Making schools safe: breaking down the barriers to learning

There is general agreement that education is vital to improve people's life chances and to increase the opportunities available to them in their lives. More difficult questions to engage with are: how to provide equitable access to education; what form good quality education should take; and how to ensure that children's safety and wellbeing are guaranteed at school. It is not enough simply to be enrolled in school if the provision is poor or the school is unsafe.

Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4)[1] was introduced in 2015. It aims to meet the challenge of good quality education for all children in its promise to 'Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'. This is important as it emphasises the key theme of 'quality' without losing the emphasis on equality. It is important to also note that SDG4 focuses not only on key areas such as literacy, numeracy and employability skills, but also on the need to provide safe, nonviolent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all.

However, school safety is a barrier to learning that is not always explicitly included in education policy or development programmes. One reason may be that school safety is an elusive concept. It covers a wide range of risks and dangers, which are difficult to tackle through a single initiative. In addition, some risks to children's safety and wellbeing are generated from within the school system (for example, corporal punishment) while others occur outside the direct influence of educators (for example, attacks on schools by armed groups). This makes a unified response challenging.

In recent years UK schools have made progress towards establishing much safer school environments with initiatives such as the banning of corporal punishment, anti-bullying initiatives and the implementation of safeguarding. During wartime, the British government strove to protect children's safety at times of severe danger. For example, during World War Two, millions of children were evacuated to safer rural areas during the Blitz bombing raids on Britain's cities.[2]

However, progress towards safe schools across the world is unequal. Educators are beginning to agree that inadequate school safety on a global scale is acting as a significant barrier to achieving education for all. They have identified the following non-exhaustive list of challenges preventing equitable access to a quality education:

- Armed attacks on schools, school children and teachers by state and non-state forces.

- The occupation of schools by state and non-state forces.

- The risk to children and schools posed by natural disasters and hazards such as earthquakes and floods.

- Sexual violence; this includes intimidation, harassment, unwanted touching, coercion and rape.

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[1] http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/education/

[2] http://www.iwm.org.uk/history/the-evacuated-children-of-the-second-world-war

- Psychological violence; verbal and/or emotional abuse.

- Bullying.

- Exclusionary curricula, practices, pedagogy and facilities that prevent children from learning.

The Safe Schools Declaration is a commitment made by countries to show their support for the protection of education during conflict. It is sponsored by Norway, and has been signed so far by 74 countries including the UK. The Make Schools Safe Campaign urges the UK to implement the Declaration. The campaign also calls on countries to implement additional policies that will make schools safe for all children in times of peace as well as war.

Children in the Philippines attend classes following damage and destruction of 17,500 schools by Typhoon Haiyan in 2013. Children are frequently placed at risk by poorly designed school buildings and inadequate emergency procedures.
Photo: © Jonathan Hyams/Save the Children

The **Global Learning Programme** **(GLP)** introduces pupils to key global issues, such as poverty and development, and interdependence, and provides the contextual knowledge to support the Sustainable Development Goals' targets. With relation to SDG4 and the importance of education, the GLP can provide a focus on three core areas: **knowledge** about the factors that affect school safety; **skills** to engage critically with the questions of what constitutes a safe education; and an understanding of the **values** that underpin a global outlook and global sustainable development.

Make schools safe

In terms of numbers alone, many children are not receiving an education. For example, in April 2015, UNESCO announced that 58 million children worldwide were not enrolled in primary school, and 100 million children worldwide began school but failed to complete their primary education.[3]

The failure of the global community to provide primary education for all prompted educators to re-evaluate the global goals agreed at the end of the 20th century. In particular, attention turned to improving the quality of education, ensuring that highly vulnerable children attend school, and providing schooling for illiterate and innumerate adolescents, youths and adults.

This encouraged the global community to draft new and more comprehensive **Sustainable Development Goals** (SDGs) in 2015,[4] which promise to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' by 2030.

Nonetheless, in 2017 UNESCO reported that 264 million children, adolescents and youths were still missing out on primary and secondary school.[5] The challenge of meeting SDG4 is therefore a big one.

A school in North East Syria that has been occupied by several armed groups. War scars left behind include bullet holes, smashed windows, broken desks and sniper positions.
Photograph: © Save the Children

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[3] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-32194962
[4] https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/jan/19/sustainable-development-goals-united-nations
[5] http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0025/002595/259593e.pdf p. 7

Attention is now turning to **school safety** as a major barrier to learning. Here are some key statistics:

- The UN Secretary-General's report on children and armed conflict in 2016 suggested there were 2,832 reported armed attacks against schools in 20 countries and 205 cases of military use and occupation of schools in 14 countries. This equates to an average of 15 life-threatening armed attacks on education every school day. In total, 28.5 million children live in countries affected by conflict.[6]

- 875 million school children around the world live in high seismic risk zones where schools and communities are at risk of damage and destruction by earthquakes.[7]

- Plan International estimates that at least 246 million boys and girls suffer from gender-based violence every year and an estimated 150 million girls have experienced sexual violence in school.[8]

- Only 10% of the world's children are legally protected from all forms of corporal punishment.[9]

- UNESCO estimate that 246 million children will experience some form of bullying or similar school-based violence every year.[10]

Agreement is growing that achieving education for all is not possible unless action is also taken to make schools safe, secure and welcoming spaces for all children. Many young people in the UK will be aware of the efforts their own schools make to promote their safety and wellbeing. This resource asks them to critically consider their opinions about how to make schools safe on a global scale.

Send My Friend to School asks teachers to join the thousands of other schools taking part in the Make Schools Safe campaign. To receive a teacher's pack showing how your school can learn more and get involved visit www.sendmyfriend.org

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6 http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=s/2016/360&referer=/english/&Lang=E
7 Wisner et al (2004). School Seismic Safety: Falling between the Cracks?
http://www.ilankelman.org/articles1/wisneretal.2004.pdf
8 Plan International (2013). A Girl's Right to Learn Without Fear.
9 http://www.endcorporalpunishment.org/progress/countdown.html
10 http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002469/246970e.pdf

Links

Send My Friend to School

- Download the free teachers pack with everything you need to bring the campaign to life in your classroom, including case studies of schools and children's stories, videos, activities, factsheets and campaigning information http://www.sendmyfriend.org/

Oxfam

- 'Explore Girls' Education' Key Stage 3 resource explores access to education in Afghanistan and includes ideas for taking action https://www.oxfam.org.uk/education/resources/explore-girls-education

Support from the GLP

- The Sustainable Development Goals page includes background reading, videos and activities about the SDGs.

- The education page references numerous resources.

- Support for critical thinking from the GLP.

- The GLP pupil outcomes balance knowledge, skills and values.

- GLP gender equality resource developed for the World's Largest Lesson includes activities on girls' education.

- For more GLP-badged resources, visit the Global Dimension website.

Resource created by Send My Friend to School and Oxfam Education for the Global Learning Programme.

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