

# Teacher development and student well-being

by Rebecca Winthrop and Jackie Kirk

*Improved support for teachers' professional development is vital during emergency, chronic crisis and early reconstruction contexts as teachers can have a significant impact on their students' well-being.*

Over the past decade humanitarian actors have focused attention and resources on developing education as a specific intervention aimed at mitigating psychosocial distress affecting children during war. Of particular importance in this effort is support for teachers. The importance of teachers in children's lives dramatically increases in situations affected by armed conflict: children may have lost or been separated from their parents, and parents may be less able, for many reasons, to support their children. Support for teachers' professional development is even more important as acute teacher shortages often mean that adults and youth who have never taught before or even finished their own education are recruited as teachers.

## Healing Classrooms Initiative

In an internal evaluation of its education programmes in 2002, International Rescue Committee (IRC) field staff identified teacher training as the highest priority for improving programme quality.<sup>1</sup> As a response, IRC launched its Healing Classrooms Initiative, which aims to improve teacher development for student well-being through research into teachers' and students' experiences

in school and their perceptions and beliefs about teaching and learning in selected pilot countries. This article focuses on the initial findings of research undertaken in Ethiopia and Afghanistan in early 2004.

IRC has worked in Ethiopia since 2001 when it set up an emergency education programme serving Eritrean Kunama refugees fleeing government persecution. The programme is located in the relatively small Walanihby refugee camp in the vast and arid northern Tigray region near the Ethiopian-Eritrean border. For many children this was the first time that they ever had access to school. There is one primary school in the camp with 25 teachers and approximately 800 students. Working with the Ethiopian regional education office, IRC trains teachers, provides teaching and learning materials, develops curricula, runs school feeding [see pp35-37], mobilises and trains the Parent-Teacher Association [see p34], and engages youth in recreation and peer outreach activities. The Healing Classrooms research was conducted in this school.

IRC has been working with the Afghan community in exile in Pakistan since 1980 and with the Afghan people inside Afghanistan since

1988. IRC currently runs six education projects in Afghanistan, one of which is the community-based schools project. In close collaboration with Ministry of Education district officials, IRC supports access to education where there are no functional government schools.

In three provinces, IRC supports community-based primary classes for over 10,000 students which are held inside people's homes or in community structures such as mosques. The classes follow the government curriculum and IRC mobilises the community to support education, trains the community-nominated teachers, provides teaching, learning materials, monitoring and evaluation. The project has a special focus on girls as cultural factors often limit girls' ability to travel even moderate distances to attend school. While IRC has full support from the Ministry of Education in this project, the community-based schools are not part of the government system and receive no direct support from the government. The Healing Classrooms research was conducted in 20 community-based classes in five villages in Bagrami and Charasiab districts in Kabul province.

Three broad themes have emerged from the two country studies: teacher identity, student well-being and gender dynamics. Aspects of the first two of these themes are discussed here.



Shemelba refugee camp, Ethiopia

### Teacher identity

In emergency, chronic crisis and early reconstruction contexts, very little attention is given to the make-up of the teaching corps. Yet understanding this is key if we are to better prepare these teachers for working with children.

#### *I'm not a 'real' teacher*

92% of the teachers in Ethiopia and 75% in Afghanistan did not consider themselves to be 'real' teachers. Many say that they did not choose to become teachers but were nominated by their community because of their relatively high level of education. Once nominated, however, teachers expressed their willingness to serve their community and, in the words of one Kunama teacher, "give my little knowledge to the children in this camp". For others, teaching was merely a means to support their families. Because they think of their teaching as both a community service and/or a short-term occupation, and not as their chosen vocation, many teachers lack confidence in their ability to be a 'real' or a 'good' teacher.

The study found that in Ethiopia the in-service teacher training enabled teachers to function fairly effectively; newly acquired tools such as lesson planning gave teachers – in the words of one man – "confidence to stand up in front of the class". However, their own mental models of teachers differed considerably from how they perceive themselves.

In Ethiopia, especially, teachers felt that they could not be good teachers until they completed their own education, regardless of the amount of in-service training they had received. Women teachers in particular, who generally have lower levels of education than the men, were very aware of their limitations and lacked confidence in their abilities. Teachers' self-image plays an important role in delivering quality education and must be taken into account in designing teacher development programming.

#### *Being 'alternatively qualified'*

Despite teachers' lack of confidence, professional qualification and ex-

perience, in many other ways these teachers are highly qualified for the job they do. The fact that they belong to the community in which they are teaching can often be a more important qualification than a teaching certificate.

In Ethiopia, teachers – as refugees themselves – have a very clear understanding of the aspirations and motivations of the students and their families and can, at least to some extent, respond to these. Teachers reinforce students' and parents' approach to education by emphasising the importance of studying and working hard now because of what it will bring in the future. This coherence of message is reassuring for students, and confirms for them that they are on the 'right track'. The future-oriented approach to learning and life is an important way for children in the camp to have hope for a better life, which helps them survive the harsh reality of their daily existence in exile. Many teachers additionally show commitment to the children and to the community by, for example, home visits to struggling students for extra tutoring sessions. Many see an important role

for themselves in contributing to the eradication of illiteracy in their community.

In Afghanistan, being a member of the community is perhaps the most important qualification these teachers can possess. In many villages, girls have access to education only because the classes take place in locations that are close to their homes, and run by teachers who are known and trusted by their parents. IRC's community-based schools are tailored to each community depending upon what is acceptable and what teachers are available. In some communities parents allow their girls to be taught by a male teacher provided he is well-known to them; in others, girls must be taught by a woman. Some parents allow young boys and girls to be in the same class, while others insist on sex-segregated classes. "Yes, it [girls-only class] is very important for us - if there were boys here then our parents wouldn't let us come", said one girl.

In addition, the community-based teachers transmit important cultural knowledge. Parents expect the teachers to model and teach good manners and appropriate behaviour (*tarbia*). Teachers are conscious of being a role model for their students

and talk about the importance of creating a trusting environment in class, in sharp contrast to many government schools which, in a recent report, have been cited for widespread emotional and physical violence against students. The reasons for this difference are likely to be, among others, the smaller class size and the community connection between teachers and students.

### Psychosocial teacher training

The vast majority of teachers need support in working with children who have directly or indirectly experienced traumatic events, such as displacement, loss of family members or direct violence. In Ethiopia, as in most IRC education programmes, 'psychosocial teacher training' is provided as a separate session/module in in-service pedagogy and classroom management training. The session covers topics such as child development, techniques for creating a supportive classroom environment, how to communicate with children, how to identify a distressed child in the classroom, and when and how to refer a child to mental health or other professionals. Teachers have all received at least one such in-service training on children's psychosocial needs.

In the individual interviews, teachers indicated that they had understood and retained what they learned in the training with many demonstrating an awareness of different indicators of child well-being. However, based on classroom observation, there was little indication that the teachers were able to integrate this learning into their day-to-day subject teaching. Teachers articulate other good reasons for children to come to school - to learn (in one teacher's words) "unity, love and social cohesion", good behaviour and personal health and hygiene, for example - but their way of addressing these issues was generally to lecture the students on virtuous living and studying hard. Although this future-focused orientation was clearly important to the students, they need to **experience** a classroom environment in which to develop skills such as friendship and social cohesion.

The research indicates that emphasising the psychosocial needs of children through a stand-alone 'psychosocial' session/module may not be an effective approach. Even though the session/module provides concrete tools for classroom teaching, in practice it remains separate from teachers' understanding and application of general pedagogical and

Afghanistan



classroom management skills. There is also the risk of over-emphasising the subject, leading some teachers to believe that the training enables them to solve children's problems, which it was never designed to do. A better approach would seem to be to integrate the psychosocial concepts, without naming them as such, into pedagogy, lesson planning and classroom management training. This would also shift the emphasis away from a specific bundle of 'psychosocial skills' to tools needed to be good teachers and to create 'healing classrooms'. Also important is to build more explicitly on the cultural

*the term 'psychosocial' should be de-emphasised*

understandings the teachers already have of their students as members of the same community.

The stand-alone session/module approach to psychosocial teacher training is common to many education in emergency programmes. Learning from this research, however, IRC now plans to integrate psychosocial concepts and skills into all pedagogical and subject matter teacher training.

### Student well-being

There is an emerging consensus on how educational interventions can promote well-being in various ways such as establishing a normalising structure, providing opportunities to process recent experiences in a safe environment and imparting life-saving information. The initial findings in this study have highlighted some additional factors.

In Ethiopia, 77% of students interviewed stated that their favourite aspect of school was learning and gaining knowledge. The process of learning itself and gaining knowledge for knowledge's sake was powerful and important to them. Gaining knowledge would enable students to accrue social and individual benefits that students felt were important, such as "eradicating illiteracy from our tribe" and, in one student's words, becoming "a wise man". Knowing that through going to school they were on a pathway to achieving these goals appears to be of real significance to the students.

The children appear to gain significant psychological benefit from knowing that in the future they will be able to help support their parents and their family. The possibility of becoming a teacher themselves is seen as a way of doing this. 78% of students indicated they wanted to become a teacher, for financial reasons – "to rear and support my family" – and because of the role played by teachers in the development of their community.

In Afghanistan, the study showed the importance of the status of being a school-girl or school-boy. Being

recognised by the community as students is very important to the children interviewed. For these children, physical appearance is a way community members recognise them as students and many children spontaneously talked in great detail about their school versus home clothes.

### Implications

IRC's Healing Classrooms initiative aims not only to improve programming and policy making in the short and medium term but also, in the longer term, to enhance our ways of thinking about students, teachers, schooling, well-being and protection. IRC's programmes in Ethiopia and Afghanistan have already started to implement more 'teacher-centred' development programmes, including collective identification of teacher development targets and self-evaluation tools and processes. Other implications for IRC and for other agencies and governments supporting education in humanitarian settings include:

- Teacher development programmes should better acknowledge the life experiences, motivations and aspirations of teachers. Basic assumptions upon which training curricula have been developed should be revised and new ways created to support teachers' long-term professional development.
- In areas with acute teacher shortages, teachers who have not completed established certification processes but who possess

'alternative qualifications' should be formally recognised. This is especially important for promoting access to education in early reconstruction contexts such as Afghanistan.

- Training for teachers in understanding children's psychosocial needs, often covered in separate teacher training sessions/modules, should be integrated into general teaching methodology trainings.
- The training focus should be on being a good teacher for all students and the term 'psychosocial' should be de-emphasised.
- The importance for students' well-being of enrolment in a school and of learning and gaining knowledge should be recognised when developing education interventions in these contexts.
- Further research is needed on the most effective and appropriate forms of teacher development for student well-being in emergency, chronic crisis and early reconstruction contexts.

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See also the article by Jackie Kirk and Rebecca Winthrop on 'Home-based teachers and schooling for girls in Afghanistan' in id21 Insights, September 2004, at [www.id21.org/insights/insights-ed03/insights-issued03-art04.html](http://www.id21.org/insights/insights-ed03/insights-issued03-art04.html)

1. IRC has administered over 60 education programmes in 20 countries of conflict over the past five years.