Launch Event for Accelerated Education Working Group (AEWG)
Talking Points by Nina Papadopolous

I remember when I worked in Peshawar in October 2002, and at the moment the Taliban fell, there was a great deal of uncertainty in Afghanistan. Thousands of families crossed the border into Pakistan looking for safety and security. Refugee camps and host communities in Peshawar were flooded with newly displaced Afghans. You will remember that during the Taliban education was prohibited for girls over the age of around nine. In many of these families there were 15-, 16-, and 17-year-old girls who had been out of school for at least six years.

They came to the camps in Pakistan with wide eyes, eager to register for school. But we didn't know where to place them, all of a sudden we had first-grade classes filled with teenagers, 15- and 16-year-olds in grade one alongside six-year-olds.

This experience had a profound impact on my conceptualization of what it means to offer relevant, age-appropriate education that builds skills and can lead to multiple pathways for learners.

So let's talk about this: What is the problem?

There are approximately 262 million children and youth out of school globally.[1]

Put another way,

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1 out of 11 primary school age children, 1 out of 6 lower secondary school age adolescents, and 1 out of 3 upper secondary school age youth are not in school.[2] The reasons for being out of school are varied—and are a combination of supply—access related—and demand-side factors—quality and relevance. In Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, the majority of the 29.8 million out of school primary-aged children in this region (57%) are unlikely to ever enter into school; while in other regions, such as South Asia, Southwest Asia, and East Asia/Pacific, more than a third of the out of school primary-aged children have left school early.[3]

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[1] UNESCO-UIS (2016). Leaving No One Behind: How Far on the Way to Universal Primary and Secondary Education? (Policy Paper 27/Fact Sheet 37). Available at http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002452/245238E.pdf.

[2] Six countries are home to more than one-third of all out-of-school children, according to UIS data. Nigeria has 8.7 million out-of-school children of primary age followed by Pakistan (5.6 million), India (2.9 million), Sudan (2.7 million), Ethiopia (2.1 million) and Indonesia (2.0 million). Additionally, there are a number of other countries where it is known that there are large numbers of children out of school, such as Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of Congo, but where precise data is unavailable.

[3] See UNESCO-UIS (2013). Schooling for Millions of Children Jeopordised by Reductions in Aid. (UIS UIS/FS/2013/25). Available at http://www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Documents/fs-25-out-of-school-children-en.pdf.

Children and young people living in crisis and conflict-affected contexts are particularly vulnerable to this issue. More than 75 million children and young people (aged 3–18) are currently out of school in 35 crisis-affected countries. 51% of the 65.6 million refugees and IDPs are under 18, and only half of refugees are in primary school. Girls are 2.5 times more likely to be out of school than boys in countries affected by conflict.[4]

The passage of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) reaffirms a global commitment to ensuring that girls and boys will have access to and complete free, equitable, and quality primary education by 2030. The SDGs also have a fundamental premise to leave no one behind and to start with those furthest behind. Yet, **for many overaged out-of-school children and youth, the formal schooling system may no longer be a viable option**.

What role might Accelerated Education play?

National education policies often preclude learners from enrolling after a certain age.

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Additionally, over-age learners who do enroll in formal education systems are found to be much more likely to drop out early, with this phenomenon particularly true amongst households in poverty.[5] Often, when over-age children return to school, there is not only a risk of overcrowding classrooms and difficult teaching conditions with multiple age ranges, but there are also considerable protection risks in mixing older and younger children in one class.

Accelerated Education (AE) programs are used to promote access to certified education for children and adolescents who have missed out on substantial amounts of schooling. They are a key way to allow older children and adolescents to access condensed primary education services in conditions appropriate for their age.

What are Accelerated Education Programs (AEPs)?

AEPs are flexible, age-appropriate programs, run in an accelerated timeframe, which aim to provide access to education for disadvantaged, over-age, out-of-school children and youth—particularly those who missed out on or had their education interrupted due to poverty, marginalization, crisis, or conflict. The goal of accelerated education programs is to provide learners with equivalent, certified competencies for basic education using effective teaching and learning approaches that match their level of cognitive maturity.[6]

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[4] Education Cannot Wait (2016). The Situation. Available at http://www.educationcannotwait.org/the-situation/

[5] See footnote 1.

[6] Accelerated Education definition by the Inter Agency Accelerated Education Working Group (AEWG), October 2017.

AEPs emphasize acceleration of a curriculum such that students get an equivalent level of education in a shortened time frame. This requires increased and more effective time on-task, an emphasis on literacy and numeracy with a socio-emotional learning component and oftentimes, removal of non-core subjects. Programs also often demonstrate flexibility to meet the unique needs of the learners they aim to serve—both in terms of time-tabling and location of instruction. The intention of this flexibility is to enable students to study in a way and at a level appropriate to their ability, age, and circumstance.

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On completion of an AEP, the intention is for learners to reintegrate into the formal schooling system, enter into skills-based technical and vocational education, or to enter directly into the workforce, but with core literacy and numeracy skills in place.

There is no one way to structure an AEP, and programs globally vary in their pace of acceleration, the age range they target, and the approach to teaching and learning that they employ. While AEPs normally cover most or all of primary education, some AEPs have also been extended to the secondary level.

It is important to note that AEPs are distinct from other forms of alternative education.

I'd like to talk about when AEPs might be an appropriate option:

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First, we need to figure out what it is that is preventing children and young people from learning: Keeping in mind that an accelerated education program isn't always the appropriate response.

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Is it due to language or curriculum content?

Have they fallen behind their 'age appropriate' grade level?

Is there no space in the 'formal' education system for them?

Are there policy restrictions that inhibit them from entering school?

Are they too old? Overage?

Once we uncover the reason we can better design an accelerated option that suits their needs.

What are the core tenets of quality Accelerated Education provision?

With the goal of strengthening the quality of accelerated education (AE) programming through a more harmonized, standardized approach, the inter-agency Accelerated Education Working Group (AEWG), led by UNHCR and with representation from nine member organizations,[7] has identified a set of 10 evidence-based Accelerated Education Principles. The Principles help establish clear, common aspirations for AEPs globally and clarify the essential components of effective AEPs.

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Wrap Up

I know from my experience talking to so many kids and their parents in fragile contexts that children and youth need more flexible options. Especially if they have missed out on education. We owe it to them.

If we work together, we can improve the relevance and quality of education for these children and young people who desperately are seeking a credible, certified education that is recognized by their governments. We must work together to establish definition and clarity for governments, donors, Implementing Partners, and CSOs.

I'd like to conclude with a call to action. Please take these guidelines, use them, adapt them, and help us to improve them. Even more important, listen to what children and young people need in crisis contexts.

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[7] The AEWG, led by UNHCR, is made up of the following education partners working in accelerated education: UNICEF, UNESCO, USAID, the Education in Crisis and Conflict Network (ECCN), the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Plan International, the International Rescue Committee (IRC), Save the Children, and War Child Holland.

When is Accelerated education a relevant response?

What is the specific barrier preventing students from learning?

Language & curriculum content difference

Behind expected grade level competence

Lack of space in the formal education system

Policy restrictions

Age of the student

AEP is not intended to expand the size of the formal system for girls and boys of primary school age.

Are the students aged 10-18?

NO **YES**

AEP is not appropriate. **For under 10s:** explore options to enrol them in formal primary schools or other forms of alternative education. **For over 18s:** consider adult education programmes.

Have the 10-18 year old age group missed one or more years of school?

NO **YES**

A **bridging programme** is the most appropriate response. This is a short-term targeted preparation course that supports students' success, taking various forms such as language acquisition and/ or other existing differences between home and host education curricula and systems for entry into a different type of certified education

A **remedial programme** is the most appropriate response. It provides additional targeted support, concurrent with regular classes, for students who require short-term content or skill support to succeed in regular formal programming.

A **catch up programme** is the most appropriate response. This is a short-term transitional education programme for children and youth who had been actively attending school prior to an educational disruption, which provides students with the opportunity to learn content missed because of the disruption and support their re-entry to the formal system.

An **accelerated education programme** is the most appropriate response. An AEP is a flexible, age-appropriate programme, run in an accelerated timeframe, which aims to provide access to education for disadvantaged, over-age, out-of-school children and youth. This may include those who missed out on or had their education interrupted due to poverty,marginalization, conflict and crisis. The goal of accelerated education programmes is to provide learners with equivalent, certified competencies for basic education using effective teaching and learning approaches that match their level of cognitive maturity.