

Educating Refugee Children – a Global Way Forward

Rose Cardarelli, Ed.D.

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals represent a global commitment to ensuring that children have access to a quality education, yet it is estimated that 262 million children are out of school around the world.¹ *Save the Children* notes that half the refugees worldwide are children, who have left everything behind to escape conflict, have experienced profound physical and emotional traumas and are missing years of school, severely compromising their futures.² *Save the Children* also notes that it is the non-developed countries which are the catalyst to children being educated, advising, "it is important to build bridges of partnership." While it is understood that the refugee situation is a difficult one, the good news is that there are many dedicated organizations from across the global community available to respond to this massive calamity. The profound physical and emotional traumas experienced by refugee and migrant children require a multitude of traditional and non-traditional educational services and a broad spectrum of professionals to help them endure and survive their current situation. We acknowledge that this immense crisis demands a cooperative humanitarian response for the provision of education in emergencies with accompanying psycho-social support to meet the challenges facing today's refugee and migrant children. What we lack is a coordinated effort that maximizes all available capabilities and addresses the problems of all children.

Working Toward Solutions

There are many descriptions of the educational approaches that can be offered as solutions for this immense and important crisis.³ These include **formal, informal, non-formal, accelerated, and essence-based** education programs. **Formal education** is normally traditional classroom-based, and provided by trained teachers. **Informal education** happens largely outside the classroom, in after-school programs, community-based organizations, libraries, at home, or in the case of refugee and migrant children, under extenuating circumstances (disaster, conflict or humanitarian emergency) conducted primarily by people who are not trained or certified teachers. **Non-formal education** includes programs that do not generally have or provide formal certification or use approved curriculum, but have more structure than informal learning, and may be intended to accomplish formal learning objectives/outcomes. Non-formal learning includes various structured learning situations, such as swimming sessions for toddlers, community-based sports programs and conference style seminars, which either do not have the level of quality in curriculum, accreditation or teacher certification associated with formal learning, but have more structure than those associated with informal learning programs, which typically take place spontaneously as part of other activities. These three styles of learning are recognized and supported by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).⁴

Accelerated learning seeks to recover lost time by completing formal educational requirements using more rapid but still rigorous processes. **Essence-based education** involves sensing and advancing a child's essential-self through engaging him or her in essential, meaningful content, developing essential lifelong skills and dispositions, and meeting his or her essential human

needs.⁵ (Such learning is particularly relevant for migrant and refugee children.) This paper provides insights into the applicability of these programs to meet the needs of the students, to ensure successful access to and assimilation into opportunities for education. It is evident that any program pursued should include the social competencies necessary for academic success and progress and in conjunction with learning competencies that are part of a national curriculum of the host country Ministry of Education for greater success and sustainability.

Education programs conducted by the UN now focus primarily on ensuring accreditation and inclusion of all children within national school system processes. There are currently several UN organizations specifically mandated to assist in educating refugee children, including: the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO - which is technically the lead UN agency for education), and Save the Children, which promotes children's rights, provides relief and helps support children in developing countries. UN officials believe that education programs should allow refugees the opportunity to transition to higher levels of education through integration into the available national system.⁶ Accelerated education is viewed by the UN as an alternative to education rather than an informal adjunct process. The UNHCR focuses on 10 Principles and it feels strongly that these principles are relevant to overall good programming for accreditation and the inclusion of all students.⁷

Informal learning approaches teach the love of learning and re-engage children's senses; they primarily complement formal education systems and should not seek to replace or supplant the formal process in the country of residence. Programs like the "Essence of Learning" developed by Caritas Internationalis, focus on reading support and navigating through the barriers that children have endured due to trauma.⁸ Similarly, "We Love Reading" is a Jordanian organization that builds mobile libraries and trains local community members to facilitate reading circles by teaching children to read out loud and build a culture of literacy;⁹ the stories read to the children have been written by educators and they have key messages in Arabic that speak to relevant life topics, which reinforces the educational value of the program but still is not intended to meet formal education objectives.

Some countries with high numbers of refugees, such as Greece, have mapped and identified the gaps regarding formal and non-formal education. Greece has determined the number of children in school and those not in school and identified their countries of origin to further develop educational strategies. According to the Greece National Education Sector Working Group, they currently have 3 specific objectives: to expand access to education for refugee children; to improve the quality of education for refugee children within a protected environment; and to strengthen the capacity of the communities and the Greek education system to support integration of refugee children in formal schools. The Greek government has conceptually planned that education for pre-school children (4-6 years of age) will occur in camps, primary school age children (7-12 years of age) will be transported to nearby Greek schools for afternoon and pre-integration classes, and secondary students (13-15 years of age) will attend school for afternoon classes. They will also provide some vocational classes and it is their intent to hire additional Greek teachers, and teacher coordinators to meet the evolving needs. Members of the Greece National Education Sector Working Group are collectively pursuing the opportunity to

increase access to education for refugees, improve the quality of education for refugee children in a protected environment and strengthening the capacity of the communities and the education system for both refugees and Greek children to fully support the integration process. The approach in Greece may possibly be a model for other countries with high numbers of refugees who are striving to ensure educational objectives are met for all children.

Accelerated education programs are flexible, age-appropriate, inclusive programs with protective practices that are designed to provide access to education for disadvantaged children who have had their education disrupted due to conflict and crisis. Accelerated education is intended to provide basic education in a focused and accelerated mode while integrating psycho-social wellbeing and life skills into a curriculum that is relatable to the student's exposure to conflict situations.¹⁰ An Accelerated Education Working Group, led by the UNHCR, and comprised of representatives from UNICEF, USAID, the Norwegian Refugee Council, the International Rescue Committee, Save the Children, Education and Conflict Crisis Network and War Child Holland works to develop and implement such programs where they are most needed. They are focused on achieving a more standardized approach to accelerated education through the development of materials based on international standards and practices. They intend to do this through improving international and national policies and systems, strengthening the evidence base through research and knowledge management, and improving programming through development, promotion and dissemination of guidance and tools. Such programs have been proven to be quite effective.¹¹ While one would think that education standardization might be the most efficient and convenient method, some research reveals that high achievement may also result from individualized learning.

Rock and Bokas state “**Essence-based learning** is unique in the way that it simultaneously addresses and triggers many important aspects of the learner's essential self: thinking, memory, emotions, ethics, aesthetics, the physical, and the senses – what is being learned – how it's being learned, the learning environment, and the physical and emotional needs of the child.”¹² They believe all factors of curricular content, methodology, environment and the child, must come together. One example of essence learning for refugee children involves yoga. There have been educators who have brought the gifts of yoga, being calm and mindfulness, to the everyday lives of children living in refugee camps. Yoga methods have been a tool used to address the social and emotional needs of the children suffering from post-traumatic stress as a direct result of the crisis and experiences they have endured in their home country. Yoga brings the intent to build up a child's self-confidence and to strengthen the mind and body connection. Fun and complementary sports, recreational and yoga activities are also vital to instill hope and play. The Qatar Foundation has established a program using yoga with refugees with many positive results.¹³ More research into these approaches would solidify their relationship with the learning process.

Recommendations

Unfortunately, there is very little published policy that provides guidance, standards and indicators of success for all these various educational programs that might demonstrate the benefits or value of non-traditional approaches to the kinds of uncommon education needed by refugee and migrant children. But the discussions must occur because solutions are imperative

and resources are available; we need to ensure they are well focused. To develop a better way forward, the following recommendations should form the core of a new more focused international response:

First, we all must **be realistic** about the capacities of the educational systems, schools and teachers in the most conflict-ridden countries, where so many of our migrant and refugee children reside – they simply do not have the resources to accomplish all the work that is required. Even under normal conditions, most of these educational systems are challenged to accomplish what is needed for their own resident children, so they are far from able to accommodate the extra stress they currently suffer and cannot provide the optimal formal education solution for the total population resident in their locales. There is no doubt that they need international assistance.

Second, even with their paucity of resources, the nations that shelter these refugee and migrant children **should retain formal education responsibilities**. They know best what is required to prepare the children of their regions for success, and their efforts to maintain national standards for learning would only be undercut if others tried to provide competing, alternate formal education processes. National standards and outcomes must remain the goal for all organizations and everyone seeking to help refugee and migrant children to learn and prosper. Those standards should be set by national leaders and should be supported fully by other international agencies.

To help the nations where refugee children most need support, **Non-Governmental Organizations and International Organizations should assume a supporting education role**. Using the same national education standards, NGOs (which have the skilled personnel and the resources to bridge the gap between the resident student populations and the outcomes desired) should apply themselves to the populations most in need – those requiring catch up learning to recover what they have so long missed. If Save the Children, the OCED, OFDA and USAID were focused primarily on accelerated education, then the resources of the countries involved could remain focused on their intended mission of formal education and all students could prosper.

Finally, **charitable organizations should focus on informal learning approaches**. Informal learning is easiest for such organizations to accomplish given the more episodic nature of their support and the nature of their personnel's skills. Informal learning remains extremely valuable but should not compete with the formal learning opportunities.

The crisis in education for displaced children is hugely important and challenging, but tangible solutions are within our grasp at this tipping point. However, the people of the world must act at this defining time. If the majority of organizations around the globe could work together and focus their efforts in these ways, then the clear and present crisis of some 262 million out-of-school children could be eased and the well-deserved futures of so many of our fellow human beings restored. It would be tragic if the education crisis of refugee and migrant children worsens to the point of no return and realized by generations to come.

About the author: Dr. Rose Cardarelli is a former U.S. Army Medical Service Corps officer and Professor of Human Security. She obtained her Ed.M. from Boston University, her MHA from Baylor University and her Ed.D. from The College of William and Mary. Her humanitarian work with refugees, migrants and disasters has taken her to Greece, Haiti, Germany, and Jordan. She is a Kappa Delta Pi Non-Governmental Representative to the United Nations and a member of the Association for Childhood Education International.

Notes

¹ UNESCO Institute for Statistics, “Results of the 2016 UIS Education Survey,” 2016, found at: <http://uis.unesco.org/en/news/results-2016-uis-education-survey-now-available>.

² See *Save the Children* at:

http://www.savethechildren.org/site/c.8rKLIXMGIpI4E/b.9311443/k.5C24/Refugee_Children_Crisis.htm.

³ See “Education Cannot Wait,” 2016, found at: <http://www.educationcannotwait.org/>.

⁴ OECD, Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning, found at: <http://www.oecd.org/education/skills-beyond-school/recognitionofnon-formalandinformallearning-home.htm>.

⁵ See: Rod Rock and Arina Bokas, “Disrupting Education: Capturing the Essence,” *Brilliant or Insane: Education on the Edge*, found at: <http://www.brilliant-insane.com/2015/03/disrupting-education-capturing-the-essence.html>.

⁶ UNHCR. (2012). *Education Strategy 2012-2016*, found at: <http://www.unhcr.org/5149ba349.pdf>.

⁷ See Khassim Diagne and Hannah Entwisle, “UNHCR and the Guiding Principles,” found at: <http://www.fmreview.org/sites/fmr/files/FMRdownloads/en/FMRpdfs/GP10/33-35.pdf>.

⁸ See: <https://www.caritas.org/>.

⁹ See: <http://welovereading.org/index.php?lang=en>.

¹⁰ Rod Rock and Arina Bokas, “Disrupting Education: Capturing the Essence,” *Brilliant or Insane: Education on the Edge*, found at: <http://www.brilliant-insane.com/2015/03/disrupting-education-capturing-the-essence.html>.

¹¹ See USAID’s “Accelerated Learning Program for Positive Living and United Service, Mid Term Evaluation Review,” found at: http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PDACM655.pdf.

¹² Rock and Bokas.

¹³ See “The Nature of Yoga Brings Mindfulness to Everyday Life,” found at: <https://www.qfi.org/blog/nature-yoga-brings-mindfulness-everyday-life/>.