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Editorial: Protecting education at all costs? Education in times of crisis and conflict

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Editorial on the Research Topic

Protecting education at all costs? Education in times of crisis and conflict

This Research Topic was launched in 2021 at a time when the world was reeling from the impact of the novel coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), and record numbers of people were being displaced by climate change, armed conflict, and natural disasters. The intent was to bring attention to the multiple faces of education in crisis and conflict settings and to more deeply interrogate the ways in which the shape, form and function of education can either support sustainable development or hinder it (Lopes Cardozo and Shah, 2021).

The articles in this Research Topic highlight the urgency of protecting, supporting, and enhancing educational opportunities for those currently affected by conflict, contagion, and climate-induced disasters. As explored in the paper by Jones et al., for adolescents in Northern Ethiopia, conflict has negatively impacted their educational aspirations and hopes. The authors emphasize how efforts to advance progress toward Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 will require concerted efforts to not only address the diverse needs of learners who have been affected by conflict but also increase financial commitments and political will to protect education from attack.

The broader importance of education during and after a crisis is also a point raised by Shah et al. in their work. Based on a comparative study carried out on how five different countries approached the decision-making process around the closure and reopening of schools during COVID-19, the authors find that education is a vital and visible state institution that reached out to diverse communities across a country in the midst of a crisis. It is for this reason that ensuring equitable, accessible, relevant, and inclusive educational opportunities for all remains a critical component of building sustainable and resilient peace in societies ravaged by conflict or, in this case, contagion (Novelli et al., 2017).

What occurs in the classroom also plays a role in maintaining or disrupting efforts toward sustainable peace. In Gadais et al.'s analysis of the physical education curriculum under the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), they provide a vivid illustration of how education is often a contested and ideological project. While the context and focus of the authors' investigation are unique, the story the study tells is not. A long line of research highlights the contested nature of the curriculum and how it can be used by regimes to shape and form citizens of a particular ilk and character (for instance in Novelli, 2010).

The article by [Cohen and Willemsen](#) is a visceral reminder that in times of crisis, teachers too find themselves caught in the middle ([Lopes Cardozo and Shah, 2016](#)). The authors detail how during the COVID-19 pandemic, female educators in the United States struggled with the double burden of maintaining their professional and personal roles. They had to care for their students and families while also protecting their own wellbeing. This story is not unique to the United States, but by situating their study in the Global North, the authors remind us that support and attention to teachers' wellbeing, working conditions, and professional autonomy remain an urgent priority globally ([Cohen et al., 2021](#); [Shah, 2023](#)).

It is easy to frame young people as victims of crisis and conflict, but the study of [Mitchell et al.](#) presents a different picture: one in which youth articulate and demonstrate agency in a number of ways in response to Mali's compounding crises. While young people are often presented as threats to peace and stability, an interesting finding to emerge from the authors' article is how these Malian youth hope to play a role in preventing, managing, and resolving conflict. Additionally, their work raises critical questions about whether promoting a vision of education as individually transformative is appropriate in a context where collective wellbeing is prioritized. The authors stress the flawed logic of articulating universal purposes, intentions, or aims of education, and instead highlight the importance of listening to and engaging with learners.

This is a point also made by [Boisvert](#) in an article that critically examines how a seemingly universal consensus on the need to return children to school in the midst of a crisis masks broader tensions about the purposes and aims of education. With specific attention to the discourses employed by supranational actors during the COVID-19 pandemic, the author uncovers how education can be argued simultaneously as a human right, a form of protection, and a means for economic development—despite the inherent contradictions between these purposes of education. Such contradictions and tensions reflect long-standing debates about why education is important in times of conflict and crisis.

Collectively, the articles in this Research Topic indicate that we are at a particular inflection point within the education in emergencies community. Recent years have seen mounting criticism of business-as-usual approaches which are notably

colonial and exploitative toward affected populations. Additionally, the short-termism with which problems are currently approached means that solutions are never durable, or locally situated ([Shah et al., 2023](#)). Hence, we must do a better job of asking questions such as education for what, for whom, and in what circumstances, while also ensuring that when answering these questions, the interests of learners, communities and society are at the forefront.

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