

Emergency education in Iraq

by Anita Malley and Carl Triplehorn

In areas of crisis, quality assessments – involving listening to young people – are imperative for quality educational programming and protection.

Educational assessments must be attuned to children's protection needs within the context of their overall formal and non-formal educational needs. Detailed understanding of children's well-being in areas of crisis saves lives and improves educational programming. Managers with limited staff and time must strike a difficult balance between programme delivery and assessment, especially during the initial stages of an emergency.

Education is a vital component of humanitarian aid and reintegration assistance. In the difficult months following the end of the Saddam regime, education provided a stabilising influence in children's lives. The start of the school year in Iraq in October 2003 marked an important milestone in the resumption of normal life. While much assistance has been focused on the more obvious needs of shelter, household goods, food security and income generation, it is important not to forget children's other needs as they struggle with a difficult language, a new school curriculum and an uncertain post-conflict environment.

School and protection assessments

Save the Children USA has been supporting formal and non-formal education for 50,000 children in the Basrah governorate of southern Iraq. Participatory and respectful assessments, especially during the early stages of the emergency, established trust with children, communities and government officials and have facilitated the development of ongoing longer-term development programmes.

In June 2003 Save the Children conducted a multi-sectoral rapid needs assessment which included education. The needs and capacities of individuals and communi-

ties were assessed to determine the nature of Save the Children's response. In addition to health, shelter and water, it was found that the protection, education and psychosocial needs of children were critically unmet.

As schools were closed and not due to open until September, Save the Children established summer camps. In July and August 2003 8,500 children in eight locations participated in week-long summer camps which were open to children regardless of their school-enrolment, ethnic, disability or social status. Children from Christian, Muslim and Sabean communities attended. Transportation was provided for those from outlying communities, for children with disabilities and for those living in residential care facilities.

The first priority was to ensure that the summer camps offered a safe and positive place for children to play and interact. Educational and recreational activities ranged from structured literacy and numeracy classes to sports, music and art. Save the Children has learned from its global experience that such activities mitigate the psychosocial impact of conflict and prepare children for re-entry into school. Children were also equipped for post-conflict realities by raising awareness of health issues, landmines and unexploded ordnance. At the end of each camp children, parents and volunteers organised community festivals which



brought these issues to the attention of the wider community.

In communities where summer camps were held, Save the Children partially rehabilitated schools and youth centres. Water and sanitation facilities were repaired, war-damaged windows and doors were replaced and looted classrooms repainted.

When schools opened Save the Children decided that, to reach the neediest, support activities should be focused in rural areas of Basrah governorate that had been acutely affected by the Iran-Iraq war, neglected under the previous regime and expecting high numbers of returning refugees and IDPs. During this second assessment phase school facilities were found to be particularly poor due to dilapidated classrooms and unusable desks and blackboards.

Save the Children prioritised 20 primary schools and began to initiate

activities in partnership with communities. Local people contributed towards school maintenance and security and mobilised volunteers to lead landmine awareness and recreational activities. Save the Children assumed responsibility for the rehabilitation or repair of the school and the provision of school furniture, sport and leisure materials and teaching aids and stationery. In collaboration with the Basrah Teacher Training Institute Save the Children developed a teacher training curriculum focusing on child-centred teaching methods, children's psychosocial needs, alternative methods of discipline and inclusion of life skills within existing subjects. The revised curriculum has been successfully piloted in the 20 schools and will be introduced to additional schools in the coming year.

communities are resentful when they are assessed ... but services do not materialise

In October 2003 a protection assessment identified several areas of concern. As many as 60% of adolescents in urban areas of Basrah were found to be misusing prescription medication – considered a less visible substitute for alcohol. Equally worrying was the evidence of the impact of weapons, responsible for accidental injuries and deliberately used by children when in conflict with others. To address these issues, Save the Children developed a healthy lifestyles project to promote drug- and weapon-free behaviour amongst young people in urban areas. Posters and storybooks were designed and Save the Children staff visited 18 intermediate and secondary schools, as well as orphanages, to conduct awareness sessions about drugs and weapons.

The assessment also indicated that isolated rural communities were heavily impacted by landmines and had low levels of health and that children had very limited access to education. To address this, Save the Children initiated a Mobile Recreation and Messaging Bus to bring one-day life skills messages and recreation activities for children aged 9-11 in under-served rural communities. The aim was to impart key health, safety and landmine awareness messages and to give children

an opportunity to participate in recreational activities. Posters and leaflets as well as teaching aids were left in each location visited by staff.

Returning displaced children

Basrah governorate is the second most popular return destination for repatriating refugees, particularly those coming from Iran. The numbers of returning IDPs are equally high. Both groups have returned to already impoverished communities with housing shortages and dysfunctional public services. In many cases, refugees and IDP returnees have joined other vulnerable families squatting in public buildings without access to adequate shelter.

In April 2004 Save the Children, with support from UNHCR, conducted a survey of the reintegration needs of school children returning from exile in Iran. Data collected from 153 schools

identified 1,453 returnee students in the targeted areas. Key findings from the school surveys showed that:

- A significant number of returning refugee children have poor written and comprehension skills in Arabic – particularly if they have been educated in Farsi and speak it at home.
- Poverty prevents many returnee children from attending school, as the children may be required to work in or outside the home, families frequently move from place to place, and in some cases families cannot pay for school uniforms and stationery.
- Schools' limited water supply and poor sanitation facilities significantly disturbed the returning children.
- Difference in curricula between Iran and Iraq impede returnee students' reintegration: as the English language is not included in Iran's primary school system but is taught in Iraq, returnee children are being left behind.
- Many returnees and their families lack proper documentation required for registration in the Iraqi school system.

Small focus group discussions with returnee children – designed to be

child-friendly and non-intimidating – gathered information about their reintegration experience. Children were asked to draw pictures of the things that they liked and disliked about their new home and were then asked to explain what they had drawn. Many had difficulty drawing something they liked about their new home. The majority of the pictures featured scenes from Iran, particularly houses, mosques, apple trees, rivers and mountains. Many are clearly homesick for Iran and know little about Iraq. Worryingly, many of their images of Iraq displayed war-planes, helicopters, tanks and occupation soldiers bombing or shooting at Iraqi houses and people. The children's explanations of the pictures demonstrate that they view the military as a threat to themselves, their family property and their land. These pictures speak to a need for sensitivity on the part of parents and teachers. Regardless of whether children have themselves witnessed these events, or acquired their attitudes through the media or through family, their perceptions are real and the implications must be addressed in future programming.

With the knowledge gained, Save the Children is working to:

- support additional courses in Arabic and English for returnee students who are lagging behind their classmates
- press for solutions for students unable to access school due to lack of documentation
- improve school infrastructure, particularly water and sanitation facilities
- sensitise teachers and parents to children's psychosocial integration and adjustment needs
- teach children about landmines, unexploded ordnance and general safety.

Future programming and lessons learned

As the reconstruction of Iraq continues, Save the Children will continue to use assessments to expand and develop education activities, rehabilitate schools, build teachers' skills and enhance the capacity of community education committees. Save the Children's approach to future assessments must be very tailored;

communities are resentful when they are assessed and their needs noted but services do not materialise.

The lessons Save the Children has learned from Iraq are straightforward and reflect known best practice. Quality assessments are imperative for quality educational programming. Holistic approaches to help children rejoin school and

re-enter society must acknowledge the special needs of children and provide appropriate assistance based on suggestions made by listening to young people. If our assessments had not incorporated mechanisms for encouraging the voices of young people, many aspects of their needs would have been missed. Assessment must be built into all phases of activities for it is important to iden-

tify and address children's changing protection and educational needs.

Anita Malley is Save the Children's Child Protection and Education Program Manager in Iraq (email: amalley@savechildren.org) and Carl Triplehorn is Save the Children's Education in Emergencies Specialist (email: CTriplehorn@dc.savechildren.org).