

Ethical reflections on children's participation in educational research during humanitarian crises

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Fabiana Maglio  and **Tejendra Pherali**

UCL Institute of Education, University College London, UK

Abstract

This paper aims to reflect upon ethical dilemmas arising from educational research in humanitarian contexts, particularly when involving children. In recognition of the paucity of knowledge on how to define ethics in humanitarian research, we review the existing body of literature that explores ethical responsibilities towards children involved in educational research at school and their communities. The paper argues that research ethics should be at the forefront of every study that is conducted in crisis contexts and more rigorous review and vetting processes are necessary to protect children, researchers and wider communities who live in crisis settings. We hope to promote an informed debate on research ethics in humanitarian contexts, while encouraging the development of rigorous guidelines, notes and minimum standards.

Keywords

Research ethics, child participation, education and conflict, child protection, humanitarian

Introduction

Professionalism in humanitarian practice

Violent conflicts and natural disasters are increasingly becoming a global concern for human security today amid growing inequalities, geopolitical tensions and

Corresponding author:

Fabiana Maglio, UCL Institute of Education, University College London, 20 Bedford Way, London WC1H 0AL, UK.

Email: fmaglio@ioe.ac.uk



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climate change. In low- and middle-income countries, the impact of emergencies is much more severe as societies are less able to cope with adversities. The main aim of humanitarian assistance is to provide rapid, relevant and life-saving support to affected communities, but such support is caught in complex restrictions of access, large-scale emergency needs and volatile socio-political contexts, which in turn may contribute to an increase in human rights violations and social injustices (VanRooyen, 2013). As the humanitarian system consists of a complex set of domains including health, education, shelter, food, sanitation and psychosocial support for people who are affected by crises, humanitarian professionals require multidisciplinary knowledge and professional expertise to deliver humanitarian assistance (Duncan, 2014). This means that the humanitarian sector is a conglomerate of different professionals who are required to possess a broad range of core competencies and be able to deliver a rapid response that is timely, relevant and meeting the needs of affected populations. The challenge is to recruit and deploy professionally trained staff quickly and in a coordinated manner amid the existing patterns of excessive staff turnover within humanitarian agencies (Loquercio et al., 2006). Additionally, the growing use of short-term contracts and under-prioritisation of staff development within agencies (Loquercio et al., 2006) significantly undermines the need for efficiency and expertise that are crucial in humanitarian response. This has resulted in failures to deploy experienced humanitarian workers on the ground (Savage et al., 2007) as well as to uphold professional standards in humanitarian practice (VanRooyen, 2013).

In recent decades, global standards, codes and frameworks have emerged in the humanitarian sector to mitigate the potential risk in humanitarian planning and practice (Duncan, 2014). The declaration of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UN, 2015) set out the agenda for improving life conditions of most vulnerable communities in low- and middle-income countries, providing an overarching model of humanitarian and development work. The SDGs offer an overarching direction for national governments and international communities with fresh, innovative pathways to development policies and humanitarian action. In this context, research plays a significant role in informing evidence-based practice to disrupt the impromptu and unregulated engagement in the field. Yet, there is a need for better alignment and space for dialogue between the academic and practitioner world to engage in ethical research and use of evidence in humanitarian and development practice (Black, 2003).

Quality education as the SDG4 is also a vehicle for achieving the other SDGs so, disruption of education in emergencies not only undermines the SDG4 milestones but also debilitates the possibility of achieving goals on other domains such as poverty reduction, good health and well-being, gender equality, economic growth and peace. Hence, the delivery of quality education in humanitarian situations is crucial both in providing a sense of normalcy and the hope for a positive

change. Educational professionals in these situations require a unique set of skills to deal with educational needs of crisis-affected children. Even though there are sporadic training events organised by educational agencies in humanitarian settings, education in emergencies field largely suffers from the lack of professionalisation. One key initiative has however been the development of the Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies, Chronic Crises and Early Reconstruction (MS), in recognition of education as a key component of mitigating psychological harm, providing immediate health and safety information, and promoting long-term stability, reconstruction and development (INEE, 2010). As such, MS were intended to provide direction to educational practitioners and other stakeholders who provide opportunity of learning in conflict and crisis settings. This is a crucial international solidarity campaign that advocates for education to be provided even during crises as a continuum leading up to post-emergency recovery and reconstruction and is based on the principle that education must be institutionalised as a human right within the humanitarian framework (Bromley and Andina, 2010). Subsequently, the challenge for education in emergencies community is to promote shared understandings of principles, values and practices, while staying focussed on the local needs of crisis contexts.

Educational research in emergencies faces complex barriers in terms of access to the field, safety of researchers and research participants and ethical dilemmas about inquiry into lived experiences of the affected populations. Especially, when children are involved in humanitarian education research, these tensions become more complex and ethically unsettling. Most importantly, there is a serious lack of professional development for researchers in emergencies about how to carry out ethical research that can inform policies and practice in crisis settings. This discussion paper attempts to fill this gap by reflecting upon ethical challenges arising from educational research in humanitarian contexts, particularly when involving children. We review the existing body of the literature exploring ethical dilemmas and focus on the following fundamental questions:

- How can field researchers navigate through child participation in research and uphold ethical integrity, while enabling children's voice in humanitarian situations?
- What are the critical factors that should influence whether, how and at which stage of the emergency children may take part in research?

The debate about research ethics in humanitarian education research is often pushed aside, risking the safety and well-being of crisis-affected children and young people. Drawing upon experiences gained through school-related data collection in different emergencies including violent conflict, mass displacement and natural disaster, we argue that respect for dignity, safety and well-being of child

participants should be at the forefront of educational research in humanitarian settings. In addition, we argue that the term ‘participants’ can be controversial, especially when they are poorly informed about research, vulnerability is unaccounted for and hence, their protection undermined (Smyth and Williamson, 2014). It is envisaged that this paper will help promote an informed debate about research ethics involving children in humanitarian contexts while encouraging the development of rigorous guidelines and minimum standards on research with children.

Role of academia in international development

The proliferation of academic programmes in education and international development has created an opportunity for educational practitioners to engage in theories and critique of educational practice in humanitarian situations. In this process, humanitarian organisations have established partnerships with academic institutions and universities to promote research, critical debates about professional standards and ethical practice in the field. The interactions between academic institutions and humanitarian organisations create a space for dialogue about how to shape field-based approaches, minimise practical risks and ultimately cater to the operational needs of organisations that provide support in emergencies. The practitioner–academic collaboration has also expanded the notion of what counts as research-informed practice in humanitarian work globally and how universities and humanitarian organisations can better collaborate to build synergies (Walker and Russ, 2010). Most importantly, such collaborations could promote innovations in research, critical reflections on policy matters and nurture humanitarian practice underpinned by high levels of ethical and moral standards. More broadly, the increased recognition of the need to raise quality and consistency of the humanitarian sector has led to the development of frameworks for professional practice in areas such as emergency operations, protection and food security (Davis, 2007). However, ethical practice in humanitarian research is somewhat lost in the crucial debate about how to secure more funding, collect reliable data to inform policies and programming and shape humanitarian operations that are most effective. Hence, our focus in this paper is to highlight the significance of research ethics, particularly relating to children in emergency situations.

The issue of accountability

Conducting research with children in humanitarian settings is ethically challenging, particularly due to their vulnerability caused by displacement, isolation and in some cases, loss of their parents to the war or disaster. Most situation analyses, rapid assessment or rigorous research studies focussed around specific areas of humanitarian needs are guided by the priorities of individual organisations

operating on the ground who often resort to readily available independent consultants who are hired through short-term contracts. These approaches heavily rely on researchers' decisions about the research approach and data collection tools without necessarily being scrutinised for ethical dimensions of the research approach and methods used. In this process, the responsibility to secure informed consent from research participants, especially the poorest, vulnerable and illiterate and how the information they have provided will be used and shared to inform relief operations is somewhat buried amid pressures and hierarchies of humanitarian programming.

Despite the adoption of INEE MS, a dissociation of standards and field practice has been observed in complex humanitarian settings (Bromley and Andina, 2010), particularly concerning field research. Available literature on children's participation in research deals with various approaches to meaningfully involve children in school-related data collection activities (Beazley et al., 2009; Boyden and Ennew, 1997; Dyregrov et al., 2010; Feinstein and O'Kane, 2008b; Gibbs et al., 2013; Hill, 2006; Mundy and Dryden-Peterson, 2011). There are a variety of tools for research with children and the need for various Participatory Learning Approaches (PLA), which are flexible and adaptable by nature. PLA-related tools are widely utilised and include a range of visualisation techniques such as drawings, maps or diagrams to enhance children's creative reflection (Theis, 1996). In many instances, children are also interviewed or filmed to reveal their educational experiences and future aspirations. Children's voices are often used as powerful messages for humanitarian advocacy, justification for increased funding and to build global solidarity. These processes are often conducted without rigorously assessing the ethical dilemma about children's ability to consent, implications of their exposure in the long term, anonymity and confidentiality. Researchers in humanitarian settings must be sensitive to crisis-related circumstances of children and the organisations commissioning and managing research must be fully accountable to how research participants are involved, and the information is used. Without clear and practical ethical guidelines, potential risks in involving children in crisis contexts can be undermined, resulting in discordant research practice. Hence, this paper attempts to explore ethical dimensions of research with children in crisis-affected contexts, specifically focusing on cultural sensitivities, security issues and psychosocial conditions that characterise most humanitarian situations.

Framing ethics in educational research in crisis settings

Ethics in educational research relates to the respect of research participants through the adoption of agreed ethical standards. These standards are meant also to help protect researchers and their institutions, while ensuring research quality and

rigour. Ethical principles for research on human subjects were initially outlined in the Nuremberg Code (1947), followed by the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 1964) and the Belmont Report, which was commissioned by the US Department of Health and Human Services in 1979. However, there are other examples of clinical research addressing the ethics of their projects that hark back into the 1800s (Benedek, 2005). These principles were intended to protect human subjects of medical research and are currently used by Institutional Review Boards to regulate a broader spectrum of research in different disciplines. Three core principles underpin the ethical standards: 1. *respect* for persons, requiring the researcher to protect participants with diminished autonomy; 2. *beneficence*, requiring the researcher to protect research subjects from harm as well as maximise the possible benefits of the investigation to participants; and 3. *justice*, referring to the equal distribution of the benefits and burdens of the research (Beauchamp and Childress, 2001). The three key areas of application to this respect were the assessment of risks and benefits, informed consent, and selection of subjects.

Following the design and adoption of ethical criteria in research related to healthcare in developing countries, social research has gradually progressed towards rigorous ethical standards. According to the British Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Framework for Research Ethics (2015: 43), the term *research ethics* ‘refers to the moral principles guiding research, from its inception through to completion and publication of results and beyond [. . .] and impact activities after the research has been published’. Formal ethical guidance is intended to define minimum standards in social research by raising concerns and provide adequate methods to address these dilemmas. The British Education Research Association (BERA) Guidelines represent the tenets of rigorous ethical practice in educational research. BERA Guidelines recognise the importance of respect for all those who engage in it, including researchers and participants, academics, practitioners and commissioning institutions (BERA, 2018). A special focus is given to responsibilities of researchers towards children and vulnerable young people, acknowledging their right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them in a way that is commensurate with their age and maturity. In recognition of the distress and discomfort that children may experience during the research process, BERA Guidelines reflect on the importance of putting young participants at ease and encourage researchers to be mindful of all the necessary steps to reduce the sense of intrusion (BERA, 2018). There are also other important guidelines, such as those put out by CIOMS (2016) and UNESCO (2019) establishing additional principles that are applicable to humanitarian settings. In conflict-affected contexts, the responsibility to protect children who are involved in research is even greater due to concerns relating to security, emotional well-being and general vulnerability. However, there is a paucity of research and analysis about how to define ethics in educational research in emergency situations.

There is a tendency to simply present a list of challenges labelled as ethics rather than articulating approaches to delineate ethics across numerous existing guidelines provided by different organisations (Duggan and Bush, 2014). Consequently, it is difficult to avoid potential risks of ignorance, negligence and malpractice in research with young children.

Ethical responsibilities towards children involved in school-related data collection activities

Recent evidence from Save the Children (2018) shows some worrying trends of increased violence against children over the last two decades. At present, 357 million children are affected by violent conflict globally, which means that one in six children lives in an unsafe environment (Save the Children, 2018). Violent conflict is the major cause of mass displacement and children constitute over half of the world's 25.9 million refugees (UNHCR, 2019). As the protection and well-being of children in crisis is paramount, researchers are interested in understanding children's life experiences, including their access to learning opportunities (Mundy and Dryden-Petersen, 2011). Children have the capacity to play an important role in their own development and in affecting their environment (i.e. 'children as agents' vs 'children as victims') and children's active participation in research can contribute to their personal development and empowerment (Hart and Tyrer, 2006). This would entail allowing them sufficient time, resources and tailored support to enable their meaningful participation (Bengtsson and Bartlett, 2011). However, more importantly, the cultural construct of childhood, social and emotional status of child participants and adult-child power relationships must be accounted for before involving children in research studies (Alderson and Morrow, 2014). This would also mean that children and research communities might not be fully aware of the potential risks derived from their participation in research, which requires researchers to engage critically about possibilities beyond the notion of voluntary participation. In humanitarian research, collaborative and participatory methods are proposed as an appropriate way to understand and respond appropriately to children's unique perspectives and experiences (Winthrop and Kirk, 2008). Hence, researchers should engage in a manner that is interactive, respectful and non-exploitative to child participants, due to children's inability to make an informed decision; power relationships between adult researcher and child participant; and the role of adult gatekeepers in granting access to children (Powell et al., 2011). In crisis-affected contexts, children may have been traumatised resulting in loss of their confidence and ability to exercise their agency. In recognition of this problem, research on children in crisis settings requires a comprehensive assessment of their safety, vulnerability and well-being (Berman et al., 2016; Feinstein and O'Kane, 2008a; Graham et al., 2013; Hopkins, 2008; Jacobsen and Landau, 2013; Powell et al., 2012).

The Global Education Cluster's (GEC) Guide to Education in Emergencies (EiE) Needs Assessments, which includes resources for humanitarian actors conducting sector-specific, joint or multi-sector needs assessments (GEC, 2016) recognises the importance of using child participatory methodologies involving voluntary consent from both duty-bearers and minors. However, significant discordance in practice has been noted in terms of how and at what stage of the emergency it is safe for children to take part in research (Bennouna et al., 2017). From this perspective, the relation between humanitarian research and ethics committees, and the way that risk assessment is conceptualised are important areas of interrogation.

The need for ethics committees in humanitarian research

In most Western universities, research projects are required to undergo a rigorous review by relevant Research Ethics Committees (RECs) before fieldwork takes place. However, studies that are commissioned outside academic settings might not always follow a process of ethics review by an independent committee. Due to the urgency of rapid response based on the immediate humanitarian needs, there is a growing trend of research being conducted by independent consultants who may not have access to or being required to undergo independent ethical review. In recognition of risks that prevail in humanitarian contexts, this is an alarming practice.

As research ethics is intended to ensure protection of human subjects while maintaining scientific rigour of research, the researcher should primarily be responsible for organising an ethics review of the proposed methodology and plans for research dissemination. However, the requirement of rigorous ethical review should be integral to the humanitarian research framework that is mandatorily implemented by all parties including commissioning bodies, research agencies and the researcher. Hence, there must be a proper mechanism and procedure laid out in the terms of reference document when the research call is announced. At practical levels, researchers should primarily reflect on whether they would feel comfortable with the process of consenting for a child – or even for their own child as a parent to take part? Do researchers feel qualified to detect indirect signs of distress in a child participant? Do they know how to proceed in case the risk of serious harm is disclosed during research? Through this self-reflection process, researchers should meditate on high ethical standards (Alderson and Morrow, 2014).

Appreciating 'risks' in research involvement

Despite the growing practice of humanitarian needs assessment to maximise educational benefits and well-being to children in crisis, considerable gaps exist with regards to research sensitivities and potential risks to child participants. First, a fair risk–benefit assessment of researching on children is crucial. This includes

appreciation of psychological vulnerability and trauma that may be affecting children who have experienced violence or natural disasters (Peek, 2008). Second, although often elusive, a deeper, mutual understanding of the harm is crucial to ensure consistency between the researcher's and the participants' standpoints and the various interpretations of what counts as harm (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012). There are important decisions to be made in terms of the way research actors (e.g. research team, donors, local authorities) determine with accuracy if harm to child participants is minimal in relation to anticipated good. There is also a challenge to define 'risks' and 'benefits' while recognising that adults' perceptions may differ from children's views (Alderson and Morrow, 2014). Additionally, the identified individual risks and collective benefits may have short- or long-term implications to child participants such as possible behavioural changes as a result of their research experience (Tanner, 2010). The risk–benefit assessment process is intended to allow time for consultation between researchers and participants on a collaborative basis. This may be an opportunity for both researchers and child participants to increase their knowledge on local risks; revise methods to mitigate them or make informed decisions about whether to participate in the research.

Risks and benefits of children participation in school-related data collection

Tensions have been observed between children's right to be 'properly researched' and the 'do no harm' principle (Hart and Tyrer, 2006). For instance, the Child Protection Rapid Assessment (CPRA) toolkit recognises that child participants may contribute to a deeper understanding of humanitarian crises but discourages the involvement of children in data collection due to the unavailability of properly trained researchers to undertake 'highly sensitive interviews' and the presence of 'inexperienced assessors' who 'may unintentionally put children in harm's way' (CPWG, 2012: 20). According to Ennew and Plateau (2004: 17), it is unethical

to ask children direct questions about painful experiences, using poorly-designed research tools (particularly questionnaires and interviews) and without their informed consent. [. . .] Indirect data-collection methods allow children the option of withholding information or provide them with the possibility of responding in ways that do not dredge up painful experiences and cause further harm.

Some children may have high levels of anxiety or emotional distress due to their endured traumatic experiences. For instance, children in refugee settings who are likely to have witnessed violence or loss of family members to war would require the assistance of properly trained staff to participate in interviews about their educational experiences and various needs while in exile (Global Protection Cluster, 2012). In such contexts, investigators' professional qualifications, thorough knowledge about the crisis, the political environment

of the host community and cultural sensitivities of the displaced populations are key to maintaining high ethical standards while conducting fieldwork. Children's emotional reactions to sensitive topics could also lead to psychological vulnerabilities, including increased anxiety, loss in confidence, guilt and shame (Alderson and Morrow, 2014). Investigation on sensitive issues related to abuse and violence can expose children to the danger of traumatisation or re-traumatisation (Thomas and Byford, 2003). Within this complex scenario, significant ethical issues arise with respect to the integrity of research. For instance, an interview with a refugee child that could intentionally or unintentionally evoke memories of the loss of their parents can cause a state of deep distress (Block et al., 2013). Because of the pressure to generate evidence for rapid response, humanitarian research may inadvertently encroach deep emotions of children's personal lives and may potentially become intrusive and exploitative, even when the invitation comes from the participants (Raftery, 1997).

Research location. The relevance of children's contributions to research and their ability to benefit from it also depends on the atmosphere and the location where the research takes place. Research activities should take place in safe and easily accessible locations such as schools and home, often in the presence of responsible adults. Children should also be provided with adequate time and support to become more confident with the key domains of enquiry (Hart and Tyrer, 2006). To identify alternative safe locations for data collection activities may be hard in humanitarian contexts, especially when school buildings are damaged or no longer accessible (e.g. occupied by armed groups or used as temporary shelters). A common rationale for education in conflict and emergency settings is that schools and educational venues also serve as protection mechanisms (Smith and Vaux, 2003). However, schools are not always safe since educational buildings may be active targets in conflict zones (Pherali, 2016). Particular attention should be given to issues that may arise within collaborative research and community partnerships, in recognition of the potentially high risk of gathering a large number of participants particularly in contexts of hot conflicts or disaster prone locations including schools (Goodhand, 2000). Hence, the identification of a protective environment and support network to carry out fieldwork is vital and should be in place when discussing highly sensitive child protection topics, such as child soldiers and issues relating to school-based gender violence (Powell et al., 2011).

Obtaining truly informed consent. A critical dimension of research ethics involves participants' clear understanding of the purpose of research, use of the data and possible consequences and implications of participation before providing an informed consent (Crow et al., 2006). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) requires that research should be adequate for

children's competencies and agency. The respect for their consent and refusal in research is outlined in the UNCRC's core principles (1989), including 'freedom of thought and conscience' (Art. 14) and listening to children's views (Art. 12). According to the British Psychological Society's Code of Ethics and Conduct, all participants 'particularly children and vulnerable adults, [should be] given ample opportunity to understand the nature, purpose, and anticipated consequences' of research (British Psychological Society, 2009: 12). The process of potential (mis) understanding is particularly relevant in school settings, where pupils are expected to understand and confirm their voluntary participation. Informed consent with children is not a one-time event and researchers are expected to continuously check in with participants to confirm if they wish to continue. They should be properly informed that they can consult with others for advice and withdraw should they change their minds (Morris, 1998).

Gaining informed consent from children is 'more problematic than is generally admitted, and [. . .] researchers would benefit from more openly acknowledging its limitations'. Related ethical issues in school-based research include 'problems of information, understanding, authority, capacity and voluntariness,' which cannot simply be overcome with 'child-friendly' methods (Gallagher et al., 2010: 471). There is an ongoing debate about the concept of 'assent' and 'consent' with child participants. Child assent refers to the affirmative agreement of a minor who may have no 'legal right to consent' or 'understand some but not all the main points required for consent' (Cocks, 2006). This term is often misidentified with 'at least not refusing', while in fact it may be used to hide children's actual refusal. In this view, Alderson and Morrow (2014) suggest that a child participant can imply consent through engagement. On the other hand, BERA Guidelines note that voluntary participation alone is not sufficient, and an explicit consent should be required and unlike assent, the concept of informed consent involves the active participation and reasoning of children, which cannot be presumed regardless their age. While approaching children to assess their competence to consent, researchers should begin from a position of assuming competence and align their methods to the child's level of understanding (BERA, 2018).

Obtaining truly informed consent from children involves researchers to primarily follow school requirements with regards to involving minors in research. This process also involves the knowledge and adherence to the local legal requirements and common practice relating to written consent and oral assent sought from children, their guardian, parents, a relevant caregiver or a person responsible for the child's well-being. Data collectors need to understand if it is appropriate or necessary to also obtain children's written consent, as in certain cases this may be a formal requirement by gatekeepers (Graham et al., 2007). This task may be particularly problematic when children's photographs are taken, or children are filmed as part of the research process (Alderson and Morrow, 2014), which in conflict-affected

contexts may raise concerns about child protection, anonymity and privacy issues. Limited time and space in school environments may make it hard for researchers to properly determine whether or not child participants are capable of understanding the intended use of research and the issues around risks and benefits that this entails (Gallagher et al., 2010). Establishing friendly relationships with educational staff and participants is an important, preliminary step towards building critical foundations for subsequent research activities (Cohen et al., 2007). In the case of rapid assessment or situation analysis carried out within a short timeframe, investigators may be under pressure to gather as much data as possible without having adequate time to follow high ethical standards. Crisis-affected school environments may severely limit the prospects for these practices due to restrictions of movement, unreliable means of communication and security concerns. Data collectors who, for security reasons, are not allowed to visit the same school twice may fail to establish empathy with children and ‘normalise’ their presence in the classroom.

While the UNCRC suggests that children have the right to be ‘properly researched’ (Art. 3, 12, 13, and 36), it is also important to protect them against the abuse of over-research, when there may be too much intrusion and potential risk of exploitation or coercion (Art. 19, 32, 36 and 37). This is particularly true when dealing with children from disadvantaged groups such as refugees (UNCRC, Art. 2). Undue influence, unjustifiable pressure and inducements from an adult or a team of researchers may compromise children’s voluntariness to take part in the research (Belmont, 1979) and in complex humanitarian contexts, it may be challenging to maintain with accuracy where justifiable persuasion ends and undue influence begins. Even when the research permit is granted by gatekeepers such as teachers, principals and carers, some refugee children may experience situations in which questioning adult authority is not considered socially acceptable, or they might be instructed to say certain things and leave others unsaid (Hopkins, 2008). This issue is particularly salient in schools, where compliance with adults’ requirements, including teachers, is associated with children’s good conduct (David et al., 2001). Some children may find it hard to refuse an adult, so researchers should be ready to offer them respectful chances to withdraw at any time (Alderson and Morrow, 2014). Other challenges may also exist with regards to obtaining written consent from parents or gatekeepers. First, the culture may be more oral than written thus, obtaining written consent may provoke suspicion. Second, when sensitive topics are investigated, some young and adult participants may feel hesitant to provide written consent – and their signature, fearing for their safety should the confidentiality be breached by data collectors (Czymoniewicz-Klippel et al., 2010). Participants’ unwillingness to sign the consent form may also indicate the researcher’s unsuccessful attempt to build consensus with respondents (Swartz, 2011). While raising an ‘ethical red flag’, this may also provide valuable space for reflections to investigators in order to re-align their research strategy towards more

context-appropriate methods. This may include local consultations in the design of age-appropriate information leaflets and consent forms to assist young participants in making informed choices.

Biased selection of child participants in research may also raise ethical concerns. While researchers have to provide relevant and tailored information for voluntary participation, investigators' lack of experience and training may affect the understanding of child participants. This may lead to a compromise of fully informed consent throughout the data collection process (Palluck, 2009). Finally, the practice of informed consent with children in stable contexts could be unethical in crisis settings and there is an ongoing debate among researchers about how to make such judgements. Parents or appointed guardians such as teachers typically provide consent for and serve as their child's advocate. However, some parents or school authorities may have interests that contradict those of the child. In addition, refugee children and unaccompanied minors who are living in exile often lack adult protection. When parents are not available to make decisions, it is not clear how consent should be obtained and whether such children are excluded from research at the cost of important evidence that need to be captured. Circumstances faced by unaccompanied children and their rights to be free from undue influence are difficult to ensure. Adults may use a variety of pressures subconsciously to get children to assent to which they might not otherwise agree and can be perceived as coercive and undermining standards of genuine consent. Hence, researchers should rely on their experience and intuition and reflect critically on the adults' assumptions to allow or exclude children to exercise their agency for what they value (Sin, 2005). It is in those complex case scenarios that humanitarian researchers are expected to act as child advocates to ensure the minor's best interest and the full comprehension of implications of participating.

Maintaining informed consent in the context of unequal power relations between the researcher (i.e. being an adult and possibly an 'outsider') and child participants is as important as obtaining it in the first place. It requires investigators to focus on active listening rather than exerting pressure on interviewees to answer questions even after a consent has been secured (Thomson, 2009). Hence, adequate training on child-friendly techniques is crucial before data collection, including the importance to identify body language and non-verbal cues, suggesting that children no longer wish to participate (Powell et al., 2012). As noted in the Belmont Report (1979), considerations must be given to both the immediate and longer-term risks of human subjects' participation in research programmes.

In crisis contexts where state capacity is low in providing access to education, it is common to observe non-governmental organisations operating informal learning centres while longer-term educational arrangements are being planned. Field research in non-governmental educational institutions may pose greater risks to children being compelled to participate in research by the organisations who might

benefit indirectly through wider exposure through research, publicity and legitimacy of their work. Such institutions might be unaware or even negligent about the need to consult with parents before their children are allowed to get involved in research studies. Additionally, there may be some restrictions from the state authority on conducting research on certain types of educational provisions (e.g. camp schools and unauthorised educational centres), ignorance of which could lead to adverse consequences for researchers and educational establishments. Researchers should conduct a thorough risk assessment of the political sensitivities of the context where the research is undertaken.

These, among others, are some of the key dilemmas having critical implications for the principles of justice and non-maleficence, and for securing useful data to inform programmes that support vulnerable children. Further engagement with these unresolved questions is needed to ensure children's safe and meaningful engagement in humanitarian research.

Conclusion

Ethical inquiry is the moral foundation of social research and its importance in humanitarian situations cannot be overestimated. Although ethics guidelines do not offer researchers clear and immediate solutions, they encourage them to raise concerns, and promote deeper reflection to plan ahead and overcome ethical dilemmas. When research is concerned with vulnerable children, ethics should be considered even more seriously and most importantly, the standard guidelines that are applied in stable contexts might not sufficiently address the concerns about ethical dilemmas while conducting research with children in crisis settings. Despite informed consent, children, teachers and researchers might not fully grasp the potential risk of children's involvement in humanitarian research. This complexity increases when research takes place in conflict-affected, security sensitive and politically contested environments. Hence, there is a need for continuous reflection, dialogue and assessment of vulnerability of research participants, and the process of securing consent may need to be treated cautiously in situations where the researcher and research participants may be unaware of potential risks that may arise from their participation. While this paper has attempted to identify potential 'harm' arising from the involvement of children in school-related data collection during humanitarian crises, we have also highlighted the moral duty of humanitarian researchers of 'doing some good'.

There is consensus in the literature that researchers should reflect on relevant ways to 'give back' to participants in an attempt to fulfil the ethical principles. A sense of humbleness is essential among researchers regarding the degree to which their research can positively impact communities. This process may be more directly advanced by disseminating and critically engaging with findings of the research with research participants. International researchers who have short-term

contracts to conduct education research in crisis contexts should be morally obliged to allocate time and capacity to implement this process in close cooperation with local researchers, who, as *insiders* can play a crucial role. While continuously protecting their safety, crisis-affected children should be informed of what has been the outcome of their participation and how their contribution in research will be utilised. They should also be encouraged to provide feedback and make legitimate complaints regarding their involvement if there are any concerns.

A common rationale for education in conflict and emergencies is that each crisis is different, and it must be approached sensitively in line with local practices and dynamics. While ethical research should adapt to local contexts, there are principles and practices that matter in every context, namely justice, respect and solidarity (Lukes, 2008). Hence, there is a need for internationally accepted principles, guidelines and minimum standards that could be applied while conducting research with child participants in crisis settings. Researchers working with children in complex contexts should do their best to honour these principles.


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ORCID iD

Fabiana Maglio  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0104-4537>

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