Education: A Key to Power and a Tool for Change--A Practitioner's Perspective

Fay Chung
Director, UNESCO International Institute
for Capacity Building in Africa (IICBA), Addis Ababa

Why do Schools Play a Critical Role in Political Conflict?

Education as a key to power

Political power may be imposed by force and violence, or it may be won through persuasion and education. In the long run, force and violence seldom succeed in winning the loyalty of a population, but in the short run they can have dramatic effects, including massive death tolls and mass movements of populations. According to Machel (1996), "The days of set-piece battles between professional soldiers facing off in a field far from town are long gone. Today, wars are fought from apartment windows and in the lanes of villages and suburbs, where distinctions between combatant and non-combatant quickly melt away". Civilian fatalities in wartime have increased steadily, climbing from five percent at the turn of the century, to 15 percent during World War I, to 65 percent by the end of World War II, to more than 90 percent in the wars of the 1990s (Machel, 1996).

In periods of political upheavals, educational institutions are often perceived as a key to power and schools often become the targets of attack. Where schools are controlled by one group, they may be seen as fair game for attacks by another group. This was the case in Rwanda where the Interehamwe, who led the genocide, routinely attacked and mined schools, killing large numbers of teachers. Fundamentalists, no matter their denomination, value education as the key to power, and the victory of the Taliban who were educated in fundamentalist institutions is a symbol of the power of education. Thus schools are often the battlegrounds for the hearts and minds of the next generation.

Schools also play an important socializing role as one of the key institutions for transmitting national, community and religious values. For example, many African nations rely on education as the main mechanism to accomplish national goals that include unification, shared language, and more balance among regions (Bray, 1986). It is not surprising that Orthodox Serbs and Muslim Albanians struggled for control of Kosovo schools, as they both sought control over the community and religion. Nor is it surprising that Roman Catholic schools are ubiquitous as an important way to instill Catholic values in children and youth.

In addition to their socializing role, schools may have the inverse effect: they may challenge dominant forms of socialization. Education has the potential to bring about change in worldviews and in values. The scope of possibility that schools offer may be cherished in societies that are open to outside influences, or it may be spurned as the source of evil in societies that wish to insulate the population against these influences. Schools that offer a modern education, including access to the natural sciences and to technology, to social and historical analysis, and to an international language, may be seen as liberating or as dangerous, depending on the point of view. For example, within

a stratified society, education of the oppressed can threaten the status quo (Freire, 1992). Educated citizens may no longer accept a worldview and social order that deprives them of basic human rights or access to opportunities.

These uses of education provide the settings for several dilemmas. The following pages highlight the observations and questions of a practitioner from years of work among communities subjected to violent conflict, displacement and civil strife. Although the majority of the examples are drawn from experiences in Africa, similar trends have emerged in other parts of the world. Describing these dilemmas raises more questions than answers: it points to the need for increasing the amount of empirical and case study research conducted in order to better understand the extent of these trends, the phenomena they produce and methods that may be useful in addressing them.

Problems

Lack of access to education exacerbates conflict

In examining numerous conflicts in Africa, over 20 in the last decade, it is important to analyze the causes of the conflicts. In some cases it may be because of extreme physical hardships, such as the years of famine, which preceded the takeover of power by the Stalinist Mengistu regime in Ethiopia. The famine was exacerbated by the war, by high population growth and by a feudal land ownership system. However, it is also important to recognize the role of education, usually the lack of educational opportunities for the majority, in these conflagrations. For example in both Rwanda and Sierra Leone, unemployed and poorly educated youths played key roles in committing atrocities. In Rwanda many of these youths believed that by killing the Tutsis their problems such as poverty and unemployment would be solved. In both countries primary, secondary and tertiary education were limited to a small minority. Lack of access to secondary education in pre-genocide Rwanda may account for the hostility of the perpetrators to educated people. Further research might examine this question: To what extent does lack of access to education account for hostility toward educated groups?

Some of the negative consequences of lack of access to education for the uneducated are clear, yet the deprivation of many may benefit those holding political power. Many political leaders assert that their state budgets cannot afford education for all.

Inadequate funds have been a pretext for providing limited access to education. Rulers who argue that they cannot afford education for all may have fundamental political objections to providing this social service. They may believe that the present social structure and stability will be threatened if citizens are educated, and that unrest may be even more likely if there are many educated people without jobs. Some of these beliefs may stem from colonial days: many colonial governments believed that educating the natives was a dangerous and unsound policy, as it would make them less malleable and more ungovernable. Colonial powers developed educational curricula and methodology specifically designed to maintain dependence and control the ideology of the masses (Heggoy, 1984; Fanon, 1967). Yet evidence of the effects of mass illiteracy demonstrate the devastating, and in many cases lethal, consequences of this claim. For example, in many African countries only half the children have access to primary schooling, and a minute percentage have access to secondary education (State of the World's Children,

1999). Future research might examine the parallels between present day governments denying funding to pubic education and the policies of their colonial precursors.

Whilst a large of number of educated unemployed may incite fear of social instability among the elite, lack of mass education, according to many researchers, severely limits the potential for development--particularly for modern economic development. (Schultz, 1989; Psacharapoulos, 1989). Although large numbers of educated people may increase the potential for political dissent, experiences in Rwanda and Sierra Leone indicate that large numbers of uneducated and unemployed youths may be an even more volatile and destabilizing force. Because of its negative effects on economic development, keeping people illiterate and uneducated may be, in the long run, more "expensive" then educating them.

To address education for all, some governments have combined low cost materials provision, distance education, and the use of community recruited teachers who are paid at levels that are affordable by the state and the community. How do the successes of these initiatives influence political actors? Who participates in discussions about policy regarding education for all? Does a desire for social control have a greater influence over determining policy outcomes than the questions of affordability?

Education in emergencies

International agencies and charitable organizations have addressed education during conflicts or complex emergencies in a random manner. The ad hoc approach to education in emergencies has meant that education programs were frequently designed on the spot by well-intentioned aid workers, but often without the professional assistance or the requisite experience. UNICEF's work, in collaboration with UNESCO and UNHCR, to form a network of educators working in emergencies, and to establish procedures as well as a teacher training program for community recruited paraprofessionals, has been ground breaking. Yet much more work is required to ensure that the children and adults in emergency situations receive not only the grades one-three education that is often provided, but that a full range of secondary and tertiary education is available. It is clear that some so-called "emergencies" such as in Somalia, may last for several decades. To provide effective support, international organizations must start by defining better the differences among types of emergencies. Research questions might include: What constitute appropriate goals for teacher training in various emergency situations? How can an organization most effectively conduct an education needs assessment in an emergency setting? After a more thorough understanding of the scope of the problems, these agencies should provide greater technical as well as financial support to education programs in emergency situations.

Successes

Liberation movements in Southern Africa

Liberation movements have traditionally supported education. This was true in all of the Southern African liberation movements in Namibia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. In some countries it was a response to colonial governments' overt policies which systematically denied blacks access to education. The mass rural education programs used by Southern Africans often relied on temporary shelters that might include a shady spot under a tree or grass thatched huts. Brick and mortar buildings were uncommon; if

they were used, it was usually in locations far from the war front, such as for the schools run in Tanzania by the liberation movements. The lack of permanent buildings led to a healthy emphasis on the types of learning that took place rather than the type of buildings constructed. This emphasis on learning (software) rather than on bricks and mortar (hardware) may explain the success of countries ruled by former liberation movements in providing education for all. This stands in contrast to countries in Central and West Africa, where high costs of construction as well as teachers' pay have prevented many countries from achieving even primary education for all.

Establishing education systems in refugee camps and in semi-liberated zones provided the experience for former liberation movements to establish policies after independence which provided primary education for all and secondary education for the majority. This was done through programs using distance education in classrooms supervised by community-recruited teachers and working in community-built classrooms. It would be valuable to conduct research on the history of education programs that were started in refugee camps and later traveled to the country of origin with the returning refugees.

Hope

Civil society building is currently the focus of many transitional and post-conflict nations, as it is expected to foster stable and just infrastructure. Educational institutions enhance critical civil society mechanisms and associations that can provide the basis for building a new society. They provide the possibility of pursuing a different future from the present in which militarized youths who would otherwise be unemployed have been recruited into the militias. Education and training at all levels, but with particular emphasis on providing job training ranging from the simplest to the more complex professional training, can do a great deal to lay the foundations for a better future.

Education must be seen as an important way of resolving problems faced by countries experiencing ethnic conflict and mass illiteracy, and in their search for a better future. To support this goal, it is essential for international and multinational organizations to take not only a keen interest in but also responsibility for education. Where attempts by foreign governments to remove warlords have failed, there is no reason why humanitarian assistance for schools, channeled through the parents and community, should not be increased as a sound investment in peace for the next generation. Education is not only a way of returning the population to normalcy, but is also a way of empowering the people against the armed violence of those vying for political power.

Whilst I do not believe that education is a panacea for all the problems of a society, it can provide certain opportunities that are closed to a society which does not choose to educate its populace. Less educated people may be more likely to accept inherited values, and preserve loyalty to inherited prejudices such as "all Tutsis or Serbs are bad", whereas educated people are more likely to see common values across different ethnic groupings. Whereas illiterate and poorly educated youths may be unable to leave their own boundaries, education provides an outlet for unemployed youths who can migrate to countries with a shortage of labor.

Finally, education is one of the first and most critical ways in which traumatized people can regain control over their lives. It is therefore not surprising that both parents and

children are likely to see schools as a sign of hope, a sign that they can escape from the violence and suffering that have been imposed upon them by political change.

Conclusion

Although the preceding pages raise more questions than answers, I hope to have provided some insights into the dilemmas facing practitioners and some ideas for future research. Because education is the key to power, it is the most effective tool agencies and individuals can use in combating political violence, poverty and injustice worldwide. As noted by Richard Shaull (1984), "Every human being . . . is capable of looking critically at [the] world in a dialogical encounter with others. . . The word takes on new power. . . .When an illiterate peasant participates in this sort of educational experience, he comes to a new awareness of self, has a new sense of dignity, and is stirred by a new hope" (pp. 13-14).

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