

*Psychosocial Support in Schools for Children in Armed Conflict :
a Lost opportunity?*

We have just heard presentations of two wonderful psychosocial programmes in schools in armed conflict settings, so the title above may seem a little harsh. However, the global scene, I believe, looks a little different, and I would like to share some of my concerns in the hope that this Symposium may be a catalyst for taking up this issue.

The reality is that there are many psychosocial support training for teachers “out there” – I, for one, developed one for UNICEF some years ago, and yet, we are not there yet. And this for several diverse reasons.

The first concern and question is coverage; another is what is being implemented and last the lack of harmonization of approaches. A separate issue which I hope the follow-up to the Symposium will take on, is the need to conduct rigorous evaluations of the effectiveness of the programmes. Among all the conflict-affected settings whose psychosocial interventions we want and need to measure, schools actually offer the easiest ones.

Coverage. First, let us recognize that only a fraction of children in armed conflict actually attend safe, let alone nurturing schools. Too often, I meet little children roaming around displaced people camps, out of school because they have been beaten or otherwise terrified or mistreated by their teachers. Refugee settings fare generally better, because humanitarian workers have more control over school administration and budgets, and have a geographically more confined constituency, making training and follow-up an easier task. But let us recognize that, as a whole, coverage is dismal.

This is puzzling because schools offer a unique opportunity to reach millions – many millions - of children in conflict situations, and to follow them over time – a captive audience in need of support who has daily encounters with professional adults. In terms of outreach for potential psychosocial responses, schools also offer an organic, ready-made opportunity to reach mothers, fathers, grand-

mothers and other community members as well; in other words, an ideal entry into communities. Given this opportunity to reach such a large segment of the conflict-affected population, continued limited coverage is puzzling.

Secondly, when psychosocial interventions do exist, the time allotted for the training is usually vastly inadequate, as sometimes only a day or two is set aside for it, and in addition little or no follow-up is provided. All too often it looks like an afterthought. This, I believe, may be due in part because of misunderstanding on the part of educators of the critical role that a supportive classroom can have on actual learning. The common understanding is that “*children are all traumatised*” and that we want to teach teachers how to respond to trauma. Trauma is the new disease, every normal reaction, even mild, to the dire situation, elicits a diagnosis of “trauma”. It is no surprise, then, that educators are intimidated and skeptical, and wondering whether we will really teach their teachers how to heal trauma.

Equally disturbing is a sort of “free for all” market place with regard to psychosocial training, whereby, in the absence of standards ministries of education or schools principals are familiar with, interveners can implement anything they want, without any quality control. In one region of a country I recently worked in, I observed three different NGOs with psychosocial training programmes - covering all but about two dozen schools - , each coming with a different training and approach. It actually happened that on the same day, two different NGOs arrived at the same school, each ready to start a psychosocial training .

On the question of content and quality there is another fundamental issue rarely addressed. All too often the training fails to face and take into account the grim reality of the teaching environment, and take refuge instead in the safety and comfort of training teachers in a few “psychosocial recovery principles”, with little attention to the context of learning, which unfortunately, in many cases vastly diminishes the benefits of the training.

Here is some of the realities of schools in most - even if not all - conflict-affected and post conflict settings:

- > Very large classes, where children often number as many as 100
- > Low teachers' education and teacher training
- > Limited –in some places absence of – teaching and learning materials
- > Low compensation for teachers, and often delayed pay for months or longer
- > A population of teachers who is no different from that of their students, meaning deeply affected by the conflict, often having suffered multiple losses of property or family members, and living with uncertainty .
- > School administration unable to support its teachers for lack of basic means, and /or knowledge of how to do it.

I would argue that the school environment has to be studied first, before finalizing any psychosocial training programme, and modifications to that environment made wherever possible. For example, where classes are unmanageably large, children can be split up in smaller units supported by a volunteer older youth – this has been done successfully in some places but only a few. Even as there is widespread recognition that teachers also need support, few places have articulated or taken action to provide such.

How to support teachers may be the first thing we should discuss with school administrators. Following on the critical benefit of attachment and relationships principles we discussed yesterday, we must find ways so that teachers can weave supportive relationships, create opportunities for supervisors to listen to them , and, perhaps, among other measures, promote support groups among teachers.

That is all I will say for now, as this is not the place to get into the actual approaches and content of psychosocial training and responses in schools. I do hope, however, that this Symposium will spur a renewed interest in making sure that schools in conflict areas are safe, first, and supportive, and that we find ways to work more closely with the education sector to make some of the needed changes happen.