

EDUCATION AS A SECURITY STRATEGY

Conflict and natural disasters can expose children to a variety of threats, including physical harm, exploitation, forced recruitment, psychological distress, and separation from families. Humanitarian agencies often face an overwhelming (an often unrealistic) task when they compartmentalize these threats and try to address them individually in the field. However, initiating education programs during emergencies can offer a more comprehensive approach to addressing many of these security concerns.

Education during emergencies is simply ‘any formal or nonformal education provided to children, adolescents, or adults whose access to national or local education systems has been destroyed by man-made or natural disasters.’ (Academy for Educational Development, 2003). This may vary from structured recreational activities to formal classes on literacy to vocational training for adolescents and adults.¹ The low cost of most education programs can make it an attractive intervention to many agencies and donors. Yet, simplicity should not be mistaken for static or seen as impervious to corruption or abuse. Education is dynamic, subject to the same exploitation and manipulation by groups in power as any social system. If not well planned or executed, education can augment many of the security concerns it is trying to eradicate.

Threat to Physical Harm. During an emergency situation, children are at risk for malnutrition and disease, violence, and physical harm from landmines, unexploded ordinances, etc. Education programs can keep children off the streets and in safe, structured, supervised environments with something as simple as a child-friendly space.² It is important to keep in mind that in an emergency environment, basic literacy and numeracy are even more crucial since they are the basis of life-saving skills. Education programs can also provide classes on landmine awareness, public health (such as HIV/AIDS prevention and destigmatization), and peace education. Schools (or child-friendly spaces) can minimize malnutrition by feeding all school-age children, thereby also preventing parents from choosing to starve sub-threshold malnourished children in order to get them into a feeding program. Vaccinations and disease prevention is also expedited by the school environment.

Cautionary tales do exist, however. Tantamount is the controversial implementation of peace education. Though well intentioned in nature, peace education can be irresponsible if it is taught by only one group during or after a conflict situation, or if it is directed solely at children and does not involve the community. After a conflict, persecutory or victimized groups may be ill suited to teach a course of peace education—teachers are subject to the same biases, anger, and resentment as any other member of society. However, training teachers well, or using international or “outsider” teachers (when necessary and if language constraints permit) can counter this. Peace education that is directed solely at children can be even more damaging since it may make children more

¹ See the Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children’s report “Global Survey on Education” (2004) for a detailed listing of the variety of programs that constitute education in emergencies.

² Child-friendly spaces simply consist of a tented, safe, adult-supervised area with age- and culture-appropriate toys and games for about 50-100 children. They must also have latrines and potable water.

vulnerable to violence and death in a hostile environment. Conciliatory attitudes may make children more vulnerable to accusation of betrayal or make them easy targets for manipulation by groups in power. Often, adults cop-out of responsibility by laying their hopes for a peaceful society on their children's shoulders when they cannot manage it. This is not an argument for ending peace education, but measures must be taken to link adults and their attitudes to what children are taught in school, and to find a peace education curriculum that encompasses the whole community. (Fawcett, 2005) Education programs must also seek to be realistic in their implementation. Ideally, children should be protected from having to work. But, often, financial constraints of the family, hidden school fees, or simply the socio-economic context of the society forces children to work. Since education is often valued, children may still go to school, but work at night, exposing themselves to prostitution, unexploded ordinances, or harassment. This however, can be avoided by implementing flexible schedules for children, which frees them up for work during the day.

Schools can also be targets of violence during an ongoing conflict since it threatens community organization and morale and instills an atmosphere of fear. In the end, security depends on the larger security environment, but educational planners should take this into account when initiating a program and choosing a location. It is best not to choose locations near the outskirts of a camp, and local advocacy emphasizing attacks on schools as a war crime may discourage militias.

Threats of Recruitment and Exploitation. The lack of daily structure and adult supervision often leave children bored and vulnerable to forced or voluntary recruitment into gangs and militias. Educational programs can provide the necessary safe environment and structure that engages children in positive alternatives to violence, as well as sexual exploitation. It can also bolster their identity as a student and their sense of belonging, which may discourage militia involvement. Educational programs also free up parents so that they can look for food and/or work during the day, reducing a child's need to engage in violence or prostitution. Schools may also serve as ways to track and reunite families separated by emergency situations.

However, education can also put children at risk for these factors if it is not carried out well. Militias have been known to recruit on school grounds if they are not well supervised. But the presence of international "witnesses" can significantly reduce such activity. Often people are not needed for a presence to be felt—simply displaying international NGO signs and letting the community know that the school is supervised by an international organization may help deter recruitment.

Girls are a particularly vulnerable group, and though education has been known to keep them safe from sexual violence, there are also cases where teachers and school officials have either exchanged grades for sexual favors or raped students. Girls may also get assaulted on the way to school, and therefore are less likely to attend. Some countermeasures may include providing adult supervision for the children to and from school (this may also deter forced recruitment), training of female teachers, placing female teacher's aides in classrooms, or involving students in the educational system

through committees so that they have a course of action once abuses occur. For example, in Liberia, a child protection network was formed through the election of student “junior counselors.” These students then put together a report detailing sexual abuse by teachers, which led to dismissal of teachers and the implementation of codes of conducts for students and teachers (See Nicolai, 2003). In every educational intervention, parents and students should be made aware of confidential reporting procedures, and policies on sexual abuse should be enforced.

Threats to psychological well-being. Education, via child-friendly spaces or schooling, is often the most recommended psychosocial intervention to prevent psychological distress. It provides normalcy in a child’s life when it is critically needed, and can help children look forward to future short and long-term goals. It can also provide a forum for discussion of past and present problems, as well as allow for social integration of minority groups, unaccompanied children, disabled students, as well as ex-combatants when possible.

It is naïve to think, though, that children (and adults) will not be profoundly changed by their experiences, and psychosocial programs that look to “return” to normalcy without allowing students to integrate their new experiences and address current needs are sorely misguided. Integrating ex-combatants, disabled, and/or minority children can be tricky, and should be carried out by teachers trained to support them. Most importantly, education programs should include all children in the area. A well-funded program for ex-combatants or refugees is bound to breed resentment in noncombatants or local populations when they live close to one another.

Care should also be taken to make sure the curriculum that is adopted by the school is not discriminatory against any student’s ethnic, political, or religious groups. Although textbooks should be locally procured, ones written to favor one group should be discarded.

Language of Instruction. Language is central to establishing, maintaining, or changing power dynamics in a society, and the chosen language of instruction plays a critical role in establishing a nondiscriminatory curriculum. UNHCR has a policy of “education for repatriation” which encourages educational programs to utilize the language of the home country. This makes teacher recruitment and repatriation easier, maintains a person’s cultural identity during a time of upheaval, and may allow students to sit for exams upon return.

Nevertheless, adopting the home country’s language presents its own unique problems as well. If ethnic groups have been persecuted, the home country’s choice may be another tool of persecution and further eradicate one’s cultural identity. Studying a *host* country’s language may allow some refugees to continue secondary education, a chance they would not have received in their home country, such as Afghan refugees who are allowed to enroll in secondary schools in Iran. In addition, politics of oppression may lead home governments not to recognize achievement or exam results in refugee camps, and instruction in the host country’s language would have been more beneficial.

The answers to these problems are not simple, and require a case-by-case analysis and solution. As a general rule, so long as the home country's language of choice does not perpetuate ethnic or cultural discrimination in a classroom, it should be used since it will facilitate return. Political discrimination may be able to be addressed without changing languages. But, at the same time, guiding principles dictate that efforts should be made to incorporate a child's mother tongue into educational activities, even when discrimination is not present.³

Concluding remarks. Educational programs often offer a quick and cost-effective way to address security concerns during emergencies. Nevertheless, simple should not be mistaken for fool-proof, and forethought and an ongoing dialogue with students and the community are necessary to ensure a system that works to keep children safe and optimistic about their futures. Location, language, curriculum, supervision, and community involvement need to be considered before any education program is initiated. In addition, a willingness to remain flexible and address the students' needs is crucial to ensure the physical safety and psychological well-being of children.

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³ See Margaret Sinclair's chapter in *Learning for a Future: Refugee Education in Developing Countries* for detailed case studies that highlight how languages of instruction were chosen.

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