Awkward but Useful?
A short review of the Education and Fragility Discourse

Rebecca Winthrop
Presentation at the INEE Global Consultation
Istanbul, March 2009

There is increasing attention to 'education and fragility' by international development actors, especially bi- and multi-lateral donors, UN agencies, and international NGOs. But what does the phrase mean exactly? Many practitioners and policymakers working on education in developing countries, such as government officials and civil society practitioners, have only recently been introduced to the term.

This paper provides a short and concise review of the education and fragility discourse in order to establish a common understanding from which multiple actors can engage in further debate. Ultimately, this paper argues that the term 'education and fragility' is simultaneously awkward and useful, presenting real problems for developing countries labeled as fragile but also providing important conceptual shifts in understanding the dynamics of international educational development.[1]

Awkward

There are three main reasons why the term education and fragility is awkward: 1) it is confusing, 2) it sounds bad, and 3) it was developed with little input from developing country actors.

Its Confusing: How is it defined?

There is no commonly agreed upon the definition of fragility across development actors. Instead different institutions have different, although often overlapping, definitions. For example, the World Bank, Save the Children, the Foreign Policy Association, and the Brookings Institute all have different indexes for measuring fragility.[2]

However, there are some areas of commonality. Fragile contexts are often distinguished by instability, whether that be political, economic,

or social, and the presence or risk of violent conflict. Perhaps the most widely referenced definition comes from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development – Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC), which describes fragile states as those with "limited capacity and/or will on the part of the state to provide basic services to its population."[3]

Differing approaches have been employed, admittedly for different purposes, to examine and to address issues around fragility and education. Three such approaches are:

- o Categorization approach. This approach develops multiple categories of fragility based on distinguishing characteristics, which then could be used to classify different contexts. An example of this approach is the OECD-DAC categories of fragile states, which include "deteriorating," "arrested development," "post-conflict transition," and "early recovery" (here the focus is on classifying states in order to improve service delivery, including education).

- o Unifying Problem approach. This approach rejects as too difficult the attempt to categorize states because of the innumerable contextual differences across states and contexts of fragility. Instead, this approach looks for a characteristic or problem that unifies fragile contexts as a group. An example of this approach is Gene Sperling's articulation of "trust-gaps" as the common problem in delivering educational assistance in fragile contexts (here the focus is on identifying and then addressing the particular trust-gap so that funding can flow to education).

- o Core Functions approach. This approach seeks neither to categorize nor to uncovering a unifying problem. Rather it identifies core functions that must be performed in any context to provide education and allows for nuanced contextual analysis by ranking how strong or weak a state or other actor is in each function. An example of this approach is the FTI Progressive Framework, which identifies core functions - "planning and coordination," "resource mobilization and financial management," "service delivery," and "monitoring system improvement" – and provides a spectrum for each with which to do contextual analysis (here the focus is on educational analysis and planning at country level).

It Sounds Bad: Stop Calling me Fragile!

Another reason why the term education and fragility is awkward is because on the whole developing countries do not want to be identified or labeled as fragile and certainly not as a fragile state. This label can drive away investors at the very time in which a country needs it most and it can mask sub-national, regional, or global forces that contribute to the instability.

It was developed with limited input

Not only does it sound bad to be labeled a 'fragile state' but the very countries which get labeled had very little input into the choice of the term. Many people have critiqued the term and as a result the focus has shifted to talking about fragility or fragile situations, which could refer to only one area of a country than the whole state.

Useful

Despite these limitations, the education and fragility discourse is also quite useful. It provides helpful organizing concepts to better understand the complex dynamics of international educational development. There are three main reasons why it is useful: 1) it bridges gaps, 2) it foregrounds the bi-directional relationship between education and fragility, 3) it ensures attention to unintended consequences.

Bridging Gaps

A fragility lens allows us to evaluate the extent to which any given context/country is susceptible to instability at any given point in time, especially if we use the core functions approach. This is a much more accurate picture of the world than, as done previously, classifying contexts as either 'emergency' or 'development.' The concept of fragility conceptually dissolves the long-standing gap between humanitarian relief and development assistance. This is especially crucial for the education sector because of the reluctance of humanitarian actors to address education. The concept of fragility is also agile enough to illuminate the cyclical nature of instability and

conflict, allowing for increased focus on "pre-crisis" moments and preventative action.

Bi-Directional Relationship between Education and Fragility

The ability to examine the way in which education is affected by fragility and vice-versa is also much improved using this lens. The way in which educational access and quality is hampered by instability is relatively well-documented and recognized. This is not the case with the role that education can play in fueling or mitigating fragility itself. This bi-directional dynamic between education and fragility is especially important to understand in relation to conflict prevention.

Focus on Un-intended Consequences

Understanding this bi-directional dynamic between education and fragility, exhorts education actors to be much more thoughtful about policy and practice. Using a fragility lens forces educationalists to look for the negative, un-intended consequences that may fuel instability and ultimately children and youth's ability to access a quality education.

Conclusion

The education and fragility discourse is both awkward and useful. While a better term may be developed in the future, our current focus should be on the concepts and content of the debate. Even if imperfect, the education and fragility discourse is advancing the case for a quality and relevant education in <u>all</u> contexts.

---

[1] Credit goes to Jacqueline Mosselson who first used the words awkward but useful in our discussions of education and fragility.

[2] Williams, J. (2009). *"Fragility," Education, and the State.* Presentation at CIES.

[3] Tebbe, K. (2009). *Global Trends for Education to Support Stability and Resilience: Research, Programming and Finance.* INEE.