

Education and conflict: Essay review

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Abstract

This review essay looks at three recent publications in the emerging field of ‘education and conflict’ and explores an apparent gap between theory and practice in the field. Recent works by educationalists Lynn Davies, ‘Education and conflict: complexity and chaos’ (2004) and Tony Gallagher, ‘Education in divided societies (2004)’ are contrasted with the World Bank’s 2005 ‘Reshaping the future: education and postconflict reconstruction’, and similarities between the publications are highlighted. Davies’ work uses complexity theory to illuminate the relationships between education and conflict and to establish an argument for ‘complex-adaptive schools’, which would use conflict positively to engage students in the creation of peaceful communities. Gallagher, using a number of well-developed case studies, examines the way education systems have been structured to respond to and operate in divided societies, concluding that classroom agency and flexibility are crucial. The calls, by Davies and Gallagher, for educational re-creation are explored in contrast to the World Bank’s publication, which offers best practice lessons to support post-conflict educational reconstruction. The article probes these differences and points to areas where the practitioner-directed Bank publication and the more academic works do and do not intersect, attempting to indicate areas where bridges may be built.

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Keywords: Education and conflict; Educational reconstruction; Post-conflict reconstruction; Peace education

1. Introduction

A growing body of work is emerging about education and conflict, including the three recent publications by the World Bank (2005), Lynn Davies (2004) and Tony Gallagher (2004) to be reviewed herein. In addition to the recent ‘mushrooming’ (World Bank, 2005) of literature, the ties between education and conflict are receiving increasing media attention. Mention is beginning to be made of mistakes that have happened during educational reconstruction and humanitarian ef-

forts. For instance, the much celebrated UNICEF ‘back to school’ campaign undertaken in Afghanistan in 2002 did succeed in re-starting a scattered educational system that had virtually ceased to function due to internal fighting, and in getting a large percentage (approximately 60%) of Afghani children back into classrooms (UNICEF(a), 2006). With a budget of nearly USD 50 million, the project involved rebuilding schools, developing curriculum, paying teachers’ salaries, providing school supplies and ensuring access to education for girls (UNICEF(b), 2006). In what was its “largest-ever logistical effort” UNICEF purchased and distributed 7000 tonnes of teaching and learning materials across the country (UNICEF(b), 2006).

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Typical of reconstruction efforts, the Afghan project was framed around a sense of urgency, and took place over a very short-time frame, rushing to have conditions ready for children to start school by a set date. While new curriculum materials were produced, the decision was taken to use existing textbooks for certain subjects including Islamic instruction (Stephens and Ottaway, 2002). These textbooks, produced with the support of 43 million USAID dollars in the 1980s and early 1990s (Off, 2004) contained anti-Soviet messages and were filled with violent images. From these books children learned to count using photos of guns and landmines, and received divisive and hate-filled religious messages. That such violent textbooks were reprinted as a part of the ‘back-to-school’ project, at an approximate cost of USD 200,000 (Stephens and Ottaway, 2002), highlights the increasingly recognized need for serious reflection about educational response to conflict, as well as the need for further research into programme evaluation and formulation of best practices. It is important to note that UNICEF has decided to destroy the re-printed textbooks (Stephens and Ottaway, 2002).

The above example also highlights the pressures that practitioners working towards educational reconstruction are under when designing and implementing programming. In the context of postconflict educational reconstruction, where once established systems are often in a state of crisis (Sommers, 2004), where funding is unstable and unreliable (Sinclair, 2001) and where infrastructure and communications are often destroyed (Sommers, 2004), it is understandable that mistakes have been made. In the Afghan situation, the school system had been virtually destroyed by 25 years of war, many students were registered in schools that were, in fact, nothing more than rubble, and girls had been forbidden to attend school for the previous 5 years under the Taliban regime (Off, 2004). Conflicts like those in Sierra Leone and Liberia have created situations where educational reconstruction must address the concerns of large numbers of child soldiers returning to formal education. Government ministries are often not functioning or have recently been re-established, educational records have often been destroyed and communications between different regions are difficult (Sommers, 2004; Davies, 2004).

As agencies have struggled to provide humanitarian response in situations of conflict, the need to

include educational response has emerged as a clear priority. Thus, education has come to be understood as the fourth pillar of humanitarian response (Machel, 2001), joining food and water, shelter and health care as essential needs to be met in situations of emergency. A considerable body of literature has emerged looking at educational provision during and in situations of emergency, a large percentage concentrating upon the education of refugees and internally displaced persons (see, for instance, Crisp et al., 2001).

In addition to being seen as a core component of humanitarian response, educational reconstruction in post-conflict situations is essential for stability, future economic growth and in order to meet Millennium Development and Education For All goals. In the context of these goals, to be achieved by 2015, emergency educational provision and post-conflict educational reconstruction are of central importance. It is estimated that half of the 104 million children who are not attending primary school live in countries that are facing or currently recovering from conflict (Tomlinson and Benefield, 2005). Thus, if MDG and EFA goals are to be accomplished, a focus on the education of those children affected by conflict is crucial.

The salience of the above arguments ensures that educational response to conflict is increasingly understood as an essential and immediate need. Still, research in this area is described by Tomlinson and Benefield as contributing to a “field in its infancy” (Tomlinson and Benefield, 2005, p. 13). While the urgency of a single conflict certainly merits attention, the majority of the literature in this area is grounded in the reality that “there are no signs that the world is becoming a less-conflictual place” (Davies, 2004, p. 3). Since the end of the Cold War we have seen both a change in the nature of conflict and an increase in its frequency (Kagawa, 2005; Sinclair, 2002). The three publications that this article concentrates on all begin their discussions by pointing to the intensification and transformation of conflict.

In ‘Education in divided societies’ (2004), Tony Gallagher cites a University of Uppsala study estimating that there were 82 armed conflicts in the world between 1989 and 1992 (p. 9). The vast majority of recent conflicts are fought within national borders and do not play out on conventional, demarcated battlefields. Lynn Davies, in ‘Education and conflict: complexity and chaos’ (2004), points out that in discussion of

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