

# Conflict and education for all



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Education is an essential tool for human development and the eradication of poverty. It is the means by which successive generations develop the knowledge, values and skills for future economic, social and cultural development. This is one reason why the Millennium Development Goals<sup>1</sup> place so much emphasis on achieving universal, free and compulsory primary education through Education for All (EFA).<sup>2</sup> There are many impediments to the achievement of EFA. These include lack of priority to education on the part of national governments (such as insufficient spending as a percentage of GNP, or inequitable distribution of funding and resources) and lack of effective action from the international community in the use of development assistance. Within countries, poverty, child labour, distance from school, unequal access due to gender or cultural factors, and the existence of conflict are all barriers to the enrolment of children in school.

The first EFA Global Monitoring Report (2002) presented a model of education based largely on quantifiable inputs and outcomes. The problem with a purely quantitative approach is that the 'quality' of education we provide also has implications for 'learning to live together' in an increasingly globalised world (Delors et al, 1996). Good quality education should also take account of the educational values, content and processes that education systems provide. These values include the statement in Article 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) that the aims of education involve:

the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin.

This has now been acknowledged in the third EFA Global Monitoring Report (2005), as follows.

Although most human rights legislation focuses upon access to education and is comparatively silent about its quality, the Convention on the Rights of the Child is an important exception. It expresses strong, detailed commitments about the aims of education. These commitments, in turn, have implications for the content and quality of education.

Therefore, arguments have emerged that the right to education is not only about access to education. Whilst the right to education is properly concerned with universal access to free and compulsory education on a basis of equality, inclusion and non-

discrimination, it is also concerned with the right to an education where the *content and processes* are consistent with human rights and fundamental freedoms.

However, there are a number of problems in turning these aspirations into practice. Whilst there may be international norms and standards concerning the aims and purpose of education, these are mediated significantly by local conditions, customs and practice; and governments tend to regard comments on their education system as external interference and an encroachment on national sovereignty. Added to this is the likelihood that, of the places where there might be concern about the type of education being provided, many are caught up in conflict. Nevertheless, from a rights-based development perspective, children do not lose the right to education simply because they live in the midst of a conflict or in a difficult environment.

A number of studies highlight aspects of education that have implications for conflict (Bush and Salterelli, 2000; Smith and Vaux, 2003; Buckland, 2004; Davies, 2004; Tawil and Harley, 2004) and suggest a number of reasons why we should be cautious about how education is provided. Firstly, education may be perceived politically as a powerful tool for ideological development. This can take many forms, ranging from the use of education in the development of liberal ideas, to nation building and, in extreme cases, political indoctrination. Secondly, education may be perceived as an instrument for providing the knowledge and skills necessary for economic development; and this may or may not include explicit reference to the implications or ethics of different forms of technological and economic development. Thirdly, education is a means by which social and cultural values are transmitted from generation to generation and, depending on the values concerned, these may convey negative stereotypes or encourage attitudes that explicitly or implicitly condone violence or generate conflict.

## Conflict analysis of education systems

Systemic analysis of education systems from a conflict perspective is an under-developed area. It is relevant for a range of professionals, including politicians, policy-makers, education administrators, teachers, parents, community activists, youth and development workers. There are many entry points to the various levels of an education system and the development of conflict-sensitive education systems involves analysis at each of these. This includes a critical analysis of the political ideology driving a



system, as well as its legislative, structural and administrative qualities – which all have implications for non-discrimination and equal access to education. The most contentious challenge in terms of international development is to find a way of raising critical questions about the form and content of education and its implications for relations between peoples, groups and nations. The difficulty will be in finding ways for this to be accepted internationally, as a legitimate concern and as part of improving the quality of education.

The extent to which education is a tool for political or ideological purposes may be evidenced by political involvement in operational matters, such as education appointments, deployment of teachers or the determination of the curriculum. In many circumstances political elites will want to use education for their own purposes. Although decentralisation of education systems may carry the potential to increase participation and ownership, it may leave education open to manipulation as part of local politics. This highlights the need for systems and structures that ‘insulate’ the education sector from political bias; potential corruption; and interference in operational decisions to implement policy. Therefore a necessary prerequisite for the success of any overall education sector plan that takes account of conflict may be capacity building and training for those working within the public service. At all levels of the education system *governance* is a crucial issue. The arrangements that are in place for representation and participation in consultation, decision-making and governance may be potential sources of conflict, or they may be opportunities for inclusion and the resolution of grievances. Arrangements for transparency and accountability also reflect an education system’s capacity to accept and address inequalities that might otherwise become sources of conflict.

In broad terms, the way in which EFA is implemented may compound inequalities and erode confidence in a government’s capacity to provide basic services. In such a situation, grievances are likely to become increasingly politicised and this makes it easier to mobilise support for violence and conflict. For example, education may become a source of conflict depending on whether it promotes conformity to a single set of dominant values (assimilation); permits the development of identity-based institutions (separate development); or encourages shared institutions (integration). The extent to which any of these approaches make conflict more or less likely will be highly context-dependent.

## Curriculum and textbooks

At the practical level, there are many aspects of a curriculum that have a bearing on conflict. When a curriculum is conceived narrowly as the transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next, it may be perceived as an extremely powerful tool to promote particular political ideologies, religious practices or cultural values and traditions. The contemporary trend in many countries is to ‘modernise’ the curriculum so that it is defined in terms of ‘learning outcomes’; where learning outcomes refer to skills, attitudes and values as well as factual knowledge. They may include the development of ‘generic skills’ that include communication skills, the ability to draw on multiple sources of information and evaluate conflicting evidence, the development of media literacy, critical thinking and moral development (EFA,

2003). Within international development settings there is a particular emphasis on ‘life skills’ as a means of providing child protection, social and health education (id21, 2004); and the argument is that these are the type of skills that are also helpful for peace-building (UNICEF, 2005).

Additionally, in terms of ‘content’, every area of the curriculum carries values with the potential to communicate implicit and explicit political messages. Many of these involve specialised areas of study. For example, the UNESCO position paper on language of instruction highlights the importance of sensitivity to majority and minority languages and distinguishes between ‘official’ and ‘national’ languages.

The choice of language in the educational system confers a power and prestige through its use in formal instruction. Not only is there a symbolic aspect, referring to status and visibility, but also a conceptual aspect referring to shared values and worldview expressed through and in that language.

(UNESCO, 2003:13–14)

Another sensitive area of the curriculum is the teaching of history and the extent to which history education may become a vehicle for promoting particular versions of history, revising historical events or confronting the past in a critical way. Political dimensions in the way that geography is taught and the lexicon it uses for disputed territories can be problematic; and the content of teaching material for areas such as culture, art, music and religious education often get drawn into controversy. Such areas are sometimes referred to as ‘national subjects’ and, in many instances, are tightly controlled by governments and regarded as essential tools for nation building.

The values represented in textbooks, and other learning resources, is a further area of specialist concern. For example, the operation of a single textbook policy may offer a ministry of education a way of guaranteeing a ‘minimum entitlement’ for all pupils to basic learning resources, particularly important in low-income countries and where equal access needs to be demonstrated. However, questions may arise about who controls or benefits from the production of textbooks and about their content. In contested societies, arguments over textbook content can also become cultural and ideological battlegrounds. Textbook review processes have a long history. For example, there were joint initiatives on French–German textbooks during the 1920s; German–Polish cooperation following the Second World War; and a US–Soviet textbook project in the 1970s (Höpken, 2003). They raise sensitive issues about what might be considered offensive and by whom. A project reviewing Palestinian and Israeli projects has been underway for some years. Further examples include concerns raised by China and Korea about the treatment of World War II in Japanese textbooks; and a critique of international assistance offered in relation to the replacement of textbooks in Afghanistan (Spink, 2005).

## Education during and after conflict

Education systems face exceptional challenges during times of violent conflict. In the midst of conflict, international humanitarian law has a particular importance. The Geneva Conventions make specific reference to protections related to education at times of war. These include provisions that:

- parties to a conflict ensure that children under fifteen, orphaned or separated from their families are provided with appropriate education
- occupying powers should facilitate the maintenance of education
- education should be provided for interned children and young people
- education should be provided for children throughout non-international conflicts.

A main weakness of such provisions is that, because the Geneva Conventions were developed just after the Second World War, they related to situations where a formal state of war had been declared between countries. Later protocols, UN declarations and resolutions have tried to update accepted 'rules of engagement' to accommodate the more complex nature of modern conflicts, but in these situations, where conflicts are often waged by groups within countries or where there is no sense of accountability to international authority, the main problem is a disregard of the values and norms represented by the Geneva Conventions (Tawil, 2000).

This area has developed significantly since then and has become known as 'Education in Emergencies'.<sup>3</sup> Whilst not defined exclusively in terms of conflict, the disruption of education due to conflict is certainly one set of circumstances that come within the definition of an emergency (Sinclair, 2002). A joint initiative by UNESCO<sup>4</sup>, UNHCR<sup>5</sup>, UNICEF, Norwegian Refugee Council, CARE International, and the Save the Children Alliance has led to the creation of an Inter-Agency Network on Education in Emergencies (INEE). INEE does not have the mandate to implement or co-ordinate during crises, but enables network members to share information and encourage collaboration. An important goal for INEE has been to define minimum standards for education in emergencies (INEE, 2005).

There is also a growing appreciation that reconstruction is not simply about replacing the physical infrastructure of schools, but needs to include opportunities for rebuilding human relations and inclusive education systems. In this respect, the contribution of education to processes of peace-building and reconciliation is not well understood. Part of this may be due to a natural desire to avoid revisiting the detail of past hurts and grievances, but part is also to do with our lack of conceptual understanding of what we mean by reconciliation and how education can contribute to the process in practice. Reconciliation may be necessary at many levels (between individuals, between groups in conflict, between peoples or nations at war). There are implications for education in terms of addressing the legacies of conflict and helping future generations understand what took place. Issues include the impact on the bereaved and injured, remembrance and commemoration; debates about forgiveness, expressions of regret or apology and symbolic events; understanding the role of amnesties, prisoner releases, alongside concepts of restorative and transitional justice<sup>6</sup>. These are challenging, long-term tasks that link education to the longer-term goal of conflict prevention.

The contribution of human rights education, citizenship programmes and intercultural education are also relevant. The key point about all these education programmes is that individually,

# African Centre for Conflict Resolution & Reconciliation

We are happy to share information about our non-governmental organisation – ACCORR.

ACCORR is headed by Rev. Dr David Asante Dartey, an eminent clergyman who has played a significant role as a peacemaker and facilitator of conflict resolution over many years, both within and outside Ghana.

Rev. Dr Dartey worked as General Secretary of the Christian Council of Ghana for 10 years and made a great contribution as a founding member and first General Secretary of the Fellowship of Christian Councils and Churches in West Africa (FECCHIWA).

ACCORR, as an organisation, is managing conflict and promoting reconciliation and is dedicated to the promotion of the study and understanding of conflict and violence, the development of skills needed for effective intervention and promotion of peace in Ghana, and Africa as a whole.

ACCORR's programme thrust revolves around basic skills development in conflict analysis and management, counselling, advocacy, mediation, negotiation and reconciliation.

ACCORR's activities include the organisation of workshops, training programmes, seminars for civil society, especially district assemblies and local communities, and training individuals for the development of their skills in the relevant areas.

Although ACCORR is a registered non-governmental, non-sectarian, non-profit-making organisation, it has a sub-regional focus, and does not exclude other African regions in its scope.

ACCORR seeks effective partnerships and collaborations with state institutions, civil society and international bodies that have similar aspirations as its own.

Though the organisation does not engage directly in research, it facilitates and collaborates in researches that contribute to the management of conflict and peace building. In this regard ACCORR networks with accredited higher educational institutions in Ghana.



For further information on ACCORR, please contact our website on:

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none of them offers a 'magic solution' for the prevention of conflict. Rather, they represent a set of education initiatives that address key themes and values which could have a preventative effect in the long term. It is unrealistic to expect that such programmes will have immediate impacts within short periods of time, but the absence of 'key themes' may be indicative of issues that a society is failing to address and these may generate problems in the long term.

Overall then, a consideration of education from a conflict perspective is concerned with both access and quality. It seeks to address inequalities in access and provide a quality of education that challenges discrimination and xenophobia, so that these do not become sources of grievance used to justify violence and conflict.

*This paper draws upon a report for the UK Department for International Development (DFID) on education, conflict and international development (Smith & Vaux, 2003) and a keynote address to the 2004 annual conference of the British Association for International and Comparative Education (BAICE).*

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## Endnotes

- 1 Millennium Development Goals (MDG) <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals>
- 2 Education for All (EFA) <http://www.unesco.org/education/efa/index.shtml>
- 3 Inter-Agency Network on Education in Emergencies (INEE) <http://www.ineesite.org>
- 4 UNESCO IIEP [http://www.unesco.org/iiep/eng/focus/emergency/emergency\\_1.htm](http://www.unesco.org/iiep/eng/focus/emergency/emergency_1.htm)
- 5 UNHCR <http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home>
- 6 Restorative Justice <http://www.restorativejustice.org>

## Biographical notes

**Professor Alan Smith** is holder of the UNESCO Chair in Education at the University of Ulster, Northern Ireland. He has taught in Northern Ireland and Zimbabwe and was a Senior Research Fellow at the University's Centre for the Study of Conflict. His work has included research on education and the conflict in Northern Ireland, young people's understanding of human rights and the development of social, civic and political education.

He has been a UK representative to the Council of Europe on Education for Democratic Citizenship and a consultant for the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the World Bank on education, conflict and international development. His current work has led to the establishment of a programme in Education for Pluralism, Human Rights and Democracy at the University of Ulster in partnership with UNESCO.