

Providing education opportunities for Syria's youngest refugees

Maysoun Chehab

*Basic Education
Programme Officer,
UNESCO Beirut – Regional
Office for Education in the
Arab States, Lebanon*

Hundreds of thousands of young children have had their education interrupted by the ongoing civil war in Syria. UNESCO Beirut sees quality early childhood education as a force for reconstruction, peace building and giving a sense of hope to young refugee children and their families. This article explains the importance of a flexible approach, being willing to deliver education in various settings and using various personnel, and the need to integrate non-formal education for refugees with formal education systems in host countries.

War and conflict have been described as ‘development in reverse’ (Collier, 2007), with their impact on countries and people getting worse as crises are prolonged. As the conflict in Syria enters its sixth year, a significant proportion of young children already live in conflict-affected zones – and, with no resolution in sight, their numbers are likely to increase. The crisis has forced around 4.8 million people to leave Syria in search of a safe haven in neighbouring countries such as Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Egypt and Iraq. More than half of the refugee population is under 18 years of age, including an estimated 880,000 children under 5 years old (data retrieved in May 2016 from UNHCR sources).

The consequences of conflict for refugees are well documented and the negative impacts on young children are known to be numerous, affecting all dimensions of their development. These include losing or being separated from their parents or caregivers, social and emotional neglect, physical injury, loss of the home environment and disruption of daily routines, hunger, lack of hygiene and healthcare, and a high risk of missing out on educational opportunities. In Syria, a whole generation is at risk of falling behind and losing hope; education has been always highly valued by Syrian families, and it is painful for parents to see their children missing out on this opportunity.

Failing to ensure access to quality education opportunities has an immensely negative impact on the future and well-being of young refugees. Education can save and sustain the lives of young children and their families, offering physical, cognitive and psychosocial protection when delivered in safe, neutral spaces. Education restores children’s routine and gives them hope for the future; it can also serve as a channel both for meeting other basic humanitarian needs and communicating vital messages that promote safety and well-being.

As the United Nations' lead agency for education, UNESCO through its Beirut office is playing an active role in promoting early childhood education as a part of its response to the Syrian crisis. Advocacy efforts, policy formulation, strengthening the resilience of systems, and capacity building to support caregivers and education personnel are among the top priorities for UNESCO's intervention.

Flexibility, innovation and stimulation

What kind of education programmes do young children need in refugee settings? The key words here are flexibility, innovation and stimulation. While early childhood programmes for refugees should meet the minimum standards for quality set out in the International Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE)'s document *Minimum Standards for Education: Preparedness, response, recovery* (INEE, 2010), they can do this through a variety of settings. They can be implemented in formal education settings, temporary classrooms, mobile schools, community centres, in a tent, under a tree, at a health clinic, in a social development centre, or in a child's home. In times of crisis, education services can be delivered by teachers, community workers, social assistance, volunteers, or any trained personnel.

During the early stages of a conflict, it may not be practical to implement early childhood education programmes in a standalone approach. Instead, they can be integrated through larger programmes to provide young children with a comprehensive package that responds to their holistic needs.

UNESCO advocates for early childhood programmes to be implemented by various actors, whether governmental, non-governmental or local organisations. UNESCO Beirut is working with a group of NGOs in Lebanon to enhance their delivery mechanisms and build their capacity to offer quality education in the most difficult circumstances – training teachers and education personnel on innovative solutions that ensure the right to quality early education and relevant learning in a manner that is inclusive and respectful to the needs of learners.

We encourage early childhood education and care programmes to be designed to fit the context and environment of the Syrian child and his or her family. They should be implemented in a safe and friendly space and must include activities that stimulate the child's cognitive, social-emotional and language development. In addition to providing literacy and numeracy activities, there should be recreational opportunities for learning, including play, art, music, drama and sport. It is of the utmost importance to deliver programmes, as far as possible, in the mother-tongue language of the child.

Non-formal education

To integrate refugee children who are unable to attend formal education in host countries, NGOs have made efforts to offer non-formal education (NFE). NFE schools have been established next to refugee camps and a large number of

'What kind of education programmes do young children need in refugee settings? The key words here are flexibility, innovation and stimulation.'



△ Photo: UNESCO Beirut

refugee children are now enrolled in non-formal programmes. Unfortunately, host country governments still do not encourage, recognise or accredit this kind of learning – although the issue is coming onto their agenda.

UNESCO Beirut has initiated dialogue with several governments in the region to advance an ambitious initiative for developing regional and national policy frameworks to regularise and recognise NFE. We are making policymakers aware that learning outcomes acquired in non-formal settings represent a rich source of human capital: international experience shows that the complementary nature of NFE – especially for young children – adds strength to the education and training system.

The formal education sector needs to value the things refugees learn outside of formal settings; NFE, especially for young children, can be used as a stepping stone, a preparatory platform or an entry door to formal education. NFE can also include alternative enabling programmes that integrate several sources of support for young children, including parenting education, psychosocial support and counselling. It is hoped that our work will contribute to create greater awareness, consensus and acceptance among key actors to design formal and non-formal education and training based on a better understanding of the needs of the refugees.

References

Collier, P. 2007. *The Bottom Billion: Why the poorest countries are failing and what can be done about it*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

International Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE). (2010). *Minimum Standards for Education: Preparedness, response, recovery*. New York, NY: INEE. Available at: http://toolkit.ineesite.org/inee_minimum_standards/handbooks (accessed April 2016).

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2016, online). Syria Regional Refugee Response, Inter-agency sharing portal. Regional overview. Available at: <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php> (accessed May 2016).