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Child to Child: What We Have Learned About Educating Children

Save the Children Federation (SCF/US) began its Landmine Education Project (LEP) in Kabul, Afghanistan in April 1996. It developed a participatory curriculum based on principles of non-formal education.

by Sarah Warren, *Save the Children*

Mine Awareness Based in Schools

In its first phase, the LEP was almost entirely school-based and implemented through the city's public schools. Forty SCF/US facilitators ran two sessions each day for students in grades one to 12. The program consisted of two segments: first, a multi-media slide show containing all key messages about living in a mined area, and second, a 90-minute session during which students participated in a variety of educational games and activities. To ensure that children absorbed the messages and adapted their behavior, SCF/US trained selected volunteer teachers from

each school to carry out a series of 12 follow-up education sessions for all participants.

Non-Formal Approach

Shortly after implementing the program, staff recognized that many children who did not attend school were at high risk from the dangers of landmines and UXO. Many of them worked as shepherds or collected scrap metal and firewood. It soon became evident that the LEP had to develop ways to work on a much larger scale outside the school system, particularly as public schools close each winter for four months because they are not equipped for harsh weather. In addition to this, in late September 1996, the schools were shut down by Taliban militia, and when they were reopened

several weeks later, girls were not allowed to attend and female teachers, who accounted for an estimated 70 percent of all teachers, were forbidden to return to the classroom. This event marked the real shift for SCF/US from the school-based approach to an out-of-school approach.

Emergency Response Team (ERT)

ERT was established in reaction to emerging information about the alarmingly high number of mine/UXO incidents that were taking place in certain areas of the city. The team identified high-risk areas and quickly reached large numbers of children with landmine/UXO education. ERT developed a standard two-hour session based on the activity session that had been used in schools. Four groups, each containing three male facilitators, took responsibility for four districts of the city, sometimes crossing into other districts as needed. Each set of ERT facilitators identified all the mosques in their district and began using these as gathering places for participants. After reaching as many children as possible in the area surrounding one mosque, they moved on to the next. Another pair of facilitators was hired to travel around the city on motorcycles to educate Kuchi nomads and internally displaced people (IDPs).

As a result of the ERT programs, facilitators were able to gather large numbers of children in high-risk areas, gain extensive geographical coverage, reach thousands of people passing through Kabul on their migratory routes and establish strong relationships with the communities and authorities in high-priority districts. However, this team was unable to do follow-up training and reinforced messages by simply repeating previous activities, and, consequently the children, community

members and facilitators grew tired of seeing the same materials and format over and over again.

Hospitals and Health Care Clinics

The hospitals and health care clinics soon provided a large venue for teaching landmine/UXO education. Fourteen female facilitators were assigned to clinics and hospitals, where they began running sessions for child patients and visitors, as well as some of the adult female relatives accompanying them.

One advantage of these programs was that facilitators had a great deal of time to spend with the children at each site. They usually spent several hours over four to five days introducing key messages and basic materials to the children. Children returned again and again as there were few other educational opportunities. Unfortunately, facilitators and children eventually grew bored with the materials, and there were few opportunities to expand the program to reach children who were not patients or relatives of patients.

The Children's Network

The Children's Network carried out most of its activities in a densely populated housing project. Two female facilitators trained and supervised female volunteer branch leaders. These leaders then ran landmine/UXO education sessions for children. Both the hospital/clinic teams and the Children's Network began to incorporate other developmental and social activities for children into their sessions.

Active Learning Methods

The LEP adapted the principles and methodologies of non-formal education. It used a series of games and activities that enabled children to learn through play and interaction with their peers. SCF/US trained facilitators to guide children through the learning process. The program encouraged children's participation and stimulated them to solve problems and relate lessons to their own experiences. Most sessions used group work.

Using non-formal methods was a key success of the project. Facilitators required considerable training, monitoring and support, and even after two years, needed close supervision and refresher training. The sessions were very popular. Children flocked to the sessions, and parents, community members, teachers and other representatives of the Ministry of Education supported the program enthusiastically and advocated its expansion.

The Child-to-Child approach was used in a number of ways:

- Children were asked to discuss pictures and analyze situations together in small groups.
- Children who had already attended several sessions helped facilitate small group activities for other children.
- At the end of every session, children were asked to pass on messages they had learned to people in their homes and communities.

Involving children in these ways maintained their interest and fostered a sense of confidence and pride.

The Involvement of Teenagers

It was hoped that the Children's Network could be a base for training children to go out and work with others on mine awareness. However, there was a concern that the quality of the lessons could not be guaranteed and that attempting to monitor such a large system would be impractical. Instead, several adolescent girls were recruited and have demonstrated impressive skill in their work with children. Also, many of the 200 male mine awareness educators trained by the SCF/US in high-risk communities were teenage boys. Like all adult volunteers, they required training and close supervision, but the benefit to them and the children they reached was worth the effort.

Teenagers in Afghanistan are in need of focused attention, many of them having spent their entire lives in a war-torn society, suffering a variety of hardships as a result. Most of them are receiving little or no education and few can find jobs. In many areas, teenage girls have no access to education or job opportunities and are restricted in their movements and

social interactions. Therefore, participating in the LEP provided these youths with a unique learning experience that enabled them to make a positive contribution to their communities while simultaneously gaining some valuable skills. Teenage volunteers were also positive role models for younger children.

Conclusion

In designing a landmine and UXO education program for children, creativity and innovation were vital to capturing and maintaining the attention of participants. Materials and methods should invoke children's experiences, encourage their participation and demand that they demonstrate good decision-making skills and behavior through repeated practical exercises.

Over the long term, the program must remain focused enough to adapt to changing circumstances and lessons learned. Priorities and approaches should be reassessed periodically, with particular attention to identifying shifts in the mine/UXO situation, changes in the vulnerable populations and new information regarding the nature of the existing threat. Intensive supervision and ongoing training are critical to ensuring a high standard of performance for the program. Finally, while evaluating the overall effectiveness of mine awareness programs is complicated by numerous factors, at the very least, the general quality of the program should be monitored and the effectiveness of delivery mechanisms evaluated. ■

This article was adapted, with permission, from a longer article by Sarah Warren, Save the Children Federation in Radda Barnen (Swedish Save the Children) *Mine Awareness for Children: A Discussion of Good Practice*, Stockholm, 1998.

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■ Save the Children used a school-based and out-of-school based approach to make sure all of Afghanistan's children received mine awareness materials. c/o Adopt-A-Minefield

