

Education Amidst Conflict: The Youth Challenge

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Abstract

T*his article examines how education and conflict are intertwined. Most war-affected youth are not in school and have little reasonable chance of ever attending. Sheer demographics alone—today’s world population is history’s youngest ever—set significant limits on the effectiveness and reach of current efforts to address education needs during and after wars. Included in the article’s analysis is how youth exclusion and colossal youth populations create considerable education challenges in conflict-affected contexts.*

Introduction

Not long ago, education occupied a tiny corner of humanitarian emergency responses. Nicolai and Triplehorn, in fact, mark the “birth” of education as a humanitarian “sector” as the early 1990s.¹ This, in itself, is remarkable because of the high value that war-affected communities place on education, as demonstrated by their tendency to start their own schools during emergencies.²

The education sector as part of humanitarian interventions has begun to enlarge. Treffgarne, for example, accurately characterizes the “field of education in emergency or conflict situations” as “burgeoning,” and further notes, most appropriately, “the increasing significance of education in countries affected by conflict in current development agencies’ policies.”³ These agencies include not only United Nations and non-governmental agencies, but most, if not all, major international donors as well.

Yet despite such critically important advancements, the need to advocate for en-

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hanced support for educating war-affected populations endures. It remains a hard slog, as massive education needs are too often met with grossly insufficient support. The most dramatic example of this is southern Sudan, where it was reported that in the late civil war years, only 0.7 percent of school-age children in one war-torn county were in school⁴ and 0.3 percent of school-age children completed all eight years of primary school.⁵ Bolstered by such evidence of educational need, the authors of one article illuminate a fairly common advocacy rationale in the literature on what has come to be known as “education in emergencies.” In a publication for the Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement, Erin Mooney and Colleen French assert that “too often... education is treated as a secondary need, to be addressed only once conflicts have subsided.”⁶ The authors then shed light on a number of problems that regularly impede internally displaced children’s access to education, including poor infrastructure, safety concerns, and discrimination.

Unfortunately, access is not the only challenge confronting internally displaced persons (IDPs) seeking education. Mooney and French highlight the significance of the language of instruction that internally displaced children may receive in school. They recommend that internally displaced persons should “have access to education in a language that they understand.”⁷ However, one issue of critical significance to many IDPs is not mentioned: the educational curriculum itself. In a variety of modern conflicts, this is no small issue. A core cause of recent conflicts involving Southern Sudanese and Kosovar Albanians, to name two examples, was not only the language of instruction in school, but the substance of the curriculum as well.⁸ In both cases these issues were seen as intolerable instruments of state dominance, and resistance to them helped fuel vicious civil wars.

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The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (1989)⁹ both state that all children have a right to education. This is underscored by the current Education for All (EFA) initiative, which seeks, by 2015, to ensure that “all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances, and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to and complete, free and compulsory primary education of good quality.”¹⁰ Yet issues of content, quality, and safety persist, and access to education continues to be a particularly difficult challenge for war-affected children, and especially youth.

This paper will review a selection of current literature on how education and conflict are intertwined, noting, among other things, that the discussion to date largely addresses education taking place inside formal schoolyards. It will then consider some of the implications of a perplexing and potentially explosive chal-

challenge facing war and post-war communities: the fact that, despite worldwide efforts to counter the trend, most war-affected youth are not in school and have little reasonable chance of ever gaining access to education of any sort. The sheer demographics alone of today's world being history's youngest in terms of human population set significant limits on the effectiveness and reach of current efforts to address youth education needs, particularly in war-affected areas. But the fact that exclusion negatively impacts the lives of so many war-affected youth makes the challenge significantly more difficult to address. The paper will close with a consideration of the daunting youth challenge and a brief sketch of possible next steps.

Education and Violent Conflict

How can education play a role in conflict and warfare? The idea, at first, may seem fairly unusual. Education is generally thought to be a good thing. It is often considered a positive force in social life, and a key to increasing the quality of life. Salmi, for example, cites a study highlighting a "clear correlation between girl education and mortality rates, especially child mortality."¹¹ Schools, moreover, might conjure up thoughts of peaceful learning, places where knowledge of the world and oneself takes shape for children and youth.

Education as a Cause of Conflict

But even in fairly idyllic situations, schools are part and parcel of the world around them, much more like sponges than oases. A sequestered school is just as tied to societal values and tensions as a community school in an urban neighborhood. It may be a cherished location for the children of wealthier families. It may be a repository for members of a particular social class or ethnic community. Either way, the geographic and social separation is ultimately a mirage: there is a reason underlying an institution's separateness, and that reason may be tied to social exclusion or inequality, both of which help fuel conflicts.

Education can be much more than a contributing cause, or effect, of violent conflict; sometimes it rests right at a conflict's core. This can be partly explained by education's deep ties to nation-building and identity formation. Beginning with the formation of nation states, Vriens notes that "together with the army [education] was the most successful instrument for the propagation of a national identity and for the dissemination of militarism." Vriens also argues that there is "little historical evidence [that] education is a necessary instrument for peace...and in fact history points more to the contrary."¹²

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In our current era, moreover, Bush and Saltarelli observe that "in many conflicts around the world, education is part of the problem rather than the solution, because

it serves to divide and antagonize groups both intentionally and unintentionally.”¹³ For Davies, the problem centers on how “education indirectly contributes to conflict” through collusion related to class, gender, and ethnicity. Education can also be used to stir conflict by fueling greed and establishing a sense of superiority and fear of failure, Davies adds. Promoting fear through education also facilitates mobilizing populations for war.¹⁴

Education is thus potentially dangerous and can be a central contributor to violent conflict in a diversity of ways. In many if not most modern wars, a central factor underlying conflict is the use of education as a social exclusion tool. The tool itself can come in different forms. It can focus on segregated access, either by ethnic group in places such as Central Africa or by severely restricted access to education, such as in Sierra Leone. Forcing the use of a curriculum and language of instruction endorsed by the dominant political group onto the dominated, such as in Kosovo and Sudan, in addition, can fuel outright rebellion. These and related concerns have been noted in a growing number of studies.¹⁵

One of the “two faces” of education that Bush and Saltarelli describe is termed “negative.” Within this framework, the authors name seven “peace-destroying, conflict-maintaining impacts of education:”

1. The uneven distribution of education as a means of creating or preserving positions of economic, social, and political prestige;
2. Education as a weapon of cultural repression;
3. Denial of education as a weapon of war;
4. Education as a means of manipulating history for political purposes;
5. Education serving to diminish self-worth and encourage hate;
6. Segregated education as a means of ensuring inequality, inferiority, and stereotypes;
7. The role of textbooks in impoverishing the imagination of children and thereby inhibiting them from dealing with conflict constructively.¹⁶

Bush and Saltarelli are concerned with ethnic conflict. Their concerns thus circumscribe an intentionally narrowed field. Recent or ongoing conflicts in a variety of countries, including Burundi, Kosovo, Sri Lanka, and Sudan, center on ethnic differences; but wars in countries such as Colombia and Sierra Leone do not.

Salmi’s analysis, on the other hand, is broader and inclusive of more contexts. He introduces a framework consisting of four kinds of violence in the context of education: direct violence, indirect violence, repressive violence, and alienating violence. Direct violence would include the presence of weaponry within schools, corporal punishment, land mines preventing children from attending schools, the bombing of schools, and teachers receiving death threats. Indirect (or social) violence would include illiteracy, the impact of the AIDS epidemic, deliberate discriminatory practices that keep particular groups out of school, and schools with poor infrastructure (the absence of latrines, for example). Repressive violence features the idea that “an uneducated population is

fertile ground for the denial of civic and political rights” and emphasizes that “adult illiteracy and the lack of a civic education in schools are obstacles to full participation of the majority in democratic life.”¹⁷ Finally, there is alienating violence, which centers on the use of a curriculum and language of instruction to assert dominance of one group over another. Another aspect of alienating violence is “the culture of fear prevailing in many school systems where tests and exams have become an end in themselves.”¹⁸

Education as a Mechanism for Peacebuilding

Far more documentation exists with reference to the positive aspects of education. As Seitz notes, “that education fosters social peace, contributes to overcoming social inequality, and is the key to equal societal participation, still ranks as one of the elementary legitimization formula for all education policies, including international policy.”¹⁹ Salmi asserts that “education is an important instrument to overcome violence and improve respect for human rights.”²⁰ A review of education in emergencies programs leads Bethke and Braunschweig to conclude that they all “serve the primary and interrelated functions of protection and cognitive and social development.”²¹ The Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) argues that “education in emergencies, and during chronic crises and early reconstruction efforts, can be both life-saving and life-sustaining.”²²

Among the most compelling arguments underscoring the positive side of education during and after conflicts is Nicolai and Triplehorn’s work connecting education to child protection.²³ They divide the “potential protective elements of education in emergencies” into three categories: physical, psychosocial, and cognitive protection. Under physical protection, the authors argue that schools provide a number of benefits, among them the fact that they supply children with “safe, structured places” to learn and play, are inclusive of all children, and engage “children in positive alternatives to military recruitment, gangs and drugs.” Under psychosocial protection, the authors contend that among the benefits of schooling are giving children “an identity as students” while averting feelings of “inadequacy felt by children out of school,” facilitating the social integration of vulnerable children, and providing a daily routine and a hopeful sense of the future. Cognitive protection includes the following benefits: schools help children to “develop and retain the academic skills of basic education,” furnish children with “knowledge of human rights and skills for citizenship and living in times of peace,” and encourage children “to analyse information, express opinions, and take action on chosen issues.”²⁴

Exclusion from Formal Education

Whether positive or negative, it is important to note that most of this discussion concerns formal schooling far more than any other kind of education. This is no small observation, since, as we will shortly see, many young people are no longer in a formal school, and furthermore unlikely to ever return to one. Moreover, the education in emergencies literature largely focuses on primary education. Additionally, Bethke and Braunschweig’s survey work reveals that refugees living in camps have, by far, the best

chance of accessing formal education. At the same time, “for the vast majority of refugees living outside of camps and for IDPs, their right to education is often denied.”²⁵ In general, most of those in primary schools are boys, although Buckland notes that in some cases, “the primary enrollment gender gap actually declines during conflict, usually as more boys are drawn into conflict.”²⁶ The typical profile of a war-affected child attending school is as follows: a boy attending a refugee camp primary school.

The research of Bethke and Braunschweig suggests that most war-affected children and youth are not receiving formal education of any sort. They have studied the statistics of ten of the leading conflict-affected countries and territories in the world and have found that there are somewhere between 25 and 28 million children and youth not in school.²⁷ Bethke and Braunschweig estimate that these ten countries and territories collectively represent about 70 percent of the world’s combined refugee and IDP population. Using this rule of thumb, something like 42.5 to 47.6 million of the world’s refugee and IDP children and youth are not in school—“some because no educational opportunities are available, others because poverty or cultural reasons prevent them from attending school and still others because they choose not to attend.”²⁸

Today’s Extraordinary Youth Challenge: Demographics and Exclusion

One of the main reasons that so many youth are not in school is demographics. There are more youth present in today’s world, both in terms of size and proportion, than ever before in human history.

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The implications of such demographics on education (among other realms of human endeavor) are very likely transformative. Many school-age children in war and post-war contexts are unlikely to return to formal schooling. Nine years after genocide and civil war in Rwanda, for instance, a quarter of all primary-age children were still not in school. Obura correctly considers this “unacceptable;” even worse, 94 percent of Rwandan adolescents are not in school.³³ Such situations are in-

creasingly common, and in countries with overwhelmingly young populations such as Rwanda (where three in four people are under the age of 30), it will be extremely difficult to reverse the trend.³⁴

But demographics may not even be the most serious threat to accessing education. Of all the negative aspects of education identified in the previous section, exclusion is probably the most serious. Citing la Cava and Lytle, Buckland writes that “the most common experience of youth in postconflict reconstruction is one of exclusion.” Youth exclusion refers not only to education but also to employment (youth unemployment is typically “at least double the national rate”), politics, and society in general, as “youth are most frequently associated with violence and crime in post-conflict contexts.” This set of circumstances is especially dangerous because, as Buckland notes, the frustration that youth feel due to their exclusion arrives “at a time when involvement in conflict often leaves youth with a new sense of empowerment.”³⁵

This “new sense of empowerment” requires considerably more study, appreciation, and response than it currently receives. Child and youth-based wars can transform youth identities. Some youth learn that a gun in their hands changes how they are perceived. No longer hidden and disempowered, an armed youth too often garners more respect and attention than one without a gun. At the same time, youth involved in wars are exceedingly vulnerable. Indeed, one of the dangers of youth exclusion, and the threats to social cohesion that it causes, is that since so few opportunities normally exist for youth to receive either formal or non-formal education, they can become easy prey to those seeking to exploit them.³⁶

Tragically, it has taken ruthless, yet highly effective, child exploiters to reveal many of the astonishing abilities of severely undereducated, poor, and excluded children and youth.³⁷ It is no accident that child soldiering has almost exclusively arisen in areas suffering from economic deprivation and social and political exclusion. It also largely occurs where there is an abundance of poor youth: for child-based operations which field no more than a few hundred or thousand child soldiers at a time, the supply may appear nearly inexhaustible. At the same time, educational options are all too frequently unattainable. Prospects for education to positively impact social cohesion drastically decline when most children and youth do not have access to it.

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Conclusion: Education's Limits

A tragic irony highlighted by modern warfare is that many of those who realize the unusual and diverse potentials of youth seek to exploit them. People recruiting and abducting children and youth into armies have already realized that young people can become superb assets to a war effort. Young people are quick learners, normally demand little and require considerably fewer supplies than adults, and can become unusually

obedient, thus efficiently carrying out difficult military assignments. They can suit just about any purpose a military operation requires, including serving as soldiers, spies, domestics, porters, and concubines. Finally, expanding youth demographics means that they are unusually expendable. If they are lost, others can be quickly found to take their place.

One of the primary misfortunes of youth living outside of schooling during and after wars is that they lack access not just to education but to the array of protections that schools can provide. War-affected youth are quite often severely traumatized. They are vulnerable to exploitation and are frequently forced to endure many kinds of neglect. That they are also exceptionally numerous in countries where most civil conflicts take place means that the attention required to address their concerns is considerable. Members of war-affected communities attempt to reintegrate youth into their societies of origin, but they are often forced to do this with limited human and financial resources. Youth needs are also diverse, ranging from psychosocial support and education of many kinds (including basic, health, and peace) to vocational training and access to capital. Reaching female youth can also be difficult, particularly if they are victims of sexual violence.

What might be done to address the challenge of youth during and after wars? One starting point is to recognize that the literature concerning education in emergencies and early reconstruction largely focuses on formal education and primary schooling. The level of attention paid to out-of-school youth, many of whom are alienated and marginalized, and who have different educational and vocational requirements, needs to be dramatically enhanced.

While steps are being made to raise the profile and importance of support for youth, the tendencies of many international institutions and post-war governments in this regard can be counterproductive. The case of the profoundly war-affected region of Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea, and Côte d'Ivoire is instructive. In this region most post-war investments are directed to rural areas and formal economic sectors, even though post-war trends suggest dramatic expansions in both urban population growth and informal economic sectors.³⁸ These tendencies need to be reconsidered and, in all probability, significantly revised.

The response to the youth challenge should emphasize an inclusive approach that listens to youth and addresses their priorities and location. This may sound difficult, time consuming, avoidable, and costly. But the alternative is far worse. Following most conflicts, military leaders have already demonstrated the skills and potential of youth to devastating effect. Prioritizing appropriate responses to youth needs is essential because youth are a central ingredient to peacebuilding and post-war security—and one that remains undervalued.

Endnotes

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