



Promoting Quality Education in Refugee Contexts: Supporting Teacher Development in northern Ethiopia

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Issues for Refugee Education

The right to education of refugee and internally displaced children is enshrined in human rights laws and conventions; it is recognized that for children whose lives are affected by war, violence, displacement and the general disruption of normal life, education plays an important role in providing protection. This protection may be in the form of physical protection in a safe learning space away from dangers of the surrounding areas; it may be psychosocial protection in the form of interaction with peers and trusted adults with opportunities to be creative and to share concerns and ideas in different ways (Nicolai & Triplehorn, 2003). However, the reality is that many refugee and displaced children are unable to attend school – and for those who do, the quality is very low and there are few opportunities for much more than rote learning. In some circumstances going to school may even put children – and especially girls – at risk. This brief article uses the example of the education program in a refugee camp in northern Ethiopia and the Healing Classrooms Initiative (HCI) intervention to highlight some teacher-related challenges in the pursuit of quality education in such contexts, and to provide examples of how these may be addressed.

As suggested above, in refugee camps and other such emergency contexts, quality education has particular dimensions; the psychosocial support dimension is of particular importance but relevant, locally-determined learning content may also be critical. Children and youth may need very specific lessons in order to ensure their own survival and well-being and that of their families, especially younger siblings, for example on land-mines, on health and hygiene, on avoiding or resisting recruitment into fighting forces. Lifeskills education, including reproductive health and HIV/AIDS may also provide vital protection to students, and especially girls whose vulnerability to early pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS is often high.

Teachers have a critical role to play in the provision of such quality education; they are working directly with children and their families, are at the forefront of community efforts to achieve normalcy, to attend to children's physical, cognitive and psychosocial needs (Winthrop & Kirk, 2005). Yet the challenge for organizations supporting education in emergencies is that whilst the educational needs are huge and complex, the number *and* capacity of available teachers is often very low. Many of the teachers working in schools for refugee or internally displaced students (IDPs) only became teachers since fleeing their homes and have had little training or professional development to guide them in their work; for the most part they rely on their own experiences of being in school to inform their pedagogy.

With this limited professional orientation and support, while teachers have great potential to positively impact children's lives, some can also be abusive and disempowering. Indeed, some teachers may use teaching methods which marginalize certain students and which do not encourage questioning, analysis or critical thinking. We cannot take for granted that schools are always positive and beneficial places for children. Authoritarian and abusive behavior (including corporal punishment) from teachers creates quite the opposite of a healthy and healing classroom environment. Teacher training, support and professional development are therefore particularly important to the International Rescue Committee (IRC)¹ and to other agencies supporting education in emergencies.

The IRC's Healing Classrooms Initiative

The IRC's Healing Classroom Initiative is a global action research project focused on improving teacher support and development in crisis contexts from the perspective of student well-being. It is using qualitative methods to learn more about teachers' lives and experiences and to document existing 'promising practices'. Building on these existing practices and other assessment findings, new innovations are then developed and piloted. There is a wealth of literature that attests to the multiple and diverse identities, biographies and experiences of teachers in Western contexts, but in emergency and post-crisis contexts, there is very little attention given to the make up of the teaching body. And yet this is a highly significant issue, especially given the fact that in such situations, 'teachers' are often nominated by the community without any teaching experience or even a desire to teach. Male and female teachers often have very different experiences and priorities which we need to acknowledge. However, the focus of programming attention tends to be on the very practical issues relating to teacher recruitment and basic training. The Healing Classrooms Initiative is therefore piloting alternative approaches which recognize and build on the different experiences of the teachers. These approaches are more holistic, working with the principles of psychosocial well-being and the "healing" of children and teachers and integrating these with culturally appropriate notions of "good teaching."

The Healing Classrooms Initiative is inspired by Fowler's idea of "learning for leverage", that is engagement in patterns of organizational learning and action research that test and illuminate promising responses to important policy issues and dilemmas of practice (2002). In IRC this means encouraging and supporting staff to be more reflective about their work, to design and implement strategies for meaningful data collection and leading discussions for data analysis and learning. Working in these ways HCI promotes strategic action research to expand IRC's impact in the field of emergency education through "feeding in" evidence of improved programs, new conceptual knowledge about education and child protection and concrete recommendations for changes in policy at the same time as raising new challenging ideas for discussion ("feeding out"). Learnings, as well as tools and materials from pilot projects in specific countries are shared across all programs in a number of ways: staff workshops, a new 'elearning program' and through ongoing program support from the technical advisors.

A Healing Classrooms Initiative intervention in northern Ethiopia

Context

In northern Ethiopia, where a small population of Eritrean refugees lives in a camp close to the border, IRC has been supporting education since 2001, soon after the camp was first established. Although initially a non-formal program in makeshift structures, the primary education component has evolved into a fully accredited learning program from Grade 1- 10, with additional pre-school classes, housed in a formal school structure. In such a context, there are numerous challenges to quality education, including the stressful environment of the camp, the limited resources, the lack of tailor-made curriculum and teaching resources. However, one of the major challenges is with regard to the teachers. The initial refugee population of Kunamas had very low educational levels, and very few experienced teachers. The men and women selected by the community as teachers generally had little or no experience of teaching and had not completed their own secondary education; this was particularly true of the women. The Kunamas have since been joined by refugees of the majority ethnic group in Eritrea, Tigrigna, many of whom are well-educated and experienced classroom teachers; however it remains important that Kunama teachers are supported in their professional development for the provision of linguistically and culturally relevant education to the children of their community.

Initial assessment and interventions

As a first step in the Healing Classrooms intervention in Ethiopia an assessment was conducted in February 2004. This was a broad and multi-dimensional assessment of teaching and learning in the school, conducted through a mixed methods approach including student and teacher interviews and questionnaires, classroom and playground observations (Kirk 2004). The quality of education for the school's youngest children was of particular concern; the assessment documented that although the school day was shorter for the younger students, it was made up of a series of separate lessons, given by different teachers. The students sat at desks and had no resources to support their learning. As in the other classes, the teaching methodology was predominantly teacher talk, with some individual question and answers. Some of the teachers occasionally used pictures and real objects (for counting in maths, for example), but there were few opportunities for active learning. Teachers had received no special training on early years' methodologies such as learning through play, nor in early years' child development. Furthermore, the pre-school classes were generally taught by the least experienced teachers – mostly women; the better qualified and more experienced teachers focused their attentions on the higher stakes and higher status grades and subjects such as science and maths. The impact of quality on attendance was obvious; as asserted by the headteacher himself, one indicator of the low quality of instruction and therefore lack of commitment from the parents, was an average daily attendance rate of less than 50%.

The HCI assessment therefore recommended moving towards a more age-appropriate school day schedule and teaching methodologies that emphasize learning through play, song, story and drama. Also recommended was to consider instituting

'homeroom teachers' with whom the students would be able to develop a special relationship, even if they are sometimes taught by other less familiar teachers. Teacher training and development was clearly a priority but at the same time, it was important that this was not premised on a deficit model of the teachers, and that the special qualities of the least qualified teachers were also acknowledged and built upon. A follow up assessment, using a similar methodology, but more focused in scope, and particularly attentive to changes in teachers' attitudes and self concept, was conducted in October 2006 (Kirk, 2007).

'Spontaneous' and 'Tentative' Teachers

"When we arrived there were no educated men and so we are the best."

"When we came there were so many children from the community and I thought I had better share what I know. I had never thought about becoming a teacher."

Women teachers, HCI Initial assessment, February 2004

Through in-depth interviews with the male and female teachers in the school, critical issues emerged related to how they feel as teachers and how they understood their role and status in the community; we use the broad term 'teacher identity' to refer to this combination of self concept as a teacher and awareness of the collective status and roles of teachers in the community. Various teachers articulated how contradictory their teacher identity was; most of them had never before considered – or even wanted – to become teachers, and of the initial teachers, most had not yet completed their own secondary school education. Rather, as the Kunama people had fled persecution in Eritrea and settled in a temporary camp, community leaders identified the most educated men and women and requested them to teach. IRC soon started to support the school, providing basic teacher training. Despite the IRC teacher training seminars and the obvious progress that had been made in their teaching skills, the participating teachers still felt somewhat uncertain about their teacher identity. They were very aware of their own limitations and quite under-confident about their ability to be a 'real' teacher. The few women teachers especially, expressed how awkward it was for them; they knew they are the best educated and so therefore the most suitable teachers, they knew that if they did not teach, the children would be without educational opportunities. Yet at the same time, it was still uncomfortable for them to do so, feeling that having not completed school themselves it is impossible for them to be good teachers. In order to describe and discuss the implications of such experiences - which are otherwise absent from the literature on teachers and teacher biography - we coined the terms 'spontaneous teachers' and 'tentative teachers'.

As interconnected issues, teacher spontaneity and tentativeness both have negative impacts on the quality of teaching and learning for students. 'Spontaneous teachers' are those who, at a time of crisis or necessity, are nominated as teachers - or who nominate themselves as teachers; such teachers may never have had a career plan or even desire to become teachers and so may feel understandably conflicted about their entry into the profession. Such spontaneous entry into teaching often leads to a certain 'tentativeness' about being a teacher. Teachers may feel uncertain about whether they

want to remain teachers, especially if other opportunities arise, they may feel uncertain about how long the community will accept them as teachers if other ‘better teachers’ become available. Even with intensive training and professional support, they may continue to lack confidence in their own skills as teachers.

Support and Development for ‘Alternatively-qualified Teachers’

When there was a shortage of teachers in the camp we acted as if we were professionals ... Well, starting from Walanihby², taking so many trainings, and in addition to daily experience we are now almost feeling like teachers.

Woman teacher, follow up interview, October 2006

In 2006, we conducted follow up interviews with the teachers. Some were now working in the new pre-school and these interviews constituted an opportunity for them to look back on their professional development over the last 5 years. Improvements in the quality of the physical learning environment for young children with the construction of a purpose-built pre-school had been coupled with specific efforts to strengthen teacher identity, to help the teachers feel more like ‘real’ teachers and therefore more certain about a longer term commitment to teaching.

As a result of these and other HCI interviews, IRC HCI started to use the term ‘alternatively qualified teachers’ to highlight the very valuable qualities and abilities that inexperienced and unqualified teachers do have, especially with regard to child well-being. In many ways these teachers are ‘alternatively qualified’. Being part of the same community as their students, they often have very intuitive understandings of how to protect and support children in difficult times. They also understand the needs of the students, for example, for extra explanations of lessons, and they reinforce the messages from the children’s parents about the value of the education and the importance of studying hard. Furthermore, they understand the need for very context-specific educational content, such as lessons focused on ‘social cohesion’ and on environmental protection and the careful use of wood resources.

IRC has subsequently used a more teacher-centred approach to teacher development. This approach builds on the actual and possible roles that teachers articulated for themselves and on the context-specific strategies they described that they used to ensure quality learning. Such an approach differs significantly from the more traditional teacher training approach which promotes ‘good pedagogy’ but from a starting point that is premised on the assumption that the teachers’ current pedagogy is ‘poor’. For example, at the outset of the new pre-school program, the teachers’ very active involvement in the translation and adaptation of the curriculum itself was an important way of recognizing, validating and integrating their local knowledge and understandings; the teachers worked with ‘mentors’ to map out the curriculum topics into a contextually-grounded program of learning for their students. Such an approach has further helped to strengthen teacher identity and has also been complemented by community respect and admiration for the women teachers who are seen to be doing something very special and important in the community. For many of the Kunama refugees, a special pre-school, with facilities and activities specifically oriented to young children’s needs, is something they had never seen before. The teachers have responded positively to both the

professional support and the changed physical environment and are developing more child-centred approaches, for example, engaging their students in more active learning activities in the classrooms and in dance and song in the central school hall (Kirk 2007).

At the same time, efforts are being made to provide opportunities for the teachers to continue and complete their own education – both through access to formal secondary schooling in local Ethiopian schools, and through special, ‘advanced’ adult education classes in the camp which focus on issues of interest to them, such as globalization, world events, politics and so on. In the follow up interviews of 2006, women teachers talked about their interest in formal certification as teachers. Completion of secondary education and access to Ethiopian teacher education courses is also a pathway to this, and an important strategy for IRC to use in the promotion of a strong, positive and sustainable teacher identity.

The Bigger Picture: Promoting Quality in Education in Emergencies, Chronic Crises and Early Reconstruction

IRC’s work to enhance quality pre-school education for refugee children takes place within a context of increased global attention to education for children whose lives are affected by crises of different kinds. Although education in emergencies, chronic crises and early reconstruction is a relatively new field and one that has suffered from under-funding and inconsistencies in coverage and quality, the establishment of the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) in 2000 has, through the mobilization and coordination of UN, NGO, government and other actor members, helped to raise the awareness of the importance of education in emergency and post-emergency contexts and to increase the coverage and quality of interventions³. The Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies, Chronic Crises and Early Reconstruction, developed through a consultative process facilitated by the INEE in 2003-2004, synthesize and articulate good practice and lessons learned (INEE, 2004). These Standards provide a framework for quality education in the most difficult circumstances that is oriented to protection and peacebuilding. Gender equality is a cross-cutting principle, and especially relevant to the Standards applying to teacher recruitment, training and support.

Such principles underpin IRC’s efforts underway in Shimelba Camp, northern Ethiopia, and provide direction for further development. Challenges certainly remain, especially in terms of maintaining high levels of teacher motivation in the difficult and stressful refugee camp environment. However, lessons learned from this Healing Classrooms pilot project indicate that there is certainly much to be gained in terms of educational quality from listening to teachers’ voices, and from creating teacher support and development materials and activities based on who the teachers really are and on what their different strengths and weaknesses might be. Conceptual insights gained from this project, namely notions such as ‘tentative’, ‘spontaneous’ and ‘alternatively qualified’ teachers, are worth pursuing. As indicated in the overview of the HCI above, teachers working in emergency and post-conflict contexts have so far received little attention from researchers. A better understanding of how they construct their practice and professional identities, and the challenges involved, can help design more effective organizational support systems to this end. Just as in situations of normalcy, and arguably

to a larger extent, teachers play a significant role in the provision of quality learning opportunities.

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¹ The IRC is an international humanitarian agency committed to ensuring protection and development for children and youth affected by conflict. IRC supports education and child protection programs in over 20 countries, with a range of responses, from informal, child friendly spaces in the immediate emergency contexts, to technical support to ministries of education as they are restructuring the education system.

² Walanihby was the first camp – the refugees have subsequently moved to Shimelba.

³ See www.ineesite.org.