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TOWARDS AN OPERATIONALIZATION OF RESILIENCE IN EDUCATION SYSTEMS: IDENTIFYING, PROTECTING AND USING ASSETS IN EDUCATION COMMUNITIES

Why does identifying, protecting and using assets contribute to resilience in education?

Resilience is a process that occurs in adversity. It entails the assets (capacities and engagement processes) that allow people, communities and institutions to recover from crisis, to perform in spite of difficulties, and to transform in the face of adversity. Thus, the fundamental operationalization of education resilience is understood by The World Bank's Education Resilience Approaches Program (ERA) as the identification, protection and use of school and community assets. This focus on assets can contribute to student learning, as well as to managing and minimizing their exposure to risks. Through four initial pilot studies, in Rwanda, South Sudan, Honduras and with Palestine refugees in the UNRWA¹ system, ERA came across a consistent finding: the combined capacities of school staff, parents and other community actors dynamically contribute to students' education purpose and motivation, and mitigate their exposure to risks. However, education systems must systematically support these assets to fully benefit from their potential.

¹ UNRWA stands for United Nations Relief and Works Agency, a body created to support Palestine refugees and their descendants from the 1948 conflict in the Near East, and which continues to operate education services for these communities in West Bank, Gaza, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon.

This Education Note presents the findings from the first four ERA pilots (Rwanda, South Sudan, Honduras and the UNRWA system in West Bank, Gaza and Jordan) to illustrate the facets of education resilience and how it can be fostered. The main message is that education resilience involves identifying risks and assets, protecting the assets in schools and communities, and aligning education system commitment to a resilience approach.

Risks and Assets

The starting point for education resilience interventions is a collective understanding of how adversity affects students and schools

The difficulties students face in adversity cannot be forgotten, and identifying those risks is the starting point to a resilience approach. Education systems in contexts of adversity must have a collective understanding of the risks students face in order to be relevant. Failure to identify risks can result, at best, in education services that are deemed irrelevant by students and families and that, at worst, collude or ignite the risks already faced by students.

Explicitly addressing the risks education communities face provides an opportunity to focus on the contributions and sense of purpose that education can provide in difficult situations. Students in Palestine refugee communities (UNRWA), Honduras and South Sudan attributed a positive meaning to education in spite of the risks they faced. Although resilience

After 40 years of resilience research, it is now known that resilience is a complex process focused not only on individual strengths, but also on available opportunities and services especially for the most vulnerable.



focuses on assets and opportunities for positive change, opportunities must be understood within the difficulties present in the lives of individuals and in their social context. This is the reason why State and other services providers must make services available and equitable in a manner that supports the inherent resilience processes of both individuals and communities at risk. Institutional services which address local risks and engage with the assets of education communities will be most relevant.

Further, the complex interactions between individual and country level risks in South Sudan were made evident in the ERA pilot study. Many of the personal risks identified by participants (migrating from rural to urban communities, studying as southerners in the north, and the obstacles for female students to access higher education) seemed to parallel the root causes of armed conflict in the country: the territorial and ethnic conflict, the differences in language and culture, systematic exclusion, etc. Understanding these risks provided an opportunity, however, to also discuss the individual assets of university students and the national assets of a post-independence South Sudan, as the country entered a more pronounced state-building phase.

Identifying and utilizing existing and indigenous assets is a key facet of education resilience

Early research on resilience focused on assets as internal protective factors (optimism, purpose, problem solving, togetherness, empathy, humor, etc.) of populations in different contexts of adversity, such as extreme poverty, homelessness, armed conflict, etc. Resilience is now understood as a much more complex process, focused not only on individual strengths, but also on available opportunities and services beyond the individual. Foundational to a resilience approach is honoring local assets by providing opportunities and services which support and empower the individual and community.

The ERA case study of education reforms in post-genocide Rwanda provides an example of the use of indigenous assets in education. Policy makers honored grassroots and home grown solutions in education and social services delivery and management by formalizing and systematizing them. Of note were the IMIHIGO-performance contracts, a local practice for ensuring accountability that became law. Today district mayors sign performance contracts with the President of the Republic, indicating district targets and indicators—including education targets—that all mayors have to publically report on each year to the President. Public services have been complemented with indigenous forms of community participation and national dialogue, within Rwandese tradition, such as UBUDEHE-Communal support, UMUGANDA-Community service, UMWIHERERO-Senior Servants Accountability Retreat, and UMUSHYIKIRANO-National dialogue (for details on these policies, see World Bank 2013c). Home grown solutions are locally appropriate, benefit from greater buy-in and acceptance,

can be scaled up in an easier fashion, and have the potential for greater impact and sustainability.

ERA's work with Palestinian students in UNRWA schools highlights the need for similar alignment between individual and community level assets and institutional support. UNRWA schools provide students with deep insights into their strengths, assets and positive opportunities to succeed in school. At the same time schools engage with local communities to give meaning and purpose to the many adversities in students' daily lives through education. Schools and families in Palestine refugee communities supported by UNRWA share the accountability for the learning and well-being of children and youth in spite of adversity. This generation of education meaning and purpose is part and parcel to utilizing local and culturally-grounded assets.

The importance of identifying and utilizing indigenous assets is also associated with the need to work through local actors. This has been apparent across ERA's analytical work through local researchers and universities in difficult contexts. By working with students from the University of Juba, in South Sudan, and with local researchers from West Bank, Gaza and Palestine refugee communities in Jordan, important topics for resilience research were identified that would not otherwise have been obvious to external resilience researchers. This has also been the case working with researchers across Central America and Colombia who were better able to navigate the complexities of local power relations and politics in violence-affected contexts when conducting education resilience studies.

Focusing on individual and community assets in difficult situations does not preclude or undermine the need to address the roots of poverty, violence, injustice and many other social and institutionally created adversities. However, a proper identification and use of local assets helps ensure relevant service provision and helps build resilience in individuals and communities.

Protecting Assets in Schools and Communities

Parents, caretakers, and teachers play a key role in promoting resilience among students

Existing evidence from 40 years of resilience research in contexts of adversity shows that after parents (and other primary caretakers) teachers are the most influential adults for children and youth. Similarly, data collected at the school level in both UNRWA schools and Honduras points to the crucial support of parents, caretakers and teachers in providing care, helping to develop competencies, and supporting an increased understanding and meaning of adversity and of the positive role of education in difficult contexts. Palestine refugee students explicitly express a need for teachers and principals to understand the contexts in which they live as adversities

follow them into the classroom. These findings are reiterated in Honduras, where evidence from a critical school case points to the need for school staff to relate to the lives and adversities felt by students and connect with them around these issues.

In recent ERA work, Palestinian students also indicate how their skills, leadership, knowledge, and desire to work in groups can be used in the teaching and learning process and specifically focus on the importance of peer-to-peer learning, healthy competition and encouragement among students, and mutual support in times of crisis. In Honduras, students commented on the benefits of remedial classes and after-hours support, which they recognize and greatly appreciate. The Honduras pilot also highlights the importance of school staff and parents keeping a watchful eye on risks students experience, including those risks considered “latent” or less obvious but with potentially disastrous consequences. In Honduras these included non-constructive disciplinary methods, expulsion of students to the dangers of the streets (as “punishment” for not complying with school rules such as “uniform” or “haircuts”), and a lack of positive relations among the community of adults who would influence the students’ learning environment. This was especially expressed in students’ concerns for teacher-parental relations, which they viewed as assets when they were positive and as risks when they were poor or lacking.

Meaningful community and parental participation in schools fosters resilience

Resilience studies in high-risk situations highlight the importance of school-community partnerships to support the success of students in school. The ERA case study in Honduras found that mothers play a very supportive role in schools through the supervision of students and socioemotional support during crisis (such as deadly shootings and crimes in the vicinity of the school). Students, teachers and parents in the study also point to help from faith-based organizations, university psychological counseling interns and sport clubs. Students participating in the ERA pilot in Honduras also indicated other community services deemed relevant for them, such as sex education, youth violence prevention, and disaster preparedness (especially pertinent in Honduras, a country exposed to many natural disasters). In Rwanda, the ERA study shows that the Ministry of Education is keenly aware of the value of mobilizing the community to create ownership and build support for reforms, and following the genocide ministry officials personally visited many villages of the country to discuss approaches to equitable education reforms under a unified country. The UNRWA schools pilot provides evidence of close community-school relations that foster a collective purpose for education and learning for Palestinian children, adolescents and youth. In general, the above studies exemplify the call of students, teachers and parents for more community participation in school. This participation is not based on school administrative functions alone but rather focuses on shared efforts and accountability for the learning, well-being and protection of students.

Aligned Education System Support

Successful resilience interventions require explicit commitment through policies and resources from education systems

The examples of education resilience found in the ERA pilot studies are all embedded within the daily activities of students—in the relationships between teachers and peers in the classroom, during recess and in extracurricular activities, and in the daily interactions between school staff and parents. Thus, an education resilience approach does not promote independent resilience projects, but rather advocates aligning existing education services that are used across school life to the assets found in students, communities and schools.

Aligning education system support to a resilience approach starts with a clear commitment through education policies and the provision of resources to help those policies become operational in schools. In Rwanda, the education sector policies and strategic plans have a clear vision and embedded strategy to overcome the roots that led to the genocide. Early post-crisis interventions at the community level were followed by policy reforms promoting the role of education to foster national unity, peace, and social cohesion with respect for diversity and human rights. In the aftermath of the genocide, the education sector made it a priority to urgently get children back into schools, recruit teachers and set in motion a return to classroom ‘normalcy.’ To do so, it upheld indigenous and community processes which were later institutionalized as part of the long-term education delivery systems. This is seen as a crucial way to create stability, improve morale, heal emotional wounds and start a reconciliation process bridging emergency response with longer term development. UNRWA schools in the West Bank, Gaza and Jordan upheld international guiding policies such as those related to girls’ education, Education for All, and human rights; these provided a positive foundation to position education as a shared goal of the community, placing schools as central institutions to operationalize them.

Resilience is a dynamic process that involves human, community and institutional engagement

In line with the latest resilience research, the ERA pilots provide evidence of the multiple dynamic facets of resilience. At the individual and group level, in the pilot with Palestine refugee schools, adolescents and youth expressed not only the proximate adversities in their lives (such as extreme poverty, unemployed parents and incarcerated or deceased family members, neighbors and friends) but also how education provides a guiding purpose to their lives and how school provides a tangible space for teachers, peers, parents and neighbors to support their learning, socioemotional well-being and protection.

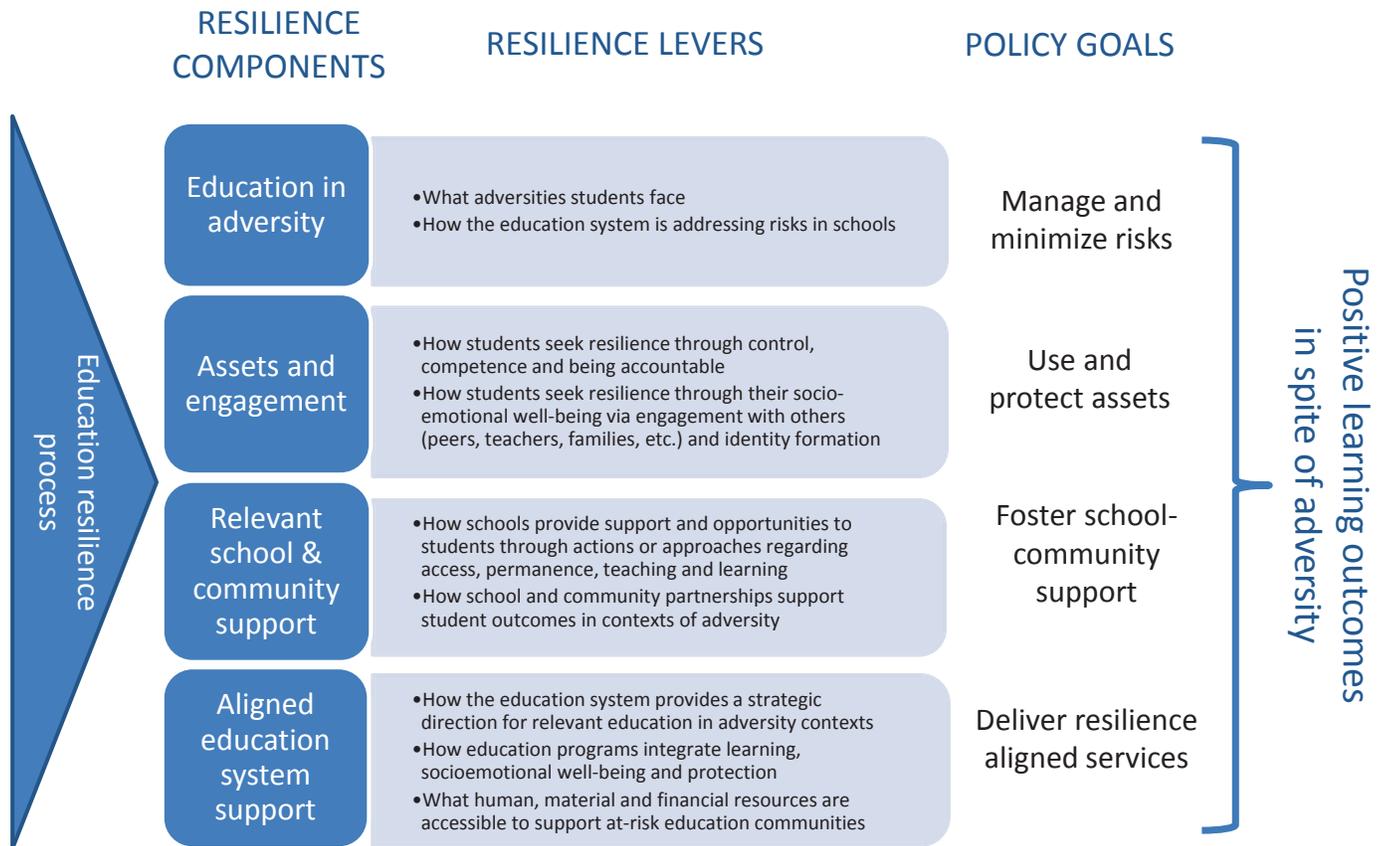
Resilience also implies institutional support, social services and structural opportunities—aligned to individual and community



assets—especially for the most disadvantaged and disfranchised. Both the Palestine refugee study and Honduran school pilot reveal how students interact with external sources of support and education system services to manage the adversities they are exposed to. The South Sudan workshops with higher education students exemplify the intellectual and leadership assets that exist in tertiary education institutions even in difficult contexts—which need to be protected, supported and utilized. The pilot in Rwanda provides examples

of education system level resilience by detailing how education policies provide meaningful and relevant guidance in the post-genocide period, especially focused on issues of unity, equity and social reconciliation.

The general lessons learned from the pilot ERA case studies corroborated the four components of the program, previously presented, and are summarized in the following figure.



Source: Author.

References

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* All sources available at <http://www.worldbank.org/education/resilience>.

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