Risking protection through education?

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. 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 decisions.
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 towering significance of coordination to the practice of education during emergencies and early reconstruction is largely derived from its ability to magnify the coherence and utility of education for students, teachers and their communities. Yet the challenges of coordinating education action during emergencies and early reconstruction periods remain daunting and diverse, and can arise even before international humanitarians arrive in a country. Due to their often-overlapping mandates, UNESCO, UNICEF, UNDP and/or UNHCR have been known to wage turf wars, which can be the starting point for unhelpful, and seemingly unavoidable, power struggles. Indeed, research and analysis suggest that the challenge of defining roles and responsibilities between and among UN and international NGO actors ultimately arises from an atmosphere of underlying mistrust and competition. Moreover, in the scramble for favourable media attention – and the funding it helps secure – rhetoric about cooperation and coordination may be bypassed in practice.

During the emergency period, the typical international humanitarian official might be described as young, single, relatively well-paid, well-equipped and forever in a rush. His or her government counterpart is generally older, burdened by family concerns, underpaid – sometimes not paid at all – and unable to move around with ease. From the outset, it is a bad match: a clash of cultures, backgrounds, expectations and degrees of patience. Stereotypes may develop, such as local officials viewing internationals as disrespectful upstarts and the expatriates judging locals as uncommitted and perhaps corrupt.

The spectre of interpersonal conflicts involving local and international officials is further exacerbated by the fact that, quite often, well-resourced international NGOs and UN agencies charge into the countryside with funding, supplies, expertise and humanitarian mandates, frequently leaving local officials feeling left in the dust. The capacity and morale of education ministries can be further eroded by the departure of better-qualified civil servants for well-paid jobs with international organisations. At the same time, truly coordinated education systems are unlikely to be achieved unless even resource-poor national education authorities are willing to decline aid that does not help fulfil the objectives of their agreed and announced plans.

Challenges involving international agencies and war-affected communities may be just as thorny. While relations between communities and agencies can grow to be excellent, the power relations are usually quite clear. In general, communities are not ultimately in charge of the schooling of their own children. The

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Education free-for-all  

During emergencies and the early stages of reconstruction the roles and responsibilities of international and local stakeholders are poorly defined. What are the prospects for improving coordination and local ownership?

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.

Amalia Fawcett has worked as an intern at the Global IDP Project, Geneva (www.idproject.org). Email: amaliafawcett@hotmail.com


by Marc Sommers