Protecting children in a situation of ongoing conflict: Is resilience sufficient as the end product?

Ritesh Shah

School of Critical Studies in Education, The University of Auckland, Faculty of Education, Private Bag 92601, Symonds St, Auckland 1150, New Zealand

ABSTRACT

Modern day conflict presents a unique challenge to the disaster response and humanitarian community. Different to many disasters, conflict manifests itself over a protracted period, with varying levels of severity and no clear beginning or end. Increasingly children are the victims of such conflict, with their basic rights threatened. Education systems are increasingly vulnerable to attack either through direct violence and intimidation inflicted on children or teachers, or indirectly through the destruction of schooling infrastructure, the loss of school personnel, or restrictions on the movement of civilians and goods. While education has historically remained the 'poor cousin' within a humanitarian response package, it is increasingly acknowledged that high demand for education exists in conflict-affected situations. In recent years, attempts have been made to merge the education in emergencies and disaster risk/response communities. As greater attention and research inquiry is made into how education can promote resilience and protection to children affected by conflict, and respond effectively to the trauma, a critical exploration of how resilience is understood and acted upon in such settings is needed. This paper, using the case study of Gaza Strip within the Occupied Palestinian Territories, suggests that while programmatic interventions focussed on supporting the resilience of children and the institutional networks of support on which these children rely may deliver short-term benefits, a restoration of the status quo or the effective adjustment of these individuals and institutions to a new state of normalcy may be ineffective and counter-productive in the medium to long-term.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

In times of human created and natural disasters, education is acknowledged as playing a pivotal role in protecting individuals, communities and entire societies from the consequences of such emergencies. Resources have been directed at supporting and/or strengthening formal and informal educational programmes which are better able to respond to crises, protect children from risk, and prevent future crises from arising. Actors such as the World Bank, the International Network of Education in Emergencies (INEE) [8] and UNICEF all perceive such planning and support to be key to minimising future risks to the education system, and to it being able to maintain function during an emergency, withstand shocks, and protect children from the vulnerabilities of conflict.

Under the banner of supporting resilience, then, education is positioned as a means to support the construction of individuals, communities and societies who are able to operate in a more adaptive, responsive and flexible way in situations of instability and crises. The dominant construction of resilience, however, is focussed on maintaining education's function in emergency situations, and ensuring that education does not hasten or worsen existing conflicts under the guise of education doing "no further harm" [4]. It is this view of resilience that is critically scrutinised in this paper, in the belief that education should and can do more.

This paper specifically explores how the concept of resilience was perceived within two education interventions in Palestine—the *Better Learning Programme* (BLP), supported by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and the *Eye to the Future Programme* (E2F), administered by CARE International. Palestine's long standing conflict with Israel has led to increasing economic and social isolation and growing strain on the education sector's ability to deliver an accessible, equitable and quality learning experience to all. These factors are perceived to be key factors driving youth disenfranchisement and their turn towards extremism. In response, donors have focussed efforts in recent years on supporting children to be resilient (i.e. adapt) to the shocks created by the ongoing conflict, and ensure that the education system can act to support the resilience of these individuals. Through a review of the key outcomes of the programmes, familiar to the author because of his role as the external evaluator of each of them, the paper

E-mail address: r.shah@auckland.ac.nz

identifies the important role each programme played in supporting children to recover, cope and move on from the impact of acute periods of conflict. The paper also identifies, however, that a key shortcoming of both of these resilience-focussed interventions was that they lacked the capacity or willingness to impact on structures of inequity and injustice within and outside of education, and thus were unlikely to be sustainable in the long-term.

2. The rise of the resilience discourse in education in conflict affected contexts

Initially, studies about the concept of resilience focussed on identifying the traits and characteristics that allowed individuals to overcome adversity. The aim of such enquiry was to understand the protective mechanisms that made individuals resilient, and in particular the internal and external assets available which allowed them to succeed [7]. Such research found that traits such as having hope, purpose, social competence, problem-solving skills, emotional regulation, and a sense of place and future were all critical to being resilient as an individual. While acknowledged as important, these early resilience studies were also criticized as placing too much weight and responsibility on an individual's agency and capacity to be resilient, without appropriate acknowledgement of the institutional support that may be necessary for an individual to act in a resilient manner [14].

Later, research began to identify and acknowledge the important role that external assets such as protective social support networks provided by kin and social service agencies played in building individual resilience [21,25,36]. This second wave of resilience research served to do two things: (1) acknowledge that resilience was a process of interaction between an individual and his or her environment; and (2) is built through concurrent and mutually reinforcing strengthening of an individuals' internal and external assets [12]. For conflict-affected contexts, it is now well understood and agreed that the protective networks and institutions that surround an individual child must be able to respond to, and build on and support the internal assets of the individual. This ecological view of resilience, particularly in the educational sphere, draws on in part on the idea that "fostering an individual's resilience, requires institutional support and social services" [24, p. 15]. Concretely this has meant taking the time, within a humanitarian response, to not only provide immediate social protection to those affected by the crises, but also to explore and leverage off 'pockets' of existing protective networks and strengthen them—at the family, community and state levels.

The belief is that by doing so, resilience-focussed activities can support recovery and 'future proof' against ongoing risks. USAID [35, p. 5] for example, defines resilience as "the ability of people, households, communities, countries, and systems to mitigate, adapt to and recover from shocks and stresses in a manner that reduces chronic vulnerability and facilitates inclusive growth." Similarly, UNDP [31] identifies resilience in its activities as supporting the ability of a state or a component of the state system to enable recovery and prevent future crises from arising. Aligned with the often now common language of building or bouncing back better, that cuts across contemporary stabilization, humanitarian and development work, there is a sense that supporting the construction of resilient systems serves to establish self-sustaining communities that are able to adapt, function in a state of flux, and address certain and uncertain risks which they may face in the future. Underpinning this logic is the notion that adverse conditions are a new normal and that strengthening the resilience of individuals and the protective networks surrounding them provides a way of sustaining 'normal' function within such circumstances [12,16].

Rightful concern, however, has been raised that limiting resilience activity to supporting individuals and communities to adapt and maintain function in the face of adversity may be shortsighted. Concepts such as recovery, protection and adaption within the resilience discourse tend to conceive of a system as having clearly defined borders. This system faces threats/risks from 'outside', and has internally established mechanisms of resilience 'within'. It ignores the fact that systems can face internal threats, and concurrently, that vulnerabilities and resilience are constructed in society by vertical and horizontal structures of power that the system, internal to itself, may have little ability to change. Additionally, a focus on adapting to and normalizing a new context of vulnerability may serve to erase or ignore underlying structural injustices and struggles against oppression [23]. Chronic and intractable issues such as inequality, unbalanced power relations, marginalization and exclusion may remain untouched within a resilience approach focussed solely on adaptation to a changed context.

3. Education in emergencies: incorporating the resilience discourse

There is ample recognition that after the family unit, schools are one of the most influential institutions in a child's development, values formation and skills acquisition. In situations of adversity, they are seen as a critical place in which students can make sense of the challenges they are facing, find purpose and support and strengthen skills such as problem solving and emotional regulation that are critical to individual resilience [12]. Adult relationships with children founded on empathy, attention, trust, respect, high expectations and virtue are found in the research to be critical components to supporting such resilience [14]. When this happens, schools become, "a social resource that fosters a sense of normalcy and purpose in the midst of chaos, and have the power to serve as a 'protective shield' for all students and a beacon of light for youth from troubled homes and impoverished communities" [24, p. 13].

Supporting children's resilience in education is also seen to reduce future conflicts from arising. If children have the necessary self-regulation and coping skills which a protective education experience can provide, there is a belief that they are less likely to externalise these feelings through violence, "form[ing] the foundations of a peaceful society" [2, p. 2]. Approaches such as UNICEF's Child Friendly Schools (CFS) model have been actively promoted in recognition of the peacemaking and peacekeeping role schools can play. As part of the CFS model, teachers and caregivers are supported to recognise children's emotional distress and help them through it, and simultaneously are taught new pedagogical approaches that help to build the trusting, nurturing relationship that is often lacking in many educational settings [33]. Within CFS, strong focus is also placed on strengthening ties between the school and the community, in the belief that this serves to improve "mutual support and commitment to learning, protection, and well-being among students, school staff, and families" [24, p. 15].

In this drive to ensure that resilience can be actively promoted within the education sector, an inward gaze has been thrust on the skills, capabilities, and functioning of key educational actors and institutions—teachers, school leaders, parent associations, youth groups—with existing strengths leveraged upon and weaknesses redressed. This 'educationalist' approach presumes that all educational problems and dilemmas can be resolved through reforms and changes to educational processes and systems, rather than acknowledging that so much of what occurs in education is actually a product of what is occurring in society at large [3]. Such action, "masks power relations, contradictions of interest, and