Chapter 1
Educating Rohingya Children and Youth in Emergencies:
A Reflection From the Field

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ABSTRACT

Rohingyas have been subjected to genocide, and their children have been systematically deprived of basic to tertiary education since 1982. Now that 1.3 million of them have taken refuge in Bangladesh, of which approximately half of them are children, they are receiving education again. Education in the camps is being delivered through formal and informal channels. In addition, while the young children between the ages of 4-8 receive some education, the adolescents are left out. At present, Rohingya children face a two-fold problem (lack of progressive education and access). In this context, this chapter draws key conceptual frames mostly from International Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) members' works. The findings shared in this chapter were drawn from a qualitative research that was conducted for a book project by the author in February 2018 and April 2019 in Bangladesh. The chapter contains the genesis of education in emergencies, Rohingya children and youth situation and challenges in the education sector, and the need for multicultural education for Rohingya children and youth.

INTRODUCTION

In early April 2018, a team from Conflict and Resilience Research Institute Canada (CRRIC)[1] made a presentation to the Rotary Club of Winnipeg (Manitoba, Canada) outlining a plan aimed at educating female Rohingya adolescents. This plan focused on addressing the needs of one of the key missing demographics among displaced Rohingyas (i.e., adolescents), specifically in relation to the continuation of their education, their psycho-social conditions in the camps, and the types of resources required to ensure their wellbeing.

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In the months following this presentation, the author and his team conducted extensive field work at two selected camps. It was a hot and humid day, with the temperature hovering around 38 degrees Celsius. As the team approached an open hut, they found around 25 children receiving lessons from a teacher. The teacher noticed the team and happily welcomed them to stay and observe before continuing the lesson using the Burmese language. At break time, the teacher introduced the team to the students, and asked them if they would sing for the team. The team expected to hear a song in the local Rohingya dialect; however, to its surprise, as the students broke into a passionate rendition of "We Shall Overcome," which emphasized their resiliency despite the dire conditions in the camps.

Rohingyas—an ethnocultural minority group in Myanmar—have been the targets of genocide since 1962. In 1982, the Myanmar government passed the Citizenship Act, which fully stripped the Rohingyas of their fundamental citizenship rights. In addition, the Myanmar government has systematically deprived Rohingya children of primary education, and has erected obstacles preventing them from accessing secondary and tertiary education. Now that 1.3 million Rohingyas have taken refuge in the camps, of which 385,307 are young people, humanitarian support is urgently required on many fronts (UNFPA 2018). For instance, although the delivery of education has been expanded considerably, a closer examination reveals that it remains unable to meet the needs of Rohingya adolescents in the camps. This shortcoming is the result of two main factors: restrictions placed on formal education by the host country, and a lack of progressive education (similar to a system prevailing in the host community, where a child starts from grade one and gradually proceeds to middle and high schools in 10-12 years) based on the Rohingyas' livelihood needs.

The statutory rights of children to be educated are enshrined in numerous declarations and treaties that the host countries are obliged to follow. For example, the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child forbids host countries from withholding education from refugees, as it could take decades before they are able to return to their home countries.[2] The UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 4 (Quality Education) and 5 (Gender Equality) also emphasize Rohingya children's rights to education, regardless of whether they are living in Bangladesh or Myanmar. Education should also be "children centered […] the entire education system, not just the curriculum, must be gender sensitive and attentive to equity and diversity issues […] parents and community members should be respected partners in the educational process. Community resources should be included as part of the 'package' of learning materials" (Pigozzi 1999, 4).

While there is an abundance of studies that focus on multicultural education within the context of Western educational systems, there is a dearth of research examining the need for a multicultural approach to educating refugee children in displaced conditions (Banks 1993, Bennett 2001, Sleeter and Grant 1987). At this point, it is critical to note the distinction between "normal" and "emergency" conditions with relation to educational contents and pedagogy. The majority of studies focusing on the education of immigrants and refugees, have been situated within host communities/societal environments (for example, refugee and immigrant children in the USA, Canada, Britain, or Germany) where physical segregation does not exist. Such studies can be said to examine "normal" educational contexts. In contrast, children and youth in "emergency" situations are exposed to numerous risks, such as the safety of the space and access to resources. It is simply not enough to delivering education directly to children in emergency conditions; rather, it is imperative to implement an approach such as multicultural education which is coined here as 'Education M Plus (+)', is able to offer specialized contents and modes of delivery. As such, the author proposes a model of multicultural education in emergency contexts that fills the void related to knowledge and practice.