



ACCESS TO EDUCATION: AFGHAN REFUGEE CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS ON EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY

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ABSTRACT

Education is a basic human right. Every child has the right to benefit through education and the social agencies make sure that they accord their children with the respect they deserve through providing them with educational opportunities. While this is an accepted goal all over the world, it is also a fact that children all over the world do not enjoy the same opportunities for education. Among the deprived ones are the disabled, those belonging to poorer communities and the refugee children. The present paper sets out to explore the challenges faced by the refugee children in their access to education. A total of 45 refugee children divided into three age groups have participated in the study. The study adopts qualitative research paradigm with focus group discussions as the main research design. The results not only indicate that these children are highly at risk, they also reflect the innocence and plight of the children who are made victims of aggression through territorial divides.

INTRODUCTION

Children are our most valuable resource and the best hope for future. They need care, compassion and respect by the society. Child care is universal and is one of the major priorities of the globalized world. To affirm this pledge, November 20th is celebrated every year as the international day of the child. This was the day the UN general assembly first adopted the declaration of the right of the child in 1959. Later, the convention on the rights of the child (CRC) was first formally registered in 1990 by UN general assembly. The convention, which no doubt is the most universally accepted human rights instrument in history, establishes an international law that state

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must ensure that “All children- without discrimination in any form, benefit from special protective measures and assistance ; have access to services such as education and health care; can develop their personality, ability and talent to the fullest potential; grow up in a happy, caring environment; and are informed about and participate in achieving their rights.

However children are not accorded with the same respect in every society. The practices of child abuse are prevalent in almost every society though they may take different forms and shapes. Among the most severely affected ones are the children exposed to wars. War can be a harrowing experience for anyone but more so for children as they are extremely vulnerable. They are vulnerable because they are developing individuals and they have age-specific needs. They need food and water, shelter, health services and education most importantly.

Wars expose children to innumerable risks, like injury or loss of a body part, orphanage, emotional trauma, death, separation from family, and displacement, migration and exile. Any one of these can leave a long term effect on the child’s personality.

Emotionally and physically vulnerable children become easy victims to menaces like child trafficking, recruitment in armed groups, and sexual abuse. In addition to these, armed conflicts generally result in destitution (children left without adult care).This exposes them to situations where they have to fend for themselves by either begging or by doing odd jobs.

While this situation is detrimental to the child’s personal self, its effects accrue to the whole society. It is said, “We learn what we live and in the degree that we accept it to live by”. Children need protective buffers from the society. Their personality development starts in the early age from the protection and support they receive from the family. Later on education grooms them into thinking and feeling human beings and equips them with life skills. If they are denied their basic rights, they accord the society with the same respect.

Literature on the mental health of refugee children has grown in the past two decades, with increasing attention paid to the psychosocial adjustment of children in this population (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007). This volume, while exposing many challenges related to the issue, also shows an inconsistent picture of children’s adjustment in the host countries with (Kinzie & Sack, 2002, Hodes, 2002, Harker, 2000) suggesting slightly lower adjustment, while (Rousseau, Drapeau, & Rahimi,2003, Sack, Him & Dickson,1999, suggesting positive investment through their studies.

This research employs case study design to study afghan children’s recollections and memoirs of their schooling experiences in their native country; and their access to education in the host country. They have been deprived of their beautiful country due to constant armed conflicts. There are millions of people who lost their property and family in the war. The worst sufferers are children who lost their families or have received injuries. There are millions of school aged

children afghan children who have taken refuge in Pakistan. They are surviving without proper food, shelter, and educational opportunities and are at great risk.

These children are present in all parts of Pakistan but their plight is most badly seen in the urban centers where they exist in scattered populations. This is because the major assistance is channeled to the refugee camps. By and large, children living in the urban areas receive little international humanitarian protection and help. Many are forced to work as child laborers under conditions simply to survive, says the report “Fending for Themselves: Afghan Refugee Children and Adolescents Working in Urban Pakistan”. (Afghan Refugee Children and Adolescents, Pakistan Receive Minimal International Assistance, 2002). Saeid Eisazadeh , Jahanbakhsh Mehranfar (2012): argue in their research study that Afghan immigrants led to increase the unemployment rate in the economy of Iran. In fact they are preferred over the natives as they are ready to work on low wages and under extremely severe conditions

Despite international pledges and concern very little attention has been given to this issue. The exodus of Afghans from their homeland during the domestic political upheavals in the 1970s and the ensuing occupation by the Soviet Union at Christmas 1979 made history as the largest refugee crisis in the world (Schöch, ,(2008) .It is vitally important to understand refugee children’s plight as it is related to future outcomes.

The study employed art-based data collection methods as well as visual images and narratives. More precisely the study was bounded by a focus on:

- How children carry with them the associations of their educational experiences
- Their feelings related to being suddenly deprived of their schools
- Their access to education in the host country
- Their perceptions on reconnecting and re establishing broken educational links

PARTICIPANTS, METHODS AND SETTING

The study employed qualitative research paradigm with focus group discussion as a major research design. The case unit study was a group of 45 children divided into 3 groups. The children were sampled in the age 9—14. They were all found in a cluster while they were working in the Sunday market. They all resided in the urban slums of Karachi city. All participants had lived in the host country for less than three years at the time of the study. They were all conversant in basic Urdu. All these children had originally arrived in Pakistan due to armed conflicts in the country of their origin.

Table-1. Shows the sampling design:

Table-1. Characteristics of the clusters (N=45), at baseline (2010) ____

Children (9—10 age group) cluster 1	11
Children (11—12 age group) cluster 2	18
Children (13—14 age group) cluster 3	16

As is shown through table 1, children were divided in three groups, according to their age groups. These children were then involved in focus group discussions. At the time of data collection each child was taken into confidence by describing the objectives of the study. Special care was taken not to hurt any child's feelings by not asking about painful details. In my own experience, I have found that entering refugee communities is a complicated process that takes time, negotiation, and a respect for the gradual development of relations based on trust and mutual respect. Even under the best of circumstances, this can be a challenging experience with its share of missteps and moments of uncertainty (Miller, 2004). The children were asked related questions, given time to recollect their memories, and were not interrupted during discussion.

DATA COLLECTION, ANALYSIS AND REFLECTIONS

The participants of the study were involved in the focus group discussion setting (each comprising of an hour). This was followed by art-based workshops (each comprising of half an hour).

Each group discussion generated revealing age-specific responses. The first was age-group 9—10. These children had migrated in the last two years. There were 11 children in this age group. This seemed to be the most care-free cohort. Because of their vulnerable age, the children did not show much concern about what had happened to them. They seemed oblivious of the enormity of the problem. During the discussion, they shared that 9 out of 11 of them were studying in schools when they were forced to migrate. Those who were studying responded that they loved their schools. They fondly recited the prayers and national anthem they used to recite every morning. They also recollected about their classroom experiences. Surprisingly seven of them still remembered the names of their teachers. They fondly recollected about their friends. They shared that they played, studied and had fun together. What was heartening was the fact that these beautiful children were living a normal, happy and carefree life when suddenly they were forced to migrate. Suddenly being deprived of something you love and cherish is a traumatic experience. Moreover it is easy to adjust without something you have never seen, but once you experience something it becomes a part of life. Three older children said that when they see other children going to school, they feel very bad.

They further shared that they had “vardis” (uniforms), they used to wear every day. They all had “bastes” (bags) and “kitab” (books). Surprisingly, five boys in this age group said that they kept

their bags safely and have brought them to Pakistan. They said that they still sometimes read their books. Three of this age group rejoined the schools here in Pakistan. Seven lived in the areas where they had schools. However, they could not join the schools as they worked on odd jobs. They said they were supporting their siblings also. Four, out of this cohort did not have schools in their areas, but they also did not have shoes in their feet and it was quite evident, what was a more pressing need for them. Nasir Mehmood (2012) argues in his research study entitled, *An Analysis Of Causative Factors Which Push And Pull The Children Out Of Their Home Into The Street World At Lahore*, that a majority of the street children studied had had future plans, which indicate that they were not satisfied with their current life and wanted to go back to their homes.

Three children who had access to schools had adjusted with the new surroundings. Now they studied numbers, and English and Urdu alphabet. A child cutely recited poems in both Urdu and Dari (their mother tongue) and this shows how quickly children adapt. All these boys worked on Sundays in the Sunday markets or picked bags in the evening. They all expressed the desire to go back to their country. Three of these children showed dislike for the weather. They said that it was too hot.

The second cohort was that of 11—12 year olds. They had left their homeland when they were in class III and IV. They remembered their schooling experiences and expressed clearly that they hated those who had deprived them of the opportunity. This cohort had the maximum number of children in it. There were 18 children in this age group.

They all recollected their memories and shared their schooling experiences fondly with the researcher. All these children responded that they still remembered their schools. They had lots of friends and kind teachers there. Three of them said that they wanted to be doctors' but now they are forced to beg for their survival. These children could read Basic English and could easily manage the addition and subtraction sums. They knew about the basic features of the planet earth as they had learnt it in Social Studies and they related it with Science. They had good understanding of time and calendars and all of them were creative in their drawing work. They sketched the picture of their schools and then shared with the researcher the feelings associated with them. The fact that they were conversant in Urdu helped the researcher in talking to them freely.

Three out of these were going to schools in Pakistan while all the others worked day and night in order to survive. Those children who did not go to school said that they had left schooling for good. They felt that though they were under paid, they have lost the passion for schooling. They believed that their basic needs were more important.

The third cohort was that of 13—14 year age group. This cohort was quite mature. They were all working. Seven out of these had proper shops in the Sunday markets which they were managing independently. The other was engaged in odd jobs. There were 16 boys in this age group. 12 boys

said that though they had schools in the area, it was very difficult for them to go to schools as they worked seven days a week.

They all shared that they were going to schools before migration. They remembered everything about their schools. They said that they studied for six months and the next six months schools remained closed because of cold weather. When probed they related that they studied Mathematics, Dari, (their mother tongue) English, Social Studies and Science. When the researcher gave them the worksheet, they could manage the basic addition, subtraction, and multiplication sums. In English they could read five to six letter words.

In Social Studies, they identified themes in history and geography. They identified country, climate, culture, forests, river, and maps in social studies. In science, they identified minerals, basic animals, living things and non-living things, human body, matter, and solar system. They showed exceptional talent in art activity also. Their strokes were mature and thoughtful. They fondly discussed that they had innumerable friends and they played cricket in the evening. Seven of them were learning to read Quran but had to leave it half way through when they had to migrate to Pakistan.

ART-RELATED ANALYSIS

The three cohorts were provided with papers and pencils and they were asked to draw their schools. Subsequently, they had to write their feelings associated with the schools.

The first cohort was that of 9—10 age group. Being the youngest age group, they excitedly drew the pictures. Their bright colors reflected the feelings they had for their schools. These colors also symbolized the hope they associated with school. It was quite surprising that though they were denied of the experience, they still remembered the details like canteens and swings. One child drew a huge bell hanging in one of the verandas of his school. He said that he used to ring this bell to announce the shift of periods. Some of them wrote the names of their schools also at the top of the building.

The words they associated with the school are the following:

What words come in your mind when you think of school?

S.No	Associated words	(N=11)	Percentage
1.	Happiness		9%
2.	Friends		7%
3.	Teachers		7%
4.	Playground		10%
5.	Stories		9%
6.	Fun		10%

The table shows that these children associate schools with happiness and fun. They also miss their friends and teachers.

The second cohort also made fine pictures of their schools. Some of them showed assembly scenes, while others showed children studying and playing in the school. They all named their schools and made flags also. Unlike the younger cohort, they concentrated more on details rather on colors. They associated school life with the following words:

What words come in your mind when you think of school?

S.No	Associated words (N=18)	Percentage
1.	Happiness	15 %
2.	Friends	7 %
3.	Teachers	11 %
4.	Peace	12 %
5.	Care	9 %
6.	Fun	14 %

The table shows that these children associate school with peace, happiness and fun.

The third cohort drew the sketch with even finer strokes. They sketched schools with playgrounds, libraries, and teachers and students. They associated the following words with the school:

What words come in your mind when you think of school?

S.No	Associated words (N=16)	Percentage
1.	Peace	11 %
2.	Knowledge	9 %
3.	Happiness	14 %
4.	Order	12 %
5.	Discipline	10 %
6.	Books	13 %

The table shows that children associate words of knowledge, order, discipline, and happiness with school. It also shows that children have very positively opted for peace as something related to schools.

The results very clearly indicate that these children have been disfigured as a result of violence. Their hopes for future have been wiped out and they have been denied an experience that could have made them a future Einstein, Aristotle or Shakespeare. This should be prevented at any cost.

International humanitarian law makes it binding for both state and armed groups to protect children and women in wartime. The law gives protection in two ways. Firstly, they must be protected against any form of abuse if they fall into the hands of enemy groups. Secondly, civilians should not be the target of attacks. The Geneva Convention of 1949 lays down number of rules related to child protection. There are 25 articles in the Geneva Convention which specially mention child protection.

As citizens of the world, we all must respect the rights of other people. Wars are unavoidable but they should not make us compromise on our basic human values. Protection of humanity should be the major goal of all endeavors. Targeting innocence and nature is threatening and inhuman as eventually (as global citizens of the world) we would also find ourselves engulfed in the same terror.

The study recommends that countries engaged in wars must respect the international humanitarian law and the children's rights. Civilians should be protected at any cost. Wars should not violate the sanctity of the fundamental rights of the civilians. There should be serious consequences for violations and all countries should be equally treated. Humanitarian assistance should double the effort in order to help these children live in the society with peace and love.

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