Discussion Activity

Memory and trauma: child soldiers

“Suddenly all the death I had seen since the day I was touched by war began flashing in my head. Every time I stopped shooting to change magazines and saw my two lifeless friends, I angrily pointed my gun into the swamp and killed more people. . . . My childhood had gone by without my knowing, and it seemed as if my heart had frozen.”

Ishmael Beah, former child soldier, Sierra Leone, taken as a soldier at the age of 12

“What has humanity created?” demands Romeo Dallaire. “What have we permitted to be created?” As a general and a peacekeeper, he has witnessed children used as a weapon of choice. They are easy to catch, light to carry, and easy to manipulate through drugs and indoctrination once they have been ripped from their families. “Man has created the ultimate cheap, expendable, yet sophisticated weapon, at the expense of humanity’s own future: its children.”

Knowledge questions to apply to this topic

- concepts and language: Who and what determines what “childhood” is, and when it ends? Who and what determines what a “soldier” is? In what ways is it important to clarify concepts and define terms in exchange of knowledge?
- memory as a way of knowing: To what extent is “memory” the content of what we recall, and to what extent the process of recollection? In what ways is either affected by emotion?
- memory, emotion, faith/trust, and sense perception: In what ways do these ways of knowing interact? How is their interaction affected in the case of child soldiers?
- memory, language, and truth: What are the problems of reliability associated with eyewitness accounts? Is a child soldier necessarily remembering events as they really happened? What factors can make the memories doubtful? On the other hand, what factors can make personal testimony particularly convincing and valuable as evidence?
- history: To what extent could history be called “the collective memory of the past”? How is the present – and possibly the future – affected by how we understand the past?
- ethics: Is it wrong for children to be recruited into armed conflict? If so, why?
- ethics: Does awareness of a problem bring any responsibility to correct it? Why or why not? Whose responsibility is the problem of children traumatized by violence?
- CAS (Creativity Action Service): TOK explores knowledge questions, including those of ethical responsibility. For practical action, however, it passes the questions to another part of the IB Diploma programme, CAS. What can be done toward solving the problem of child soldiers – or, more broadly, toward creating a better and more peaceful world?

Information questions for background

- What is the definition of a “child soldier”? Why is child participation in conflict a particular concern?
- Find out about international conventions against child soldiers, numbers involved, and organizations that work to protect children from military recruitment.

18 Romeo Dallaire, They Fight Like Soldiers, They Die Like Children: The Global Quest to Eradicate Child Soldiers. Random House, Canada. 2010. pages 4, 3