

## Editorial Introduction

### Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies, Chronic Crises, and Early Reconstruction: Issues and Debates on Quality, Impact, and Accountability

*Mathangi Subramanian* <sup>[1]</sup>  
*Teachers College, Columbia University*

Like many of my colleagues whose time in the classroom coincided with the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), my teaching career was haunted and defined by the specter of standardized test scores. I spent the first six months of every school year streamlining my lessons to incorporate only the material that appeared in the state standards, and was therefore likely to appear on the states tests. I spent the final three months of every school year, after testing was over, in trepidation about the future of my students and my career. By the time I left the classroom, I considered “standards” synonymous with “oppression,” an opinion shared by many researchers, educators, and policy analysts who claim that NCLB’s emphasis on mandated content and testing not only forces schools to focus on subject matter that may be irrelevant to their students’ future well-being, but also because it systematically discriminates against low-income communities of color, particularly those that are comprised of non-native English speakers (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Fine, 2003; Noddings, 2005).

Ironically, the standards movement in the United States developed in response to a series of national reports that revealed the public school system’s failure to provide its poorest students with a basic education (Wenglinsky, 2005). By specifying the content that should be taught in every grade level, the authors of the first national standards sought to both encourage educators to have high expectations for their students, and to hold them accountable for what happened in their classrooms. Furthermore, these original authors opposed standardized testing in favor of flexible, authentic assessments that could (and should) be adapted to diverse learning environments. In its purest form, then, the American standards movement seeks to enforce Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that every human being is entitled to a free education, at least through elementary school (United Nations, 1948), a right that the United States has yet to fulfill for all of its children.

The U.S. is not alone in its struggle to uphold children’s right to a basic education. Every day, across the world, committed educators in industrialized and developing nations face countless challenges in creating school systems that effectively serve all of their citizens. While obstacles abound in times of normalcy, they increase astronomically when unforeseen circumstances plunge entire nations or regions into emergency situations. The United Nations defines “complex emergencies” as “crises requiring a system-wide response” (Kagawa, 2005, p. 488). Most often, nations experience complex emergencies as a result of natural disasters or war.

In the past five years, large and diverse populations have experienced severe natural disasters. These disasters include a tsunami affecting South and East Asian nations in 2004, flooding as a result of Hurricane Katrina affecting the American Gulf Coast in 2005, a major earthquake affecting Pakistan in 2006, and flooding as a result of Cyclone Yemyin and other storms affecting the South Asian subcontinent in 2007. In each of these unfortunately events, inadequate and unreliable infrastructure and environmental degradation resulting from poorly regulated

economic development exacerbated damage and lengthened the time needed for recovery. These circumstances are typical of developing nations as well as impoverished regions of industrialized nations (Kagawa, 2005). Children in natural disasters experience emotional trauma when they lose relatives and friends to death or separation and physical trauma when they are unable to access necessities such as food, shelter, clean water, and health care. In natural disasters, schools not only serve as central locations for distributing aid and finding lost family members, but also as places where routine activities provide a much needed sense of normalcy in the face of chaos.

Most modern wars are fought between racial, ethnic, or religious groups. Of the 27 violent conflicts in the world in 1997, all but one of them was a civil war (Kagawa, 2005). Modern warfare is particularly hard on children, who are recruited as child soldiers in unprecedented numbers, targeted as possible civilian casualties, and are geographically displaced with or without their families. Although education is always a political act, it is particularly so when educators work with children who have learned to fear and hate others. Education in wartime can be a grounding influence on children who are denied feelings of safety and security often associated with childhood. Unfortunately, this is not always the case: as recent violence in Afghanistan illustrates, for many youth, the simple act of attending school can be life threatening (Biswas, 2007).

Like the first standards in the United States, the Inter-Agency Network for Emergency Education (INEE) Minimum Standards were developed to fix a failing system – only this time, the system was a region, a nation, or a government suffering through a complex emergency. The INEE Web site calls education “life-saving and life-sustaining,” crediting it with creating spaces where children can feel physically safe, establishing routines and distractions that improve children’s mental health, and instilling hope in the face of chaos and destruction (INEE, 2007). Fundamental to these reasons is the premise that education both creates and requires order.

The articles in this issue address the many ways in which the standards have been implemented, as well as the historical and social circumstances that shaped and determined their purpose and content. Taken together, they describe the variety of ways in which we think about education in both ordinary and extraordinary times.

**In *Education in Emergencies: Standards for Human Rights and Development***, Marina Andina conducts a quantitative and qualitative analysis of human rights and human capital discourse in planning documents for the Minimum Standards as well as the Minimum Standards themselves. Her analysis places the standards in historical context, and explores how the documents’ language reflects not only our beliefs about education, but also humans’ fundamental need for order and control.

**In *INEE Minimum Standards: A Tool for Education Quality Assessment in Afghan Refugee Schools in Pakistan***, Katayon Qahir and Jackie Kirk describe how the Minimum Standards have been used as an assessment tool in schools in Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan’s North West province. The authors describe how the standards fare in a unique physical and cultural context, and provide invaluable scholarly documentation of their use on the ground.

**In *Negotiating Change: Participatory Curriculum Design in Emergencies***, Marian Hodgkin reminds us that curriculum is never politically neutral, a fact that becomes especially salient in areas of ethnic, racial, or religious conflict. Hodgkin describes how curricula created haphazardly during an emergency situation can linger in a country for years, and how this phenomenon necessitates the creation of participatory systems for efficiently developing curriculum regardless

of the state of the nation in which it is to be used. Furthermore, Hodgkin reminds us that while curriculum is often used as a tool for war, if it is created collaboratively, it can also be used as a tool for peace.

**In An Historical Perspective on Coordinating Education Post-Conflict: Biopolitics, Governing at a Distance, and States of Exception**, Noah Sobe contrasts an historical version of the Minimum Standards with a document that an “inter-agency network” of peace churches designed for relief workers in 1944. Through his exploration of the genesis of these documents, Sobe examines the ways in which we think of education, emergencies, and normalcy. Sobe’s work reminds us of the often overlooked but pivotal role of education on the political and social workings of every society.

In both its national and international forms, the standards movement attempts to address two questions that shape this issue of CICE: first, how can we use human resources to create order in the face of disorder; and second, what is the fundamental purpose of education in normal and non-normal times. By creating guidelines for educational content and pedagogical practices, standards attempt to bring uniformity to unwieldy educational systems across the globe. By outlining what children need to learn at what age, standards take a political stance, defining what it means to be a productive citizen of a nation or people. When we develop and enforce standards in a failing school, a conflict-ridden nation, or an area of physical devastation, we display our faith in the power of education to promote normalcy, economic and technological progress, and peace. It remains to be seen whether the Minimum Standards, like those created by NCLB, will be criticized or praised, embraced or discarded, empowering or oppressive.

#### Notes

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