and, once formed, intensify over time. In addition, trends suggest that the parent-child relationship is one of the most important factors for a child's ethnic socialisation. In situations where identity has been politicised to the extent to which people will flee or engage in violence, it is therefore irresponsible to believe that schooling can change the attitudes of a whole community. In isolation, peace education directed solely at children can expose them to further risk, with conciliatory attitudes potentially increasing their vulnerability to accusations of conspiracy or betrayal. There is therefore a need to include the wider community in peace education programmes. The mere targeting of children for peace education ignores the fact that they exist in a world where power is in the hands of the adults. This is not an argument to cease peace-building education; there must, however, be a more deliberate and systematic link made between the attitudes of the community at large and those of children.

Is 'normalcy' possible?

It is often asserted that the swift creation of a basic education routine can encourage a sense of normalcy through structure and predictability. Sudden cessation of studies can represent an additional stressor, which perpetuates a sense of hopelessness. However, the situation in which displaced children find themselves is not a normal one and displaced

children may not regard their environment in the same way they did previously. A more in-depth analysis of what constitutes a 'normal environment' from the children's perspective is needed.

Following an emergency it can be inappropriate to expect children to return to a school environment modelled on their pre-displacement existence. Education in emergency programmes therefore needs to find out in what areas children perceive their new situation to be traumatic and in what areas they do not.

One way of achieving this is to allow children to alter their school environment and curricula in ways that take into account their new experiences. This can not only empower children through participation but also provide a sense of hope, pride and ownership of their schooling. This may be achieved through a commitment to the notion of participation.¹ For example, having Liberian children interview their peers showed that they did not always view their post-conflict situation as worse than their pre-conflict existence. It is important for emergency education programmes to acknowledge children's changed perspectives and encourage their participation when deciding protection concerns and their solutions.

Physical protection

Regarding the links between education and physical protection, the economic pressure on displaced families following an emergency needs to be recognised. The fact that children are required to be in school during daylight hours increases the likelihood that the money-earning activities they can become involved in will lie outside the formal sector. This can put children at risk. Prostitution or dependency on 'sugar daddies' for money, clothes or food are just two examples of practices which place young people in exploitative relationships and heighten their risk of exposure to HIV/AIDS and other STDs, as well as pregnancies and reduced

chances of marriage in later life. Ideally, children would be protected from needing to work but if the education system ignores the economic and social reality then it can diminish protection. When collecting firewood, for example, children are often required to walk long distances in poor light after school hours, therefore placing them at greater risk of mines and other UXO and making them more vulnerable to harassment. Flexible school calendars and modular curricula that allow children to attend classes and still be available for work during the day for more regularised work activities are potential countermeasures.

The Nueva Escuela Unidad schools in Guatemala provide a good example of such an approach. This is not to say that most education in emergencies supports child labour but it is crucial to acknowledge a child's context and make adjustments in order to answer needs accordingly.

Conclusion

Education in emergencies has an important role in enhancing the protection of displaced children. A pre-requisite of its success is nonetheless a willingness to avoid assumptions and acknowledge risks. To this extent there needs to be

more routine analysis of pre-conflict realities, cultural ramifications and economic aspects. The analysis must necessarily involve a greater level of participation on the part of affected children themselves and their communities. In this way the impact of education on the protection of children could be greatly improved.

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1. See Una McCauley 'Now things are Zig Zag: Perceptions of the Impact of Armed Conflict on Young People in Liberia', 2001. Don Bosco.