Breaking the silence: sexual coercion and abuse in post-conflict education

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Experience from the Central African Republic makes clear that global efforts to increase numbers of children in school, particularly in conflict-affected areas and for displaced children, need to pay greater attention to safety and accountability.

For many countries affected by war, education prior to conflict will have already been in a poor state, with a lack of materials and resources, overfull classrooms and low quality of teaching. Conflict will have further exacerbated these conditions, disrupting or even destroying what limited provision was in place. School buildings may have been looted, damaged or occupied, and trained teachers may have fled or been injured or killed, and all this against a backdrop of increased violence and non-functional State-run systems. The challenges of reinstating education in such places are considerable.

Furthermore, ensuring children's safety in educational contexts continues to be difficult. Children face multiple risks, such as dangerous journeys to and from school, an increased risk of physical and sexual and gender-based violence from armed groups or members of the community, and peer violence inside the school gates. These issues also need to be considered within a wider context in which corporal punishment is commonly accepted and the role of women and girls as subjects of sexual violence is often normalised.

A silent issue

Another form of violence and abuse also affects children in schools but is perpetuated in near silence: sexual abuse and coercion from teaching staff. 'Sex for grades' – or, as children call it in many places, 'sexually transmitted grades' – refers to teaching professionals asking children to carry out sexual acts in exchange for regular teaching tasks, such as marking an assignment, or for awarding the grades they need to progress. Sometimes children are asked for money in exchange for these basic teaching

tasks; when they are unable to pay, other forms of payment such as sexual favours have to replace financial contributions.

Since 2016, War Child UK has been supporting children in Bangui, in the Central African Republic (CAR), to campaign against these types of abuses in schools. Through a youth advocates project called VoiceMore, children conducted their own research[1] with pupils from ten different state schools, finding that high numbers of children reported incidences of this type as common, with students intimidated, harmed and dropping out of school as a result.[2] Their findings reflect other reports of sexual abuse and corruption in school systems in Africa.[3] In 2015 UNICEF's U-Report programme asked children in Liberia an open question about what their biggest concerns were, and 86% of children responded saying sex for grades was their biggest worry.[4] And in 2017 Maastricht University published a report on education in CAR which described the use of violence, coercion and corruption in schools by teaching staff as prevalent and persistent.[5]

Although pockets of reporting exist, this hidden form of abuse has been overlooked in discussions surrounding other forms of violence in and around schools. Perpetrators in places which lack adequate community and State protection systems – such as in post-conflict CAR – can act with near impunity. Initiatives like the Safe Schools Declaration[6] have helped set standards and guidelines for protecting education in conflict-affected areas, such as banning attacks on schools, but do not extend to these specific types of protection issues that can become prevalent inside schools as a consequence of conflict. Contributing and exacerbating factors are numerous and include:

- lack of money and resources to invest in schools and in training for teachers, to improve quality and safety of education

- lack of systems for reporting and enforcing codes of conduct

- lack of functioning justice systems to deal with perpetrators

- limited capacity of State-run departments such as ministries of education to oversee and manage schools

- poor school governance systems and lack of parental engagement with schools to address the issue, tackle corruption and hold teachers to account

- late or non-payment of teachers

- prevalence of unqualified 'parent–teachers' in place of professional teachers

- acceptance and normalising of a culture of violence and corruption

- lack of power and status of children in relation to adults, particularly those in positions of authority, such as teaching staff.

Impact and consequences

The impact of these problems on children, their education, families, communities and countries is significant. Children who are asked for payment or sexual favours commonly respond by attending school less frequently or dropping out as a protective measure, despite their strong motivation to get an education. For those who are coerced or forced, particularly girls, the effects of this sexual and emotional abuse on their psychological well-being are considerable, and can also result in pregnancy, STIs and – when their peers and the community know about it – significant social stigmatisation.

Corruption in schools also contributes to household stress by increasing the financial burden on families and caregivers as well as on children themselves, who often engage in additional risky work in the informal economy to find money for school. In the longer term, the presence of abuse and corruption in the school system lowers pupil retention rates, damages the academic success

of generations of children and reduces the country's chances of economic development.

"We must break the silence around these issues and do something today to hope for a positive change tomorrow. …if we act together today, tomorrow our country will be better." Stephanie, aged 16, VoiceMore participant

Breaking the silence: recommendations

Safety first: In recent years, and in large part because of the Sustainable Development Goals and other international initiatives such as the Global Campaign for Education[7] and Education Cannot Wait[8], many countries have committed to drastically increasing school attendance. In the drive to raise numbers, safety and accountability must not be forgotten, and there needs to be more emphasis on ensuring schools are safe places for children to learn.

Greater accountability: Teaching staff committing abuse should be held to account. A lack of adequate systems in schools for monitoring and disciplining teachers means that teachers in many places can act with impunity. Governments need to take a greater interest in this issue and ensure a zero-tolerance message is communicated to schools and head teachers, with those committing sexual abuse being reported to relevant authorities.

Ways to report: Corruption and abuse in schools tend to be hidden. It is very difficult for children to speak up, and they lack ways to do so, which is why demands for money and sexual favours often result in children dropping out of school. Every school should have child-friendly systems in place that allow children to report demands for sexual favours or payment.

Raising awareness: Most children are not aware of their rights or that these practices are illegal. While codes of conduct might exist in some schools, schools do not communicate to pupils or communities what is expected. All schools should have clearly defined protocols for how staff and students are expected to

behave. They should also help ensure that children and adults are informed about the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the protections and assurances it contains relating to education and protection from abuse.

"One child being abused in school is too much. We must promote a culture of honesty." Jean, aged 17, VoiceMore participant

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1. We supported the young people as they planned and prepared their research, including how to approach other children, what to do if they felt uncomfortable and how to ensure confidentiality. The children created a code system to record information, no names were taken, and we agreed steps to be taken if a respondent said they had been personally affected or made a disclosure.

2. War Child (2016) *Combatting Corruption and Abuse in Schools* bit.ly/WarChildUK-VoiceMore

3. UNICEF/Plan/ActionAid/SCF Sweden (2010) *Too often in silence: a report on school-based violence in West and Central Africa* www.unicef.org/wcaro/VAC_Report_english.pdf;
Plan (2013) *A girl's right to learn without fear: Working to end gender-based violence at school* bit.ly/Plan-LearnWithoutFear-2013

4. UNICEF U-Report Liberia (2015) 'Success Story: U-Report Liberia exposes Sex 4 Grades in school'
https://ureport.in/story/194/

5. Maastricht University (2017) *The Child's Right to Education in the Central African Republic* bit.ly/MaastrichtUniv-EducationCAR-2017

6. The Safe Schools Declaration, developed through a series of consultations led by Norway and Argentina in 2015, provides the opportunity for States to express broad political support for the protection and continuation of education in armed conflict. www.protectingeducation.org/guidelines/support

7. www.campaignforeducation.org

8. www.educationcannotwait.org