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Published in:
Child Abuse & Neglect

DOI:
10.1016/j.chiabu.2014.01.006

Publication date:
2014

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (APA):
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The need for schools in Afghanistan to be declared as zones of peace and neutrality

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On October 9, 2012, Malala Yousafzai, a then 15-year-old Pakistani girl, was shot in the head and neck while returning home from school in an assassination attempt by Taliban gunmen. Malala was targeted because of her active role in advocating for the education of girls in areas ruled by Islamist militant groups. Malala was brought to the United Kingdom for treatment and rehabilitation. She has since recovered, and with global recognition of her cause, she has grown stronger in her advocacy for worldwide access to education. Indeed, the assassination attempt on Malala sparked a global outpouring of support for children’s education, particularly for girls.

Despite remarkable progress by the international community to ensure universal access to education by 2015, a 2013 report by Save the Children stated that nearly 50 million primary and lower-secondary school-age children were out of school in conflict-affected countries, and more than half of these children were girls. The report also stated that the proportion of children out of school in conflict-affected countries has increased from 42% of the global total...

Malala has come to represent the growing dangers and struggles that millions of children living in conflict-affected countries face in accessing education. The vicious attack on Malala, however, is just one of many different strategies employed by armed opposition and criminal groups to intimidate and attack children’s education. (The Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack define attacks on education as “any intentional threat or use of force—carried out for political, military, ideological, sectarian, ethnic, religious, or criminal reasons—against students, educators, and education institutions.”) Schools, teachers, and students become collateral damage in conflicts, and sometimes they are targeted as a strategy to undermine the efforts of a government to further educational, social, and economic development or as a way to intimidate communities or groups of people (e.g., schoolgirls) who may not conform to the doctrines of an armed group.

The Afghan Context

In May 2013 the United Nations Security Council released a report on children and armed conflict. The report documented 167 attacks on education in 2012 in Afghanistan. These attacks included armed groups using improvised explosive devices, suicide bombers and the use of intimidation and threats against teachers and pupils as a strategy to force schools to close. The report also stipulated that the Taliban, despite repeatedly declaring their support of education, issued a letter in 2012 in which it opposed the education of girls and made threats toward girls who continued to attend school. A report produced by CARE International and the Afghan Ministry of Education, which included a survey, showed that the majority of external threats and attacks to education come from armed opposition groups (42%) and armed criminal groups (39%).

Although Afghanistan has made remarkable progress in increasing children’s access to education, particularly girl’s education, and has seen the number of attacks on children’s education steadily decline, the future of these advances remains insecure. The transition of security responsibility from international forces to the Afghan National Security Forces and the elections scheduled for April 2014 are occurring in a context of deteriorating security and an increase in activity of a range of armed opposition groups. All Afghans, including children, face a highly uncertain future.

This Study

Against this background and to align future child protection and education programs with the perspectives of local stakeholders, Save the Children commissioned a study of the factors preventing Afghan schools from being safe for education. The study was conducted in three of the 34 provinces of Afghanistan: Faryab, Nangarhar and Uruzgan.

Faryab Province is in northern Afghanistan and borders Turkmenistan. The Province is multi-ethnic, and multilingual. Nangarhar Province is to the east of the country and borders Pakistan. It consists primarily of ethnic Pashtuns. Uruzgan Province, also made up of mostly ethnic Pashtuns, is in the south of Afghanistan and is culturally and ethnically linked to Kandahar Province.

In May and June 2013, a team of 18 international and local researchers visited the three provinces and conducted structured and
in-depth individual interviews with 52 teachers and 25 principals. They also facilitated 50 focus group discussions with students and 26 focus group discussions with community members. These interviews covered 26 school and community settings across 10 districts and were more or less evenly split between the three provinces.

The interviews and discussions generated a great deal of information pertaining to some of the challenges of making Afghan schools safe for education and of mitigation mechanisms adopted by school and community members to overcome these challenges.

Emerging Themes Related to Children’s Safety

Although there were some significant differences between the provinces, particularly in relation to respondents’ interest or ability to engage with opposition groups to reach a resolution, this article focuses on core basic themes emerging from the data analysis across the three provinces. These themes are described in Table 1.

General Insecurity and Fear

The evolving character and tactics of armed conflict leave many children wary and frightened about how the conflict may have an impact on their safety. There were child respondents from each of the provinces who reported experiencing feelings of fear when moving around in public spaces. This was particularly the case for children living in Uruzgan, which is more conflict affected. Children expressed fear of getting caught in crossfires or improvised explosive devices while playing outside or in close proximity to foreign troops who were perceived to be the main target of armed opposition groups.

The journey from home and to school was of a particular concern to many children. A 15-year-old boy from Nangarhar Province explained, “We feel unsafe out of our homes mostly when we go to school because the situation is very dangerous... Bombs are buried and blast everywhere.” Another boy explained, “I feel unsafe every day because I am wearing my school uniform, and the Taliban may kill me just because I am a student.”

Their fear has some basis in reality. As we will now discuss, it is not uncommon for students, teachers, and schools in these three provinces to receive threats or to be violently attacked.

Threats and Attacks on Students, Teachers, and Schools

Interviewees from nearly all of the 25 school and community contexts included in this study reported some level of threat or attack targeted at local students, teachers, or the school itself. Threats were either delivered in a written form (i.e., posted on a school wall, often referred to as a night letter) or verbally through a phone call to a school staff member.

Students from a boys school in the Khoje Sabz Push District in Faryab Province recounted that they received specific threats saying that the houses of those attending the local school would either be burned or have their agricultural lands destroyed. Two boys reportedly had to flee the region after being threatened by an armed opposition group to show them the houses of the girls of the village who attended school. Teachers from the school also received threats. Some were told to turn...
Table 1
Thematic framework emerging from interviews.

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<tr>
<th>Global themes</th>
<th>Organizing themes</th>
<th>Basic themes</th>
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<td>Dangers</td>
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<td>Factors preventing Afghan schools from being safe for education</td>
<td>1. General insecurity and fear</td>
<td>● Active armed opposition groups</td>
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<td>● Active armed criminal groups</td>
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<td>● Foreign troops</td>
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<td>● Traveling to school is dangerous</td>
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<td></td>
<td>● Students and teachers feel fear</td>
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<td>2. Students, teachers, and schools are threatened and attacked</td>
<td></td>
<td>● Threats of houses being burned</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>● Threats of agricultural land being destroyed</td>
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<td>● Threats of getting killed</td>
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<td>● Poison gas attacks</td>
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<td>● Murders</td>
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<td>3. Schools used for non-education purposes</td>
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<td>● Schools used as military outposts</td>
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<td>● Schools used as polling stations during elections</td>
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over 10% of their monthly salary and that failure to do so could result in either being killed or having their houses set on fire. Schoolgirls, teachers, and administrators at girls’ schools were reported to be particularly susceptible to receiving threats by opposition groups seeking to undermine girl’s children.

Although respondents from Faryab Province spoke vividly of threats towards students and teachers, this intimidation was not reported to lead to any violent action. This, however, was not the case in Nangarhar and Uruzgan Provinces. A number of respondents in these provinces could provide detailed examples of attacks against children and the children’s opportunities for education. In Uruzgan, there were several reports of teachers being killed because of their profession. Respondents of one of the girls’ schools participating in this study explained that a teacher and the janitor of their school had been killed, allegedly because they were working at a girls’ school. Shortly after the murders, a bomb went off on the school grounds, which demolished two classrooms.

Respondents from a boys school in Uruzgan spoke about how a few years ago one of the school tents under which pupils were studying was set on fire. A year later, a bomb exploded in front of the school.

Even though many of the participating schools had not been the direct target of violent attacks, attacks on nearby and neighboring schools helped fuel the fear and realization...
that the safety of students and teacher was at risk.

It is difficult to ascertain who the exact perpetrators are of some of these reported threats and attacks. According to interviewees, threats were often delivered anonymously at night. Although there were a few examples of schools and teachers being attacked due to community-based and interpersonal conflicts (e.g., a teacher was threatened after failing a learner with influential parents), most threats and attacks were attributed to either armed criminal groups or armed opposition groups. Armed criminal groups were said to be particularly interested in financial gains, as they adopted various scare tactics to “tax” teachers and other community members with a steady income.

The dominant perception of respondents, however, was that threats and attacks by armed opposition groups were ideologically motivated. These groups were said to target modern and girls’ education, especially where girls were being taught by male teachers. One school principal explained that “the insurgent told the students, ‘This school is not a place for getting an education. It is not knowledge... Knowledge is in the Madrasa [a school for the study of the Islamic religion]. You have to study in the Madrasa.’” Regardless of the motivation by armed groups to attack children’s education, they all represent a threat to children’s security.

Schools Used for Non-Education Purposes

In contexts of ongoing internal conflict and limited infrastructure, and as a result of the central location of many schools, there are a number of ways in which schools are used for non-education purposes. Schools in the three study provinces, for example, were said to be used as polling stations during elections. This practice is found country-wide.

Sixteen of the 25 schools included in this study reported having been used as polling stations during the 2009–2010 elections. Of the schools that said they were used as polling stations, seven opposed the decision at the time. The schools that welcomed the local authorities to use their facilities as polling stations were primarily in the Faryab Province.

Today, however, as a consequence of increased insecurity, few respondents from Faryab Province were keen for their schools to be used as polling stations in the upcoming elections. A similar picture emerged from Uruzgan and Nangarhar provinces, particularly from schools located in rural locations. One elder from a rural setting in Nangarhar Province linked the risks and dangers of schools being associated with political activities by adamantly stating, “We don’t agree for schools to be used for the elections, because the students and teachers get threatened.” This discontent was echoed by a senior education official in Uruzgan, who stated, “The community members and I are not happy with schools being used as polling stations, because schools are places for education.”

Whether schools are used as polling stations is a Cabinet-level decision. The effect of their use at the local level is influenced by a myriad of interconnected factors, including the tribal and political affiliations of the community, school principals, and teachers; the role of Afghan security forces; and the activities of armed criminal and opposition groups.

Although there were a few examples of schools being used as military outposts by the Afghan National Army, the schools and their
surrounding communities had successfully managed to get them removed through petitions and support from their Provincial Education Department. Unsurprisingly, respondents unequivocally agreed that schools should not be used as military outposts.

Using schools as polling stations, or in a few instances as military outposts, are not without ramifications. Aside from potentially closing down the school for a few days, respondents argued that these activities would be seen as promoting a particular political agenda, which in turn could render them, particularly students and staff, ‘legitimate’ targets in the conflict. School administrators, teachers, and mothers therefore expressed grave concern regarding children’s safety if in the upcoming elections, schools were used as polling stations. One worried mother expressed, “If in the future elections take place in our school, our school students and teachers will be in danger because the security situation is very tense.”

What Does This Mean for Children?

The accounts described, which pertain to the dangers of walking to school, children’s commitments to modern education, and the association of schools with particular political activities, raise serious concerns regarding children’s safety and well-being and the ability of schools to fulfil their education mandate.

For both students and teachers, concerns about their safety were a source of what they often referred to as mental stress. The mental stress, coupled with their heightened risk of violence, meant that many children reported being scared of going to school, parents preventing them from going to school out of fear that they might step on an improvised explosive device or their household getting targeted, and teachers losing their motivation to educate.

Unsurprisingly, a group of schoolboys in the Faryab Province told the interviewers that their families would prevent them from going to school when the security situation was deteriorating. Only when it was deemed safe would they be allowed back to school. Girls were particularly likely to either miss school or stop going altogether. This was illustrated by one schoolgirl who said “there are many children who don’t go to school because security is not good. Most of the ones who aren’t going to school are girls.” One boy explained, “We don’t have girls in our family, but our neighbors don’t allow their girls to go to school.” Although girls’ intermittent school attendance was primarily discussed in relation to their security, decisions not to send girls to school were also often rooted in gendered culture and tradition. Relatedly, girls are not merely at risk from threats and attacks from armed groups, but also from boys within their communities whose gendered socialisation contributes to marginalization of girls. One boy said, “My sister stopped coming to school because of the fear she had of being harassed by boys.”

Also teachers were reported to fear going to school. Respondents from two of the participating schools testified that teachers from their schools had to flee because of threats that were made against them. Teachers indicated that there is a limit to what level of insecurity they can accept. Some teachers spoke about losing their passion for the job, and others, as exemplified by a school principle in Faryab, threatened to quit their jobs: “If the school is threatened or attacked in the future, I will refer to the education department and will quit this job because it is not secure.” Needless to
say, the ramifications of these consequences, primarily through their contribution to drops in education outcomes, have the potential to implicate the socioeconomic development of Afghanistan.

Promoting Schools as Zones of Peace and Neutrality

It is clear that Afghan children and their education are susceptible to attacks and threats, which ultimately affects their safety, well-being, and development. The findings from this study suggest that efforts to declare schools as zones of peace and neutrality are key to promoting safe school environments in conflict-ridden contexts such as in Afghanistan. Creating this safe environment involves reducing the presence of armed forces in and around schools and school closures caused by military or political activities. It also involves encouraging political parties and actors to honor commitments to school functioning. It further requires dialogue and inclusive processes with various stakeholders at different levels, including having meetings with armed groups to discuss possibilities of declaring schools as zones of peace and neutrality. This process can only be successful if combined with addressing structural inequalities, particularly those related to gender.

These activities are highly political and too sensitive for most nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to address directly without incurring a hostile and potentially violent response, which would undermine their impact. However, Save the Children and other NGOs can take an active role in developing interventions that seek to achieve a range of objectives that, when combined, create an enabling context for these political activities and ultimately for the development of more humane school environments.

Save the Children in Afghanistan is exploring ways to prevent or mitigate attacks on schools. The organization’s approach focuses on the shura (committee consisting of parents, teachers, community leaders, and students that comes together to discuss how to improve and maintain school security). It includes development of a code of conduct, constructing physical protections such as boundary walls, and instigating disaster risk reduction initiatives.

Developing a code of conduct aims to ensure schools are protected environments, free from violence. The code of conduct process facilitates interaction between school, community, pupils, teachers, parents and other key stakeholders, and promotes greater transparency and accountability. Items in the codes of conduct include: education as a fundamental right, prohibiting the use of schools for military purposes, protecting staff and students from threat and attack, and preventing school closures. The codes of conduct are prominently displayed in schools and provide a reference point for negotiation.

In recognition of the need to challenge the systems that compromise the well-being and safety of school-going children, Save the Children in Afghanistan and other NGOs should work to empower and enable local communities, and children in particular, to use their own voices in advocacy. Echoing the important work of Paulo Freire, Save the Children in Afghanistan plans to undertake action-oriented research by which children and community members can critically engage with their reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. It is anticipated that the research will highlight the communities’
various strategies to prevent threats and attacks, which can be developed from reactive initiatives into a wider range of proactive measures.

Simultaneously, there is a need to work more closely with the government. By engaging the government, they may become more receptive to local advocacy messages and see efforts to protect schools as joint efforts of Afghan stakeholders rather than projects of international NGOs. Such efforts will also improve chances of sustainability. Power asymmetries, however, make this kind of programming a challenge. It is sensitive and political work because the armed opposition groups, by definition, are opposed to government and often launch attacks in an effort to combat the government. Because of concern for their own safety, staff members in NGOs typically feel most comfortable implementing activities within communities and forming direct relationships with communities – as opposed to government entities – to avoid perceptions of taking sides in a conflict.

In conclusion, to build humane school environments in conflict-affected communities in Afghanistan, there is a need to combine and coordinate programming with community-based participatory research and advocacy to mobilize and generate public awareness, pressure, and action. Future research needs to unpack the complexity of the conflict in Afghanistan.

There are insurgents, including pockets within the Taliban, who do not oppose modern education. Similarly, there are mullah imams, religious leaders typically acting as the heads of local mosques, who actively support girls’ education and who make great strides to protect children’s safety and education. We need
to understand the manifestations of these different principles and use this insight to engage with insurgents and religious leaders and obtain their support in declaring schools as zones of peace and neutrality.

Acknowledgements

This article builds on findings and analysis conducted by a team of researchers at Samuel Hall Consulting in Afghanistan for Save the Children in 2013. We would like to thank researchers at Samuel Hall for reviewing this article. The end of project report produced by Samuel Hall, ‘Schools as zones of Peace: The Challenges of Making Afghan Schools Safe for Education’, is available online: [http://resourcecentre.savethechildren.se]. We would also like to thank the students, school staff and community members for sharing with us their perspectives. Opinions or points of view expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position or policies of Save the Children.

Keywords: Attacks on education; Schools; Conflict-affected countries; Safety; Insecurity; Violence; Afghanistan
Suggestion for Further Reading

Web Resources

Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack. http://www.protectingeducation.org
Schools as Zones of Peace Project. www.czop.org

Reports