Conflict, Education and Displacement

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Abstract

Children make up half of people forced to flee their homes as a result of conflict. The impacts of this conflict-included displacement on education are immense. This essay focuses on five urgent challenges for education in these settings, including barriers to access, the protracted nature of displacement, urban displacement, physical integration without social integration, and the search for quality. Three central ideas emerge from these challenges as priorities for future research: the need for comprehensive data on access to and quality of education for refugee and IDP children in order to understand the context-specific nature of general challenges; the use of "integration" as a guiding concept for education in displacement, specifically investigation of the social implications of physical integration; and the role of education as a portable durable solution for displaced children, including implications for curriculum, pedagogy, and post-primary opportunities.

Keywords: Displacement, conflict, education, refugees, IDPs

Introduction

Displacement is a primary consequence of the nature of contemporary conflict. Wars among competing groups within national boundaries, which have increased since the Cold War, are devastating to civilians because of mortality, destroyed infrastructure and livelihoods, and the need to flee one's home. The extent of displacement is one of the measures of the severity of a conflict, along with casualties and duration. Displacement on a massive scale is not uncommon. Of all the people who have experienced conflict, 56 percent have been displaced. Over the course of the conflict in Afghanistan, 76 percent of the population has been displaced, and in Liberia, 90 percent (ICRC, 2009, p. 6). At the end of 2009, 43.3 million people were displaced globally, including 15.2 million refugees, who were displaced across national borders, and 27.1 million Internally Displaced People (IDPs), who remained in their own country (UNHCR, 2010a).

There are three principal ways in which conflict leads to displacement for children and their families. First, civilians can be inadvertently caught between fighting factions and either flee once

violence reaches their community or flee in anticipation of the violence. Second, armed groups adopt strategies of war explicitly aimed at prompting widespread displacement and/or displacement of specific individuals and groups. Third, displacement results from the disruption of economic and social life brought about by conflict (Ferris & Winthrop, 2010, p. 5).

The effects of displacement on children are particularly pronounced. UNICEF estimates that about 50 percent of people forced to flee their homes as a result of conflict are children. In 2009, 18 million children were displaced globally (UNICEF, 2009, p. 25). Displacement jeopardizes children's physical and psychosocial health, and it presents challenges to child protection especially related to sexual violence and recruitment into armed forces. Conflict-induced displacement also has great implications for education, both for refugees and IDPs. This short essay begins with a brief overview of the legal framework for education in displacement. I then outline five current challenges for education in situations of conflict-induced displacement, which point to priorities for future research.

Legal Framework: A Brief Overview

All people have the right to education, including those displaced. The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees establishes the right to primary education for refugees. Host governments are compelled to carry out the provisions of Article 22 of this Convention, in that they "shall accord to refugees the same treatment as it accorded to nationals with respect to elementary education … [and] … treatment as favourable as possible … with respect to education other than elementary education" (UNHCR, 2010b, p. 24). In the case of IDPs, responsibility lies with national authorities, as outlined in the 1998 *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*. However, within the framework of

the Convention on the Rights of the Child, in a situation where there is lack of capacity and/or resources, the international community has a duty to ensure that this right is universally fulfilled. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is mandated with the protection of refugees, for example, including the provision of education.

What does the right to education mean? Whether in situations of displacement or not, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has outlined four essential elements of the right to education: availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability (the "Four As"). Through accessing an education that is available, acceptable, and adaptable, the right to education becomes an "enabling right," permitting the activation of other civil and political rights.

Education in Displacement: Five Current Challenges

1. Barriers to Access

The gap between the formal right to education for displaced children versus its provision is clear. In Afghanistan, 21 percent of respondents in an International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) survey note that "not being able to get an education" is one of their top fears related to displacement (ICRC, 2009, p. 43). In some cases, opportunities for education can increase in displacement, as for Afghan refugees in some parts of Pakistan. Yet in most cases, this fear is well-founded, as both refugees and IDPs are groups of children who remain out-of-school in large numbers. While data is often limited and unreliable, UNHCR estimates that primary school participation in camps is 69 percent and at secondary, only 30 percent. These global enrollment rates masks large inequities across camps, such that even within one country primary gross enrollment ratios (GER) can range

from zero to one hundred percent (UNESCO, 2011, p. 155). There are no global numbers of out-of-school IDP children, but available evidence indicates that internal displacement severely impacts access to education. For example, in an area of high internal displacement in Nord Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), only 34 percent of children have access to school compared to 52 percent nationally (Refugees International, 2009, p. 5).

The barriers to accessing education in displacement are similar to the barriers in any conflict setting (see Dryden-Peterson, 2010b), but they can impact children in situations of displacement through different mechanisms. Children who are displaced describe facing greater poverty than they did in their home communities. They have usually left behind their possessions and, with restrictions on freedom of movement and the regulation of professions, often their families' livelihoods. Uncertainty about the future compounds poverty and leads to doubts about the benefits of education, adding to the opportunity costs of school attendance. Discrimination based on gender and disability are often heightened during times of conflict, when community support systems disintegrate, social norms break down, and laws are not enforced. Displacement can lead to interrupted schooling and result in large numbers of overage children who struggle to access and persist in school. Further, areas in which refugees and IDPs live are often the most neglected regions with infertile land and lack of access to services and infrastructure, including schools.

2. The Protracted Nature of Displacement

Sixty-eight percent of refugees worldwide lived in a "protracted" situation at the end of 2009 (UNESCO, 2011, p. 153), defined as being displaced for five or more years without the prospect of one of three durable solutions of repatriation to the home country, local integration to the country of asylum, or resettlement to a third country. Many IDPs are similarly displaced over long periods of time, such as in the Balkans, Georgia, Sri Lanka, Uganda, and Colombia (Ferris & Winthrop, 2010, p. 9). In some cases, displacement is on-going, such as for children in eastern DRC where "displacement is sometimes daily" and children's schooling is constantly disrupted (Dryden-Peterson, 2010a). The protracted nature of contemporary displacement leads to an overarching sense of uncertainty for children and families, with three central implications for education. First, education needs to be a first-line response in displacement situations, playing a critical role in restoring an immediate sense of normalcy for displaced children. Second, educational planning cannot be short-term but must be forward-looking in nature, recognizing the likelihood that any given child cannot wait for an end to displacement if he/she is to pursue an education. Third is the under-explored idea that education itself is a portable durable solution given that future security – economic, political, and social – is less connected to where one is geographically and more to skills, capacities, and knowledge that can accompany an individual no matter where that future may be. As a durable solution, increased post-primary opportunities are critical.

3. Urban Displacement

The majority of the world's population now lives in cities. Reflecting these trends, UNHCR estimates that about half of refugees globally also live in cities (UNHCR, 2009b). Internal displacement is also predominantly urban in nature, often reflecting large migrations from conflict-affected rural areas of a country to the relative safety of towns and cities, for example in Colombia and, formerly, in Northern Uganda. While once the domain of young men, the urban displaced increasingly

include women and children. The provision of education for refugee and IDP children in urban areas requires major rethinking of how assistance to education for displaced children is conceptualized. Displaced children often overwhelm already stretched schools, especially in poor areas of cities. And yet the traditional focus on building schools, procuring desks, and training teachers is not usually appropriate in the urban context. Integration to the national system is a priority. Physical integration of displaced children requires collaboration and coordination among non-state actors (UN agencies, NGOs, etc.), national Ministries of Education officials, and local education leaders, as well as better data on the numbers and locations of displaced children. Social integration is as urgent an issue yet often overlooked in urban settings, especially as related to issues of identity, power, and marginalization.

4. Physical Integration without Social Integration

Given trends both towards protracted and urban displacement, the model of education is increasingly one of integration of displaced children in local schools. Yet this integration is often limited to the physical aspects of service delivery and does not involve conscious attention to the social processes of living together, resulting in the marginalization of displaced children. Tensions among members of the host society and refugees or IDPs, including among school children, usually result from a synthesis of political attitudes, competition over scarce resources, cultural conflicts, and security concerns. Refugee and IDP children alike can be marginalized on an individual level, facing discrimination and exclusion in the classroom from members of the host society. Further, politically powerful languages, worldviews, ethnicities, and authorities often act through school curriculum and pedagogical practice to exclude groups of children, including the displaced, who do not share in that power. Without social integration, possibilities for political, cultural, and economic stability are limited for displaced children and their families, both in the present and in the future.

5. The Search for Quality

Education of refugee and IDP children is often of poor quality. UNHCR standards for measuring quality include the number of students per teacher, with a target of 40:1; the percentage of qualified teachers; and the extent to which refugee/returnee qualifications are recognized (UNHCR, 2009a, p. 22). By these metrics, refugee education is uneven. Often there will be only one teacher for 100 or even 200 pupils, especially in younger grades; and while in Uganda, on average, three quarters of teachers are trained, in Kenya it is less than one third (UNESCO, 2011, p. 155). Moreover, these measures of quality do not address the outcomes of schooling in terms of what is learned, and they are detached from the content, meaning, and purposes of education. The search for quality education has been limited by a lack of adequate field-based expertise, with UNHCR programs not managed, assessed or evaluated by education specialists but by generalists or specialists in other fields. While evidence is weak, it is likely that IDP children are similarly stymied in the search for quality education. The challenge of poor quality education acts both as a barrier to educational access for displaced children and an impediment to the role education can play in building durable solutions.

Research Priorities

Education for children in situations of conflict-induced displacement is shaped by the five challenges outlined in this essay. Programmatic and policy responses to these

challenges could benefit from research in several areas. First, basic data on access to and quality of education for refugee and IDP children is strikingly limited. The collection and dissemination of comprehensive information is critical to understanding the context-specific nature of the general challenges identified here. Second, "integration" can be understood as a guiding concept for education in displacement, especially given both the protracted and urban nature of contemporary displacement. In particular, more in-depth research is needed into the social implications of physical integration both related to displaced children in local schools and to the range of actors involved in their education, such as teachers, parents, NGOs, UN agencies, and national authorities. Third, the role of education as a portable durable solution for displaced children is in urgent need of attention, given the protracted uncertainty within which displaced children live. Dimensions of this investigation would include implications of the idea for curriculum, pedagogy, and post-primary opportunities.

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