

WHEN EDUCATION IS NOT ENOUGH

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Last year, Blue Dragon Children’s Foundation in Vietnam was contacted by a training center wanting to offer places in their courses for survivors of human trafficking.

The training program was excellent and reputable; the sincerity of the institution was beyond question. But somehow, although they had been trying for many months to give away full scholarships, they had not been able to place a single student.

How could that be?

Looking further, it was clear that despite the center being an excellent training institution, it did not know how to facilitate the education of a young person coming through crisis. Having a seat in a classroom is simply not enough to educate someone coping with, or coming through, a serious trauma. Blue Dragon has been providing services to kids in crisis since 2003, initially to street kids and later also to survivors of human trafficking. We have found that the following factors are critical in the provision of education to young people experiencing crisis and trauma.

THE NEED FOR WRAP-AROUND SUPPORT

Blue Dragon has supported thousands of children to receive an education through institutions external to our own organization: schools, training centers, other NGOs, colleges and universities. Some have even gone on to study abroad. What has become clear to us is that having a seat in a classroom is not sufficient for a young person in crisis to receive an education. Increasingly, we understand how critical “wrap around” support is to get kids into school; get kids to learn; and keep them there through graduation.

In conceptualizing how we need to develop and implement services for kids in crisis, Blue Dragon thinks in terms of “Exceptional Care.” This means looking at what it takes to support kids from every angle and involving the young person in making decisions.

WHAT MIGHT THESE SERVICES LOOK LIKE?

Preparatory classes. Young people who have been through crisis and trauma may have gaps in their knowledge and experience that have gone unnoticed. Attending individual or small-group classes prior to joining a 'proper' course can help address those gaps and get the student up to speed. We have found that the provision of tutoring even after they start school is very effective in giving them confidence to keep up with their classmates.

Psycho-social preparation. Trauma survivors may be excited and eager to return to the normality of a class, imagining that they will blend right in and be just like everyone else. The reality can be very different. Blue Dragon's experience is that survivors of trafficking are likely to feel alone, knowing that nobody understands who they are or what they have been through. Former street children may struggle with routine, unused to having to sit and listen for extended periods. Having a psychologist or counsellor spend time with the young person to think through the barriers and obstacles they will encounter affords an opportunity to prepare responses in advance and develop 'contingency plans' for when everything goes wrong.

Teacher support. It's not only the student who will need assistance through all this; the teaching staff may need advice and guidance too. Teachers don't always have the skills to deal with complex behaviors arising from trauma. Blue Dragon's social workers find that there is a greater chance for a child to adapt to formal schooling when the school is flexible to having input, and when teachers are open to feedback/advice, especially throughout the early weeks of the placement. Blue Dragon also offers more systematic training in specialized workshops for teachers to enable them to understand how trauma affects learning.

Regular debriefings with the student. Blue Dragon's social workers and psychologists meet after class from time to time to chat, ask how things are going, and celebrate any successes, no matter how big or small. This is valuable for insights and possible hints that

problems may be emerging, so that they can be dealt with quickly while they are still small.

Legal support. Blue Dragon's legal team supports the education of kids by facilitating their legal registration. Many of the young people we meet have no legal papers (such as birth certificates), which makes it impossible for them to enroll for public examinations. This means that they will otherwise not be able to obtain the necessary qualifications to help them eventually seek employment.

Take care of the small things. It is important to look out for the little details that could make or break an educational placement. Does the student have transport to get to and from the class? What about in bad weather? Will someone accompany the student to school on their first day, and pick them up afterward? Does she have an alarm clock or someone to call her in the morning so she is not late for school? Does he have a phone to call for help? Does the school provide a free meal or do students need cash to buy their lunch – what do the other students do? All these may appear to be minor details, but they are critical to ensuring that a child who has experienced crisis have the best chance to succeed in their schooling.

THE NEED FOR CHOICE

One aspect of services for trafficking survivors that has definitely improved in the past decade is the acceptance that young people in crisis have diverse needs. When Blue Dragon was first established back in 2003-2004, the options were woefully inadequate: boys were expected to train as motorbike mechanics, and girls were expected to learn how to sew. Adult women returning from trafficking were pushed into handicrafts, and people with disabilities shuffled off to make and sell bamboo toothpicks, unless they are blind in which case they were sent to learn massage.

In all of this, there was no consideration of the individual's interests or skills. Why shouldn't a homeless child be given an opportunity to complete formal schooling and then go on to tertiary studies? The only reason to hold them back was and is the attitude of service providers.

While that has come a long way, there are still agencies trying to push young people into particular vocations according to their gender and the type of crisis they have come through. We need to be clear that survivors of trafficking and any other type of crisis have the same diversity of strengths, abilities, and passions as anyone else. What this means in terms of the provision of educational services is that the entire range of possibilities should be offered to them, as are offered to everyone else. They may need more support initially to make up for the lost time that was spent in slavery, or on the streets, but this does not mean that they should therefore be denied these options.

THE NEED FOR PROTECTION FROM FURTHER ABUSE

Children who have been abused are vulnerable to further exploitation. Strong child protection and safeguarding policies and the effective implementation of these policies must be effected. This is especially relevant when different support mechanisms involving non-paid personnel are involved.

Blue Dragon has a cohort of volunteers, both local and foreign, who support the children's education through tutoring in school subjects. Volunteers need to provide police checks, agree to abide by the child protection policies of Blue Dragon, and be willing to have Blue Dragon staff work closely with them. Children who have been abused need to feel that they are safe before they can start learning, and organizations have a duty of care to ensure their safety.

THE NEED FOR PRIVACY

More than once, Blue Dragon has been offered scholarships for students on the condition that the school be able to share their personal story. From the institution's point of view, this is absolutely fair: they want (and maybe need) to let the community know what they are doing for disadvantaged groups. What's more, some NGOs have created an expectation that survivors of trafficking and abuse will want to tell their story to the world so that they can be a voice for others in terrible situations.

Blue Dragon has been able to respond positively to many such offers in situations where the young person was over 18 and fully open to sharing their life story with the public. But this condition excludes almost every survivor of trafficking or abuse in our care. The girls and young women whom we have rescued from slavery, although ranging in age from 2 to 60 years old, are most frequently below 18 years old. The boys who were abused on the streets are similarly aged under 18.

It is not reasonable to expect that someone who has survived sexual exploitation, trafficking, or homelessness should represent every other person who has been through similar circumstances. There should be no such expectation or pressure for them to tell their story. And offers of education or support should not be tied to disclosures of intimate personal details.

Blue Dragon has at times been offered scholarships for survivors of trafficking with the firm assurance that the personal information of the student will be kept absolutely confidential and should not be disclosed outside of the school's administration and management. However, bear in mind that trafficking frequently involves deception and abuses of trust, a survivor has every reason to disbelieve such promises and is likely to decline such an offer, even if the school's confidentiality processes are world class.

There is real hope that through education we can change the world. We talk of empowering girls, breaking the poverty cycle, and reducing vulnerability by keeping kids in school. All of these are true, but none of it can be realized if we don't make educational opportunities and support services accord with the needs of the children and youth. 