

Teaching in Adversity:

Aims of Education Discourse, Teacher Participation, and Protection of Vulnerable Children in Contexts of Poverty

Dr. Bjorn H. Nordtveit (HKU)

Education writers derive different models of teachers' functions based on their vision of the teacher: varying from the view of a teacher as an executioner of a pre-established curriculum to the teacher as a liberator of minds. However, a little studied area is about teaching in adversity and the protection function of schools. Bjorn Nordtveit is currently conducting research on the teachers' and schools' roles to protect children in adverse situations. In many countries, teachers and children face the effects of war, poverty and HIV/AIDS.

In 2007 and 2008, Dr. Nordtveit evaluated school-based initiatives to protect children from the worst forms of child labor in the African countries of Benin, Guinea, Namibia and Swaziland. Some of the families in these countries are so destitute that the parents are unable to send their children to school, and instead may have to send them to work from the age of six. Schools in these countries accordingly need to build protection mechanisms to prevent vulnerable children from dropping out of school and entering dangerous work. Other regions are characterized by a very high income disparity and a high HIV/AIDS incidence. The combination of these two problems, with the associated stigma, trauma, and poverty, leads to high dropout rates at both primary and secondary level. In the schools Dr. Nordtveit visited in Southern Africa, more than half of the children were orphans. These children are at particular risk from the worst forms of child labor, and schools therefore need to set up psychosocial counseling structures and other mechanisms to protect the children.

This presentation will focus on the teachers' role in such adverse situations, when special attention is needed to protect the most vulnerable children, and where the teachers themselves face the combined effects of low school budgets, low salaries and little inspiring work conditions, exasperated by HIV/AIDS and poverty. The presentation will further discuss to which extent the notion about education as protection is relevant to the Hong Kong and Mainland China contexts.



Dr Bjorn H. Nordtveit joined the University of Hong Kong as a Research Assistant Professor in May 2006. He has more than 12 years of experience from the developing world, mainly with the World Bank in Africa and with UNESCO in South-East Asia. He has also worked for the United Nations Security Council in Iraq, the World Food Programme and the U.S. Department of Labor. Recently, he has been conducting research in the Southern part of Africa (Namibia, South Africa and Swaziland) on the subjects of education and child labor, and specifically investigated how teachers can contribute to make the school a better place for orphans and vulnerable children.