

Education in Times of Emergencies Requires Balancing Theory, Practice

Reviewed by Megan Scanlon

Kevin M. Cahill, editor, *Even in Chaos: Education in Times of Emergency*. New York: Fordham University Press and The Center for International Humanitarian Cooperation, 2010

For generations, the humanitarian world has by and large been reactive, responding to man-made and natural disasters with food, shelter, and medicine. In the past decade, however, there has been a marked shift in the humanitarian dialogue, prompting a growing debate about what works and what doesn't, as evidenced by books such as Michael Barnett's and Thomas G. Weiss' *Humanitarianism in Question* and Fiona Terry's *Condemned to Repeat*, not to mention a growing number of humanitarian blogs such as "How Matters," "Blood and Milk," and "Aid Watch" that revolve around the "do no harm" imperative. Consequently, songwriter Leonard Cohen said, "There is a crack in everything; that's how the light gets in." The emerging field of education in emergencies is that light making its way through some of the identified cracks in the humanitarian world, as illuminated by *Even in Chaos: Education in Times of Emergency*, edited by Kevin M. Cahill, M.D. The bedrocks of education in emergencies, as stated in Vernor Munoz's chapter, "Protecting Human Rights in Emergency Situations," lie in their "physical, psychosocial, and cognitive protection" properties "that can be both life-saving and life-sustaining" (p. 13). Accordingly, Cahill tells us that "Education is, as contributors in this volume will attest, not only an expression of a basic human right, but represents the only proven path to growth, development, and peace" (p. 2). *Even in Chaos* demonstrates that providing educational opportunities in emergency situations is needed, doable, and can be fruitful for affected individuals and communities.

Balancing theory and practice, *Even in Chaos* provides new perspective for its audience. In an appropriate and refreshing manner this compilation gives much needed attention to the voices being affected, providing valuable anecdotal evidence while reporting a wealth of statistics with the praxis to influence policy, and therefore giving the reader a grander and detailed scope of the problem. Each chapter is rooted in Munoz's suggestion that "for those that do offer assistance, they should act with those affected rather than for them" (p. 10), while simultaneously managing to illuminate the multiple layers of difficulty that accompany the concept of acting with. The authors facilitate to the reader a sense of ownership and empowerment among newly and loosely formed communities of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) that could not be further from a "melting pot." In his chapter, Gonzalo Sanchez-Teran exemplifies this by explaining the many complications concomitant with forming a parents' association for an IDP site in Dar Sila, Chad: "No less than 20 villages are present in each site, often coming from different geographical areas and sometimes with serious problems of understanding among each other. It is difficult to involve people in a school that involves so many actors. Making each village feel not only just a part but also an owner of the school, and therefore responsible for it, proved to be a challenging task" (p. 220).

According to the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies, "approximately 75 million children are out of school worldwide; more than half of these children are living in conflict-affected states. Millions more are living in situations affected by natural disasters," adding up to almost one sixth of the world's population and projecting significant consequences such as individual and collective trauma, political instability, economic turmoil, and the high potential for social disintegration and social disunity. Youth refugees and IDPs like Valentino Achak Deng, Sudanese author of *What Is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng* (McSweeney's, 2006) writes that much of their development occurred in refugee camps, a decidedly bleak existence if little to no opportunity is presented. However, this is not to say that

youth affected by conflict and displacement are not active participants. Neil Boothby, internationally recognized expert and advocate for children affected by war and displacement, says in a Center for Defense Information interview (<http://www.cdi.org/adm/1201/Boothby.html>):

[B]y and large children are...resilient... if we understand resilience as not something that magically exists, but [as] the interaction of the child and the opportunity. So it's the interior and the external that merge. And I think again our role in this is to recognize the fact that kids can overcome adversity, but they're not going to do that necessarily on their own.

Boothby's statement reflects the book's overall theme of human dignity. An example is Arancha Garcia del Soto's chapter on psychosocial issues in education, who writes:

Resiliency is closely tied to the consideration of the mutual support and interaction between individual and community wellness. It permeates every single emergency program.

Furthermore, in their respective chapters, "Hear Our Voices: Experiences of Conflict Affected Children," and "After the Storm: Minority School Development in New Orleans," Zlata Filipovic and Juan Rangel deftly illustrate the role played by quality education as a stabilizing and enriching agent of socialization. In Filipovic's chapter, a young man named Kon says, education can allow children of war and disaster

to gain back a sense of humanity...to become a social being again through interaction with others...without this... the effects of war are carried until they explode somewhere along the line and hurt more people (p. 78).

Moreover, Rangel speaks to the power of the United Neighborhood Organization's outlook, one that views schools as "anchors of communities, institutions where immigrant assimilation plays out, and children and families are socialized to... norms of...society" (p. 285).

Even in Chaos truly covers all of its bases. Yet, what could be strengthened is a rich narrative that organically allows the reader to empathize

consistently throughout each chapter. While recognizing that *Even in Chaos* is not a piece of fiction, the bottom line is that in a world of six billion people we are moved by the characters in our lives; moved not even necessarily by what they say or do but how they say or do it. These stories of the lived experiences of those in emergencies remain, for some parts, absent. However, the feel of the book reflects the idea that the best policy makes use of the resources available, and as the proceeds from sales go to training humanitarian workers, on a grander scale, above any book review, the contributors are indeed making use of the resources available, and making concerted, quality coordination efforts to improve the field of education in emergencies.

While reading *Even in Chaos*, the reviewer was reminded of an interview she conducted with a former gang member, who said, "Education is the best form of intervention for any social ill of any kind," which is perhaps the most important message to take away from this compilation. It is evident that the contributors of *Even in Chaos* strive to make that intervention a reality for those severely affected by emergency situations. As Deng says, "Perhaps the most that can be accomplished [in emergency situations] is a process of trial and error and of learning from practical experience" (p. 313).

About the Reviewer

Megan Scanlon is a New York University alumna.