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Commentary: How the Education in Emergencies Field Can Help the United States Respond to COVID-19

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HOW THE EDUCATION IN EMERGENCIES FIELD CAN HELP THE UNITED STATES RESPOND TO COVID-19

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The field of education in emergencies (EiE) has developed rapidly over the last two decades. In the early 2000s, the Comparative and International Education Society held only a smattering of sessions that discussed education during or after crisis. The newly formed Education for All Fast Track Initiative—today the Global Partnership for Education (GPE)—by design did not channel its funding to fragile or conflict-affected states. The Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE), established in the early 2000s to help advance the Education for All movement in contexts affected by conflict and natural disaster, had a toolkit consisting of several blue cardboard boxes that held a selection of photocopied manuals and guides from various organizations, the best of what field-based experts had to offer at the time. Many of these materials focused on the nuts and bolts of delivering education services in refugee camps or other crisis contexts, and only a few drew direct links between child protection, children's psychosocial wellbeing, and education continuity.

The argument that education was one of the best ways, if not the best, to support children's protection and psychosocial wellbeing amid crisis has been central to catalyzing the growing attention to and development of the EiE field over the past two decades. Today, with half the GPE partner countries classified as fragile states, EiE draws from a robust and wide-ranging array of global minimum standards and guidance notes, copious digital resources, a multilingual network of thousands of practitioners and policymakers, multiple courses of study in institutions of higher learning, and many global mechanisms for providing financing to crisis contexts. After a great deal of work by hundreds and hundreds of practitioners, researchers, and advocates, EiE today is a well-established sector in the global humanitarian and development communities.

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However, before the COVID-19 pandemic, the EiE sector and its know-how had been largely ignored in high-income countries. Relegated to the category of a developing-world problem, few schools in high-income countries had disaster preparedness plans that went beyond short-term school closings due to gun violence or other exceptional circumstances. School systems in the Global North were not familiar with the best practices for ensuring continuity of education in the midst of crisis, or with the many other lessons the EiE field can provide.

So what can the EiE field teach the developed world? Reflections on the US experience can shed light on this question. In spring 2020, when school closures began due to the COVID-19 pandemic, schools across the country were taken by surprise and largely left to fend for themselves. Standard EiE practices were frequently nonexistent, and school districts rarely delivered life-saving messages to their students, teachers, and personnel about the behaviors they needed to practice to stay safe. The principle of "do no harm"—namely, avoiding "exposing people to further harm" as a result of humanitarian interventions (Sphere Project 2011, 29)—was often overlooked in school-closure decisions. This resulted in the needs of the most vulnerable students, such as children at risk of domestic violence or those whose parents were frontline workers, to be disregarded, which left them exposed to greater risks during home-based schooling. District efforts frequently focused on pivoting the delivery of lessons to remote learning mechanisms, especially during the early response, and forged ahead with normal math, language, or science lessons, giving little attention to adapting the content of what children were studying to recognize that the world around them had changed, making space for their questions, or thinking through both young people's and educators' psychosocial needs. In all these respects, school districts would have greatly benefitted from EiE advice and guidance, such as that provided in the INEE technical note on the pandemic (INEE 2020).

In the United States, most of the public debate and attention given to children's education amid the pandemic has been on the lost instructional time and so-called learning loss, which refers to children's delayed academic progress. For example, students are estimated to be as much as one-third of an academic year behind grade level in reading (Education Analytics 2021; Spector 2021) and some nearly two-thirds of a year behind in math (Dorn et al. 2021); it is the country's black and brown students who have been hardest hit by these losses. This rising inequality in academic outcomes is deeply concerning, but it should not eclipse attention to children's psychosocial needs, which is a lesson the EiE community has learned repeatedly in numerous contexts.

As the pandemic has worn on, the US education community has begun to expand its focus from academic learning gaps to mental health concerns. This is in response to a nationally representative survey showing that, after just a few weeks of school closures, one-third of high school students reported increased feelings of anxiety, worry, and depression (America's Promise Alliance 2020). This has led to increasing calls for schools to hire more counselors to provide mental health services to students. While this is an important step, it by no means precludes other ways of addressing children's psychosocial needs.

Drawing from years of practitioner know-how and an increasing research base, largely in the developing world, the INEE Minimum Standards for Education can provide useful guidance, even for developed countries like the US, that are struggling to address children's education needs amid the pandemic. Several elements of good practice in the INEE standards are especially relevant for the US education community:

- The importance of integrating expressive activities, including play-based approaches, into children's daily routines as a way to support children's psychosocial wellbeing;

- Using the full range of spaces and assets available in communities (e.g., parks and school buildings) to help children learn and connect; and

- Harnessing the disruption caused by a crisis to find better ways of supporting children's long-term holistic development and addressing their cognitive, psychological, social, and physical needs (INEE 2010).

There are many creative ways to support children's psychosocial wellbeing, some of which were present prior to the pandemic, although only marginally in the US education system, that can be adopted and adapted for a range of contexts. One example is Playful Learning Landscapes (PLL), an initiative that uniquely blends the science of learning, placemaking, and community cohesion. PLL, which builds on multiple efforts and initiatives aimed at creating more child-friendly cities, transforms public and shared spaces into fun and enriching learning hubs for the development of healthy children, families, and communities (Bustamante et al. 2021; Hassinger-Das et al. 2021).

While children's play may look different during the pandemic, great effort should be made to ensure that they can still play safely at home or outdoors with their

caregivers and siblings. From the earliest age, humans crave social interaction. The classic "still-face experiment" clearly shows this. When a parent gazes at their infant with a blank expression (as they are instructed to do in the experiment), the interaction quickly goes downhill and the baby often gets upset (Adamson and Frick 2003). Research also tells us that "serve-and-return" interactions, in which children "serve" by showing an interest in something and their caregiver "returns" by responding in a supportive way, help to build connections in the brain that influence language and cognitive development (Romeo et al. 2018).

Experts argue that children need play now more than ever, since play enables them to express and process their feelings and experiences, especially those that are scary or confusing. An April 2020 article in *The Atlantic* shares parents' anecdotes about children playing "CoronaBall," a version of dodgeball, and "Social-distancing tag," where children tag each other's shadows (Cray 2020). It is clear that play permeates children's lives, even during a pandemic.

PLL is one approach that can provide increased opportunities for children to play while schools are closed and families are the central locus of education. PLL locates its installations in spaces families frequent, such as bus stops, parks, supermarkets, and laundromats. While many of these spaces may look different during a pandemic, infusing public and shared spaces with designs informed by the latest science of learning can provide much-needed opportunities for quality caregiver-child interactions and the kind of playful learning children crave. Moreover, PLL's flexible model can be adapted to key safety measures, including those related to high-touch surfaces and social distancing. Urban Thinkscape, a PLL installation that transformed an abandoned lot next to a bus stop in West Philadelphia into an interactive play space, is one of many that promote playful learning in an outdoor setting, which during the pandemic is generally thought to be safer than indoor spaces (Hassinger-Das, Palti et al. 2020). Transforming unexpected places such as city sidewalks and vacant lots into spaces where children can have playful learning opportunities can be a low-cost, COVID-friendly way to boost their learning during and after the pandemic.

Integrating interventions like PLL into public and shared spaces is one way the US education community can leverage EiE's guidance to "build back better." Data from pilot PLL installations in Philadelphia and Chicago, among other cities, show that PLL promotes the kind of caregiver-child communication that supports language learning and builds relationship; encourages children to talk about numbers, letters, and spatial relations; and increases caregivers' understanding of the connection between play and learning (Bustamante et al. 2020; Hassinger-

Das, Palti et al. 2020; Hassinger-Das, Zosh et al. 2020; Ridge et al. 2015). At the same time, PLL engages communities in the revitalization of the public realm, which creates new opportunities for multigenerational social interaction, as well as more vibrant and livable cities.

The current crisis can be leveraged as a unique opportunity for educators, parents, researchers, and policymakers to reimagine more equitable education systems. As highlighted in a recent report on education reform (Hirsh-Pasek et al. 2020), children need to develop a breadth of skills beyond literacy and numeracy in order to engage in lifelong learning and to succeed in today's rapidly changing, globalized world. An overwhelming body of evidence points to play as the best way to equip children with a broad set of flexible competencies that enable them to tackle new and different challenges creatively. Play is ubiquitous in childhood and foundational to human development and learning, and it has a unique and important role in supporting children's socioemotional development. Pretend play, for example, enables children to practice emotional regulation, which ranges from infant self-soothing to becoming more conscious of one's emotions to developing strategies to manage those emotions (Thompson and Calkins 1996).

The education community will be drawing from lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic for years to come. These insights will be relevant to all countries across the globe. Who knows—a decade down the road, we may look back at the pandemic as the event that connected the EiE community to the developed world.

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