Potential plus

Why orphans matter to teachers and their students

Brad Watson

Lecturer, International Development Studies, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Avondale College, NSW

Introduction

What can Australian and New Zealand school students and teachers learn from a relationship with a small orphanage in rural Cambodia? Would it be inspiring and fascinating or tragic and depressing? Would students be interested and engaged or would it make extra work for busy educators already overwhelmed with the realities of classroom management, curriculum and extra-curricular activities? These are questions I recently asked staff in five schools and the answers were surprising. Unanimously, without hesitation, they indicated that their schools had already adopted an orphanage, were considering doing so or would welcome the opportunity!

Unfortunately, teachers may not realise the magnitude or urgency of the problem of orphan care. By the year 2010 it is estimated that South Africa alone will have an orphan population (largely due to HIV and AIDS) of approximately two million.[1] In 2003, 43.4 million orphans lived in Africa with another 87.6 million orphans in Asia.[2] UNICEF, the world's leading child development authority, estimated that in 2003 there were 143 million orphans under 18 years of age in 93 countries of interest.[3] It is not surprising that well informed, compassionate teachers are increasingly asking what they can do to help.

The term 'orphan', however, is widely misunderstood and many students and teachers have an inaccurate perception of what being an orphan involves. Not all the children in the statistics above were uncared for and most studies of orphans note the existence of a surviving parent or a care arrangement with extended family.

Teachers will know well that children experience disadvantage on a variety of levels. In Sub-Saharan Africa double orphans are disproportionately disadvantaged in terms of school attendance[4], nutrition, personal security and mental health. HIV orphaned children experience significantly more stigma, and may experience more depression, anxiety, psychosomatic reactions and post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms than other orphans.[5]

> *Teachers may not realise the magnitude or urgency of the problem of orphan care*

Just as different school models exist in Australia, each with their unique strengths and weaknesses, orphan care models differ too. The most common types of orphan care include residential care facilities, adoption and foster care programs, and support by relatives or other community members.

In deciding which orphans to help, school principals and teachers should be aware that traditional institutions probably provide the easiest vehicle for support, communication and resourcing. However, it may be wise to support orphanages that take in children only as a last resort, or that commit to high ethical standards of care and place children in foster care, within their community, where possible.

A 2004 World Bank report concluded that

> Whenever possible, orphaned siblings should remain together and with their kin and in their community of origin. When relatives are not available, placement in families willing to adopt or foster a child is the most appropriate solution. Institutions should always be considered a last resort, and small-scale foster homes should be favoured over residential placements such as orphanages.[6]

The *Children on the brink* 2004 report[7] is highly critical of institutional orphan care models and these criticisms should be considered when entering into sister-school arrangements between Australian schools and orphanages in other countries. The report argues that: traditional residential institutions usually have too few caregivers; children are more likely to miss out on affection, attention and social connection; children are more likely to be segregated by age and sex; and that institutional life tends to promote dependency rather than autonomy.

Of concern to teachers will be criticisms in the report above that for orphans in institutional care, transition away from institutional life can be difficult; social and cultural skills may be underdeveloped; children may be isolated from important social security nets; long-term vulnerability of children may increase; and children may lose access to family land and resources. In addition, the cost of care per child is substantially higher than family care, consuming resources that could be used for many more vulnerable children in less formal models.

Given the overwhelmingly negative perception of institutional care mechanisms for orphans, governments and aid organisations have become more intentional in supporting models that are perceived to avoid the pitfalls listed above. Schools wanting to offer support to orphans should do so too.

International Children's Care (ICC) Australia, is a small, Christian child sponsorship NGO based in Victoria and affiliated with ICC International. Their innovative ICC Village Model of orphan care is based on groupings of family homes in which house parents (usually a married couple) model family life to a maximum of twelve children of mixed age and sex, on a campus with up to ten other homes. ICC Australia promotes a broader development approach in which their homes and centres increasingly act as a hub for community development activities (a lighthouse). Only as a last resort—when avenues for family support, foster care and community placement have been exhausted—will a child enter ICC Children's Homes. Dean Beveridge, the CEO, writes "The emphasis is to keep the child in the highest level of care".[8]

Phillip Lodge, a teacher at Chairo Christian School in Victoria, is enthusiastic about his school's ongoing sister-school relationship with an ICC orphanage in Cambodia and is also a board member of ICC Australia. Having personally volunteered at the school with his wife and children (teaching English), he passionately supports fundraising and points to the success of 'Middle-Fest' an annual small business event run by students from which a share of profits are used to provide playground equipment for orphans. Amongst other benefits, he notes that his own teaching has been enriched, student self-esteem and community spirit have been generated, and students have been inspired by the orphan children and their stories of survival and hope. A regular newsletter is circulated to parents and Phillip points out that "poverty is also featured in integrated thematic units of study in the 5-6 and 7-8 coursework in Bible, English and Humanities".[9]

Interview

The following transcript consists of extracts from an interview with Merilyn Beveridge, International Program Manager for ICC Australia in the Asia Region. Merilyn is especially pleased with the sister school arrangement with Chairo and hopes other schools will participate in similar exchanges.

Given the stringent criticism of institutional models of orphan care, and ICC's classification as an institutional model, it was appropriate to ask the difficult questions about cost-effectiveness, sustainability and philosophical positioning.

Brad: Merilyn, you have been involved with ICC since it was established in Asia in 1991. Given the strong criticism that exists of traditional orphan care models, what makes ICC's orphan care model unusual?

Merilyn: Brad, from the beginning, in the late 1970s, ICC chose a model that was much more than just food and shelter. It was designed for the social, cultural, emotional, spiritual, mental and physical development of the child. The ICC Village model is based on the family unit and not an institution or dormitory. Children are placed in the ICC Village when there are no options for them in a community based care situation.

Brad: There has been a lot of doubt about traditional orphanage and orphan care models in recent decades. Do children miss out on affection, attention and social connectedness if they are placed in a traditional orphanage?

Merilyn: That's valid. We believe that children need care in a family environment so we don't place children in impersonal dormitories. Instead, we use a cottage, group-home plan where children are placed in individual homes located on small acreages. Local couples parent a group of 10 to 12 children who socialise, work and play together. They also mix with families in up to 10 other homes thus giving them a small village experience too.

Brad: A common criticism is that institutional care can create dependency, making it very difficult for some children to reintegrate into society when they leave.

Merilyn: Yes, it is something that we always have to be on guard against. Children need to know how to engage with their own culture and society, and they need the skills to function outside the ICC Village when it comes time to leave. Vocational skills are also an important part of the ICC philosophy, which is why we have farms and workshops as well as formal schooling in a local school. Measuring dependency and autonomy is difficult and we do have many children who have been greatly traumatised. You would expect them to have greater needs.

Brad: It is said that one weakness of institutional care is that it isolates children from important social security nets. How do you respond to that?

Merilyn: That can be true. In our ICC Australia program we ensure that the children are engaged in activities associated with the wider community. We also endeavour to keep them connected to their own communities wherever possible. However, we need

> *It may be wise to support orphanages that take in children only as a last resort*

to keep in mind that many of the children we support in the ICC Villages have no social security net at all. In the Philippines most children are referred directly from social services. As I said before, children in our homes may have been traumatised, abandoned and in some cases be on the verge of death. What some academics probably don't consider is that children in our care are not just 'dumped' when they leave. Their net happens to be the ICC home and Village itself, which is like a real family.

Brad: Something that worries community development purists is the observation that some families may use orphanages as an economic-coping mechanism until the child becomes older.

> **We have become increasingly committed to screening children to ensure that our care option is in their best interest**

Merilyn: That is very true, and again, it is something we have to guard against. ICC homes should be a last resort and we have become increasingly committed to screening children to ensure that other care options in their best interest are not available in their communities. We also have to be on guard because sometimes families want a child cared for until they become a productive asset and that creates a dilemma because the child can be exploited.

Brad: Talking about alternatives, is the cost of care in ICC homes substantially higher per child than informal family care and if that is the case, why persist with such a model?

Merilyn: The ICC village is designed to cater for the children who totally fall through the cracks of the broader community development programs we operate and informal family care networks. There is no doubt that the ICC Village model of care involves higher costs. But, when calculating costs you have to compare the needs of the children and the quality of care, not just the unit cost for each child.

ICC Australia is committed to a broader community care program. The community based programs in areas surrounding our centres include micro enterprise training, vocational training, health education and intervention, agricultural training, and others. ICC Australia sees these programs as fighting the orphan problem on the front line by building capacity in the local community to care for orphaned and destitute children. More and more of the children we help are actually supported in their local communities...In many countries in Asia where we are working, the governments are keen to encourage foster parenting of orphans in local families. We can use our centres for those who have absolutely no other option and also the centre can be like a Lighthouse in the communities for helping families in extreme poverty with such things as skills

training and micro finance. In this way we can be a preventative to the orphan problem escalating in the area. Through ICC Australia's Lighthouse program, and under ICC Australia's supervision, we encourage more informal community based structures. As researchers have recommended, ICC Australia is actively supporting local communities in caring for orphaned and vulnerable children.

Brad: Merilyn, what do you think about those who argue that child sponsorship is an expensive, time-consuming, ineffective method of helping poor children and that it meets the needs of sponsors more than the needs of children?

Merilyn: Wow. Where do I start? ICC is conscious of the many problems with institutional care and philosophically we are opposed to traditional, western orphanages that were the result of the Industrial Revolution. In terms of what we do, I see a lot of benefits...We have a personalised, family care model, not a dormitory model. Each family does function as a family unit and our house parents are supervised and resourced. What we do is easily monitored, the staff are carefully screened and there are checks and balances in place. You don't get all that in an informal community network. Our children have very good health care and even psychological care. Also, I have observed benefits in bringing children together who have had similar experiences and circumstances. Very hurt children have a better chance in our homes. What else? We preserve heritage and culture in a deliberate way. Relatives are encouraged to visit homes but when vulnerable children return home we support them so they are not exploited. What we do is not cheap but the quality of care is very high. We often operate elementary schools on the site to ensure the children have added support in gaining good foundations in education. They also have access to a farm and supporting industries and vocational training aspects, which adds to the cost.

Brad: Is the cost justified when you could help so many more children in community care programs?

Merilyn: We think so. But there is also a pragmatic consideration. Our donors expect high levels of care and we can provide that in the ICC Villages. We will continue to work with our donors to use the ICC homes in conjunction with community development and support for other models of care when that suits children with different circumstances and needs. There really is no one-size-fits-all rule. Having said that, we have become convinced that our future direction will be keeping our centres for those who have no other options. Also our centres will provide

programs that will enable poverty stricken extended families in the community who truly love their orphaned relatives, to be released from extreme poverty and thus be able to care for their relatives.

Brad: What benefits do you see in sister school programs where students and teachers form a relationship with teachers and orphans in a developing country? Is that something you would like to see more of? For example, I was recently talking to Leyton Heise, Chaplain at Avondale Schools. He mentioned an Avondale Schools initiative to adopt an orphanage in Cambodia and get year 12 students to visit for a life-changing service experience instead of flying to the Gold Coast for a holiday or schoolies week after the HSC.

Merilyn: Yes, a sister-school relationship can be a good thing, especially for your students. There does need to be some training and negotiating if students visit orphans, so they fit in culturally and it becomes a positive experience for both groups.

Concluding Comments

Schools can engage with orphanages in poor communities and the outcomes are exciting. Enthusiastic students who are socially aware can both help orphans and learn from them. Phillip Lodge asserts

> Our school has a number of staff and students who are supporters of ICC. Students who raise money realise the power of their work to help free some people from poverty…the students learn they can be proactive and make a difference… those who have visited the orphanages were touched by the relationships that developed. The Khmer children were vibrant, happy people.[10]

There are, however, several suggestions to consider in forming a sister-school relationship.

1. Work through a credible organisation that can provide your school with regular feedback and motivation.
2. Ensure that the orphanage itself is credible and aware of the pitfalls of institutional care.
3. Remember that the benefit to students is in the ongoing relationship and raised consciousness of development needs. A quick fundraiser is a poor substitute for quality interaction and learning.
4. Do not underestimate the power of goodwill and altruism. Helping unselfishly may improve staff and student morale.
5. Facilitate culturally sensitive student and staff visits to sister-schools or orphanages.

Students need to know that impacting on one life is enough. Martin Luther King famously said "Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of

true education". While some might contest the idea of character, and wonder if service does build character, I would agree with Lady Nancy Astor who once said "Real education should educate us out of self into something far finer; into a selflessness which links us with all humanity." Linking a school to an orphanage in a developing country is one way of linking students, unselfishly, to the needs of humanity. Although it represents extra work for a busy teacher, it provides the sort of richness for which the best education is known. TEACH

Endnotes

[1] Desmond and Gow, 2001, p.5.
[2] UNICEF et al, 2004, p.3.
[3] Ibid., p.7.
[4] Monasch and Boerma, 2004, p.S57.
[5] IRIN Special Report, 2008.
[6] Subbarao and Coury, 2004, p.39.
[7] UNICEF et al, 2004, p.19-20.
[8] Beveridge, 15.09.2008, personal email.
[9] Lodge, 15.09.2008, personal email.
[10] Ibid.

References

Desmond, C., & Gow, J. (2001). *The cost-effectiveness of six models of car for orphan and vulnerable children in South Africa*. Retrieved 16.01.2008 from http://www.synergyaids.com/documents/2629_OrphanCostEffectiveness.DOC

IRIN (2008). *Southern Africa: Special report—New thinking needed on "AIDS orphans"*. Retrieved 16.01.2008 from http://www.irinnews.org/report.aspx?reportid=46986

Monasch, R., & Boerma, J. (2004). Orphanhood and childcare patterns in sub-Saharan Africa: An analysis of national surveys from 40 countries. *AIDS, 18*. Supplement 2:S55-S65, June 2004. Retrieved 16.01.2008 from http://www.aidsonline.com/

Subbarao, K., & Coury, D. (2004). *Reaching out to Africa's orphans: A framework for public action*. Retrieved 16.01.2008 from http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTHIVAIDS/Resources/375798-1103037153392/ReachingOuttoAfricasOrphans.pdf

UNICEF, UNAIDS, & USAID (2004). *Children on the brink 2004: A joint report of new orphan estimates and a framework for action*. Retrieved 16.01.2008 from http://www.unicef.org

"Linking a school to an orphanage in a developing country is one way of linking students, unselfishly, to the needs of humanity"

ICC Australia contact details
Schools wishing to become involved in an ongoing relationship with orphans may contact:

International Children's Care Australia
Shop 7
Riviera Plaza
Bairnsdale
Victoria   3875

Telephone: 61(0)3 5152 5774
Facsimile: 61(0)3 8660 2967
Email: info@iccaustralia.org.au