

'We used to walk to school and it was very dangerous'

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Introduction

Conflict-sensitive education (CSE) is normally associated with countries with high levels of fragility or in conflict or post-conflict situations. However, CSE also needs to be applied to conflict-affected children who have escaped such situations. This article looks at how principles of CSE might be applied when working with conflict-affected children who now live in London having sought asylum in the UK. It provides examples of children's experiences in their country of origin prior to flight and links these to how they experience education now. It also provides examples of how current educational provision is insensitive to their needs, in many cases failing to safeguard their mental health, reducing their chances of academic success and limiting the educational pathways open to them. It points out some of the ways in which education laws are not complied with and where international legislation is not fully upheld. Finally, suggestions are made for ways to support conflict-affected children in schools and colleges. The principles of CSE need to be applied in every education system in order for it to remain peaceable and for the fulfilment of children's rights.

Education for refugee and asylum-seeking children in London

Considering the impact of war on children attending London schools does not at first glance appear to be necessary: the law makes it clear that all children should have a school place and be treated as equals with their peers (section 14, Education Act 1996). Principles of inclusive education are considered to be upheld, but conflict sensitivity is not prioritised. Even in schools that pride themselves on their provision for refugee and asylum-seeking children, the focus is largely on support for learning English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). Conflict sensitivity has not yet made it into common practice – London, after all, is not part of a failed state, nor is it experiencing war. However, many of the refugee and asylum-seeking children who find their new home have experienced war, or political instability, or have had experiences of loss, grief and trauma in their country of origin. These children would benefit greatly from the principles of CSE embedded in school curricula and working practices. They have become conflict-affected children and for them the UK is a post-conflict country. This necessitates extending the definition of CSE so that children who have come from conflict zones are able to be fully included. CSE should cover education that is sensitive to children coming from conflict situations.

In the four London boroughs I have worked in, the link between past experiences of violent conflict and present educational needs

is rarely discussed. CSE isn't much talked about in planning for the inclusion of children like this. Instead, much of the focus is on ESOL, developing functional literacy and numeracy for those who have never been to school before, and the challenges of delivering mainstream education to a large number of children who do not speak English as their first language. Sometimes, a learning mentor might be thrown in, or access to a school counselling service. Rarely, however, are teachers delivering lessons that take into account the histories of children who have fled war, torture or persecution and who live with the aftermath of this in their daily lives. Other teachers have not recognised why children from particular countries might have arrived in London, even when their countries of origin are often in the headlines for having experienced protracted war.

Much of what takes place in mainstream education provision in London schools is contrary to the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies' (INEE) principles of CSE, which clearly state that education should:

- Not favour one group over another
- Not promote exclusion or hate
- Not reflect or perpetuate gender and social inequities
- Respond to diverse priorities and take account of specific context
- Avoid pockets of marginalisation and exclusion
- Provide psychosocial protection for children

In London, it may superficially appear that norms and laws preclude the type of conflict that the INEE principles are designed to prevent. But there are more hidden examples of conflict insensitivity. For example, children are excluded in subtle ways through stereotypes of perceived gender norms – 'the family haven't prioritised their daughter's education, all the attention is on their son', or 'boys from... country x, y or z... are sexist and don't work well with female teachers'. Both comments are from a school co-ordinator for the Ethnic Minority Achievement service. Often, the generalisations are very far off the mark, with the children in question falling behind for other reasons – work that is not at the correct level, learning complex new concepts in a second language without having any previous knowledge of that concept in their mother tongue, or bullying associated with being a new arrival. Using stereotypes acts as an easy way to justify lack of achievement, falling in line with recent research that highlights underachievement among particular minority groups (for example, Lambeth's series of reports about raising ethnic minority achievement; see Demie et al., 2008), and excuses teachers and other professionals from needing to consider more carefully the

impacts of conflict, the needs of new arrivals, and the complex and varied educational experiences they may have had. Indeed, Feyisa Demie states in an interview regarding Somali underachievement that 'racism, poverty and some teachers' negative perceptions of Somali children's abilities are adding to their problems' (Bloom, 2007).

Inappropriate homework may also cause exclusion from the curriculum through children being unwilling to write about war (for

example, in history lessons) or through having to study materials that, if carelessly handled, leave them open to bullying. For example, recent General Certificates of Secondary Education (GCSE) history questions have centred on the terrorism attacks on the World Trade Centre; this necessitates discussion of Islamic extremism, focusing on Pakistan and Afghanistan. Afghanistan continues to be the biggest refugee-producing country in the world (UNHCR, 2011), large numbers of whom end up in London. Given the often largely anti-Islamic rhetoric in much of the media, this could make Muslim children feel sidelined in school.

Beyond conflict-(in)sensitive education, other difficulties persist. Contradictions exist between protections for education enshrined in law and education in practice. All children have a right to full-time education, regardless of immigration status: this is not just the right to education (UDHR, Article 26.1), but a legal imperative for children to attend when they are of compulsory school age (between five and 16 years old in England; Education Act 1996, Article 14). However, there are disparities between law and actual provision, despite recent case law. A test case was heard in 2010 regarding the lack of appropriate education for unaccompanied minors in which it was deemed unlawful to have significant delays and to only offer ESOL (*R (KS) v London Borough of Croydon*, 2010). Despite this, delays persist: for example, a 15-year-old was told in a review with children's services not to be out on the streets during school hours because of the legal requirement to attend school and the possibility the police could stop to talk to him; notwithstanding this explicit acknowledgment of his need, no school place was offered for 11 weeks, and even when a place was offered no start date was given.

Marginalisation, exclusion and unequal treatment also persist through the low expectations that are held for refugee and asylum-seeking children. Many of these children express their future hopes in terms of their educational aspirations and achievements. Those who arrive in their mid-teens with a full education behind them, and especially those who have already learned some English, appear to be at a great advantage. They can 'catch up' quickly and many have been praised for their outstanding achievements.

Refugee children's experiences

Example 1'

We used to walk to school and it was very dangerous. There were a lot of police who were along the road. Sometimes, soldiers pretended they were the police. They would ask people to come to talk to them and then they took them. They killed some people, and they forced some people to be soldiers. I was walking to school and a policeman told me, 'Come!' I stepped off the road and then I knew he wasn't a real policeman. I ran for my life.

One day at school there was shooting and a big explosion. Lots of people were screaming. I was very frightened. A boy in my class was hurt – his arm was blown off and he was bleeding a lot. He was my friend and I tried to help him but he died.

The same girl told these stories about her experiences of school in her country of origin. When I first met her, she said she had never been to school. Perhaps she didn't want to talk about it. A year later, she told these things to her mentor who had been provided by a London-based NGO, Klevis Kola Foundation (KKF), specifically to address some of the challenges she was facing learning in a second language. She is attending a large secondary school in London, learning English and becoming more confident in maths. Although her teachers know she is a refugee and that her country of origin has had a long-running civil war, they have not planned any special ways to support her at school. There has been no attention to the psychological impacts of war or the ways in which school could begin to support a child like this. They are certainly not aware of the terrifying associations of violence, war and death that school holds for her.

Example 2

A 12-year-old child told her mentor that when she was eight she had been playing outside her house and helping to look after her younger siblings. Suddenly, there was gunfire all around her. Her baby sister was shot and died in her mother's arms. The girl scooped up her youngest brother and ran with him to safety. She and her family are all now living in London and she attends secondary school. Sometimes, she dreams about her baby sister but she isn't allowed to talk about her. Her parents are very keen for her to do well at school, but they do not permit her to stay for extracurricular activities because they are afraid for the safety of all of their children. She is not allowed to go on any trips because her parents want to know exactly where she will be and become very frightened if she is ever late home.

Inensitivity: examples

One boy had been given a creative writing exercise that asked him to imagine hiding from rebel soldiers. Red pen adorned a paragraph in which he described listening to the sound of bullets nearby. It said: 'Can you think of a way to personify this? It would really add to your story.' This child had experienced torture and knew that his parents and several friends had been executed. The exercise took no account of the impact such an instruction could have on his mental health. His teachers know he is an unaccompanied minor and are also aware of much of his history.

Another recently arrived unaccompanied minor was given homework that said: *Imagine what it would be like to be in a war. Write a diary entry about sheltering from bombs.* The child wrote a highly descriptive paragraph and was told that she had 'really captured the sights, sounds and feelings' of the situation. Her teachers had previously raised concerns about how traumatised this child appeared to be.



Rene Rossignaud/Commonwealth Photographic Awards

Hoping to remain: refugees and economic migrants arrive in Malta, Southern Europe

However, these remarkable few who do succeed, do so in spite of the system rather than through being enabled by it. Despite their clear academic ability, most are entered for vocational Business and Technology Education Council qualifications (BTECs) rather than the more academic GCSEs or ESOL courses at college. These lead to qualifications less suited to their ability, skills and interests, and do not stand children in good stead for continuing their education at higher levels. For example, three unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who are currently at college doing a range of GCSEs are regularly remarked upon as being unusual, with social workers, key workers and leaving care advisers all stating that doing GCSEs is unprecedented. This raises the question of *why* is it unprecedented? These three have come from a country of origin with a good education system and all three had a good level of spoken and written English when they arrived; this does make them unusual among other unaccompanied and separated children who may arrive having had no prior education, not literate in any language, with severe interruptions to their education and with no English at all. For these children, specific support in English is of course vital. However, assessments of previous education, of English fluency or of prior knowledge in their mother tongue, is often lacking, with all new arrivals channelled through the same pathways. For a significant minority, these pathways underestimate their capabilities and limit their choices.

Education often does not promote respect or tolerance (as laid out in UDHR 26.2). For example, in a school that prides itself on specialist provision for new arrivals and that recently gained an 'outstanding' from the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED –

the official body for inspecting schools in England), refugee and asylum-seeking children regularly state that they think they are treated differently. They do not view the extra ESOL classes as helpful, often asking why they can't be in mainstream classes where they think they will learn faster. This provision is not a short-term boost to their English, but is the group they remain in while they are at this school, including those who take Advanced (A) and Advanced Subsidiary (AS) levels. Being in it marks them out as different, and denies children in mainstream classes the opportunities to meet, make friends with and learn from refugee and asylum-seeking children.

Ways forward

Ideally, curriculum managers at schools would take on the responsibility of upholding minimum standards for conflict sensitive education (CSE), as laid out by the INEE handbook, and developing their own policies and materials. However, it is unrealistic to expect already hard-pressed teachers to take on yet more work. Instead, some small but significant actions could be taken to better include conflict-affected children and ensure that education is sensitive to the needs of all children.

- Err on the side of caution. If it is likely that children in a class have had experiences of violent conflict, do not ask them to dwell on these for the purposes of an exercise
- Aim to work closely with NGOs, local charities and community organisations who can advise on these issues and help to create conflict-sensitive lessons and curricula

- Engage diaspora and local refugee communities
- Encourage schools to be active members of networks working on these issues
- Emphasise the crucial role schools have in providing safe, stable spaces for children
- Develop stronger links with parents, reassuring them about the safety of their children while they are at school and encouraging them to permit their children to participate in extracurricular activities
- Professional development centres could run training on CSE, working with newly arrived children and providing high quality education for all

CSE for the inclusion of conflict-affected children need not be burdensome or yet another requirement for teachers to tick off. Instead, at its most basic, it simply demands thoughtfulness about what children may have experienced, consideration for the long-term impacts of this, and a willingness to make classrooms safe, supportive and inclusive for all.

The UN Secretary-General's High Level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda has recommended that the new global development framework should apply to all countries regardless of development status (UN, 2013). Commonwealth Ministers of Education have further recommended that all countries need to be conflict-sensitive by stating that every education goal in the framework should reflect a cross-cutting theme: 'Conflict and disaster risk reduction [should be] integrated into all national education sector plans' (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2012). Sanctuary is not meaningful unless attention is given to mitigating the long-lasting impacts of violence and war, and that requires conflict sensitivity at all levels and in all spheres.

Endnote

- 1 All of the examples in this article are about newly arrived refugee and asylum-seeking children in London, and are drawn from events between September 2011 and July 2013. All identifying characteristics have been omitted in order to protect the identities of children and the professionals involved.

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