

# Education and conflict: Emergence, growth and diversification of the field



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## Abstract

The debate about education in conflict-affected contexts is fundamentally caught between 1) rights-based claims about access to quality learning; and 2) complexities around contexts, histories and politics of education.

In this paper, I review some of the current debates in this rapidly expanding field to demonstrate how education interacts with different dimensions of violent conflict and then, argue that education should be conceptualised both as a process of dismantling conflict-inducing structures in society and, as a process of promoting critical inquiry, respect for diversity, social justice principles and skills for civic and political engagement.

## Key Words

Education and conflict  
Peacebuilding  
Education in emergencies  
Peace and social justice

## Introduction

In the last two decades, the interdisciplinary field of education and conflict has grown exponentially, departing from the original idea of ‘the two faces of education’ (Bush and Saltarelli, 2000) and the pioneering theoretical work by Davies (2004) that analyses the complex interaction between education and conflict using complexity theory. Although the central arguments still broadly feature the role of education in conflict and peace, new theoretical frameworks and analytical approaches have also emerged lately to engage with multidimensional interactions between education and ‘humanitarian interventions’, Islamist insurgencies, the ‘war on terror’ and refugee situations (Davies, 2008; Gereluk, 2012; Novelli et al, 2017; Lopes Cardozo and Shah, 2016; Pherali and Turner, 2017). In this paper, I attempt to introduce some of the emerging themes and conceptual ideas that have enriched the field of education and conflict in recent years. This is, by no means, a comprehensive review of multifarious themes that are claimed within the field but a perfunctory overview of debates that could serve as a point of departure for researchers and practitioners who are interested in theoretical debates that shape the field of education and conflict.

## The expansion of the field and complexities

Educational experiences in conflict-affected settings are too diverse and multidimensional to be presented as a single review (Sommers, 2002) and the field that was once portrayed as ‘in its infancy’ (Tomlinson and Benefield, 2005: 5) has developed as a distinct sub-discipline consisting of research, professional and academic training, policy analysis and practice. This expansion is well attributed to the advocacy work mainly led by the Inter-Agency

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Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE). The fact that this field emerged out of urgent needs to provide educational solutions in contexts of insecurity, extreme poverty and social and emotional breakdown of populations whose lives were shattered by emergencies, the research and policy analysis is often tasked with not only the promotion of theoretical innovations but also providing practical solutions that could improve practice. Broadly speaking, global debates about education and conflict, research priorities and questions regarding professional practice in the field can loosely be organised under two main areas: **1) the provision of education in conflict and protracted crises; and 2) the role of education in fuelling conflict or promoting peace.**

Firstly, the world has experienced a historic level of mass exodus since the WWII. By the end of 2017, 68.5 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide and the refugee population, including the 5.4 million Palestinian refugees under the mandate of UNRWA, reached 25.4 million (UNHCR, 2018a). Out of six million primary and secondary-aged refugee children under the UNHCR's mandate, 3.7 million are out of school and refugee children generally are five times more likely to be out of school than non-refugee children (UNHCR, 2016). As compared to the global primary enrolment of 90 percent, only 50 percent of the primary-aged refugee children have the same opportunity (UNICEF, 2017). Merely 22 percent of refugee adolescents have access to lower secondary and dismally 1 percent of refugees attend tertiary education compared to 34 per cent globally (UNHCR, 2016). Refugee host countries are too stretched in their capacities to cope with large movements of people. In order to tackle the crisis, the United Nations General Assembly has recently endorsed the Global Compact on Refugees to ease the pressures on host countries; enhance refugee self-reliance; expand access to third-country solutions; and support conditions in countries of origin for return in safety and dignity (UNHCR, 2018b). The compact makes a commitment to support education of refugees from pre-primary to university levels by supporting host country systems; involving diverse stakeholders and utilising digital technologies (UNHCR, 2018b). In the 2016 humanitarian summit, the Education Cannot Wait initiative was launched to address the \$8.5 billion funding gap to reach the 75 million children and youth who are in urgent need of educational support in crisis-affected settings; and to bridge the humanitarian-development divide

by adopting 'humanitarian principles, such as humanity, impartiality and neutrality, and development principles, such as national ownership, capacity development and sustainability' (ECW, 2018: 13). Despite these global efforts, education for refugees is hugely under-funded; existing provisions are failing to meet the demand of access and quality and most importantly, the education systems are not refugee friendly in terms of admissions, curriculum, language of instruction and accreditation of learning.

Secondly, education is an integral part of the national and global political and economic agenda. These interests influence the processes of educational governance and policies such as, educational goals, access, quality and equity among children representing diverse social groups, distribution of educational resources, questions about gender equity, language of instruction, pedagogy, curriculum and assessment (Novelli et al, 2014). Stewart (2002; 2008) argues that multidimensional inequalities between culturally defined groups, defined as horizontal inequalities, that determine resource access and outcomes predict political instability and violent conflict. Along the same theoretical lines, the societies with greater educational inequalities between culturally defined groups have substantially higher risk of conflict and particularly, the prevalence of high education inequality between ethnic and religious groups doubles the likelihood of experiencing violent conflict (FHI 360 Education Policy and Data Center, 2016). However, governments in conflict-affected and fragile societies tend to embrace market-based neoliberal policies that show little enthusiasm towards reconfiguration of unequal socioeconomic structures and to address problems of inequalities. Consequently, development interventions in such contexts are likely to be complicit in maintaining the hegemony of the privileged political class rather than transforming them, whilst the global inequalities are also rising amidst the unjust, divisive and environmentally destructive global capital system (Piketty, 2014; Stiglitz, 2012). As Duffield (2007) argues development is increasingly practised under the notion of security biopolitics in which 'the West has both a security 'interest' and a 'values-based' desire to 'secure', to 'develop', to 'protect' and to 'better' the Other, whose insecurity threatens the security of Western consumer society as the instabilities associated with conflict, poverty and alienation threaten to spill over into and to destabilise the West' (cited in Chandler, 2008: 269). Education aid and programming are largely implicated within

these broad development aims and processes and hence, it is pertinent that the role of education and development be critically scrutinised within these frameworks.

## Right to education in crisis-affected contexts

### Education as a human right

The inception of the field of education in emergencies is predicated on the idea that education is a human right; children have the right to education even during times of crises; and the provision of education must not stop under any circumstances. Education is also 'commonly seen as a conduit for rights, a necessary prerequisite to the exercising and defending of one's own and others' rights' and individuals hold certain rights 'within the educational experience or institution' (McCowan, 2012: 70). In conflict-affected and protracted crises, education serves as the only hope to escape from the predicament. The guiding framework for this conviction is based on the principles of 4As that education is **available** for free and supported by necessary infrastructure; **accessible** to all including the most marginalised; **acceptable** in terms of its content, cultural appropriateness and fairness; and **adaptable** to meet the needs of children who live in crisis context (ECW, 2018: 13; Tomasevski, 2001). There are three main motivations for promoting education as a human right. Firstly, children are often victims of war and education serves as a mechanism of child protection as guaranteed by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989). Secondly, it helps build an international solidarity to advocate for educational rights of vulnerable and most marginalised populations. Finally, without guaranteeing an uninterrupted access to good quality education for all, including, in contexts of conflict and refugee crises, it would be impossible to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal 4 on education by 2030.

### Attacks on education

Schools, children and teachers are often targeted purposely by conflicting groups in many parts of the world. In 74 countries in the last four years, schools and universities, their students and teachers, have been intentionally targeted for attack, or education facilities have been used for military purposes, of which 28 countries experienced more than 20 violent attacks on education (GCPEA, 2018). As educational institutions represent the state and the government in power, rebel groups target schools to challenge

state authority; to defy certain education policies (e.g. curriculum and language policies); or to challenge education's core principles (e.g. girls' education) (Pherali, 2016). Attacks on schools and children also serves as a propaganda tool for extremist groups. For example, in April 2014, 329 Nigerian girls were kidnapped by Boko Haram, an extremist group that is resisting the provision of 'modern education' that is perceived as a repression of Islamic values and culture. In 2015, Al-Shabaab, a Somali militant group attacked Garissa University College in Kenya, killing 148 students as revenge for the Kenyan government's military deployment in Somalia. Similarly, the attack by *Tehrik-i-Taliban* on the Army Public School in Peshawar, Pakistan, in December 2014 killed 149 people, including 132 children. In Afghanistan, schools are targeted by the Taliban and Islamic State fighters to undermine the state control of public services such as education (Pherali and Sahar, 2018).

These brutal attacks on schools suggest that advocacy on mass schooling and 'modern education' without ensuring security can only increase security risks on children and communities, suggesting that '...contrary to expectation, schools are not always safe places for children' UNHCR (2009: 24). Additionally, 'schools can be spaces of bullying; racial, ethnic, linguistic, and gender discrimination; sexual exploitation; natural and environmental hazards; corporal punishment; and attacks, including abduction and recruitment into armed forces' (Dryden-Peterson, 2011: 32). Hence, both protection of education from external violence as well as violence prevention within education systems are crucial for promoting peace.

### Education as the foremost wealth

In emergencies, education serves as an enabling space to improve children's health through school vaccination and nutritional programmes; schools can be used to provide clean water, sanitation and shelter; and organise peace education and conflict resolution programmes as well as education for disaster risk reduction (Winthrop and Matsui, 2013). A continuous progression with quality outcomes in learning prepare young people with relevant knowledge and skills to get employment and gain stable livelihoods; enable them to access transnational opportunities; and facilitate their involvement in social, economic, cultural and political life of the society.

For refugees whose lives are shattered by forced displacement and ongoing adversities in exile, education serves as the main hope for a better future.

Irrespective of their future trajectories – integration in the host country, relocation in the third country, or return to the country of origin – education serves as a valuable portable asset for refugees. It is one of the very few domains of refugee lives that helps them carve their ‘unknowable futures’ (Dryden-Peterson, 2017). An old Sanskrit verse signifies the importance of knowledge that is gained through educational processes as:

न चोरहार्यं न च राज्यहार्यं न भ्रातृभाज्यं न च भारकारी ।  
व्यये कृते वर्धते एव नित्यं विद्या धनं सर्वधनप्रधानम् ॥

*Na chora haaryam na cha raja haaryam,  
Na bhraturbhajyam na cha bhaarakaari.  
Vyaye krute vardhta eva nityam,  
Vidyaa dhanam sarva dhanam pradhaanam.*

[Knowledge is such that a thief cannot steal, king or government cannot snatch, siblings cannot ask for a share; it is never a burden (you do not have to carry it as a burden) and it only increases after spending it; therefore, the wealth of knowledge is the foremost of all other wealthy possessions.]

Education is a basic necessity and therefore a fundamental right of human beings. But education systems represent power, ideology and hegemonic control for which learning spaces can turn into battlefields. Even though the type, processes, contents and goals of education may be contested, the essential notion of ‘education as learning’ or as a means to gain knowledge is undebatable. The rights-based approach is an effective mechanism to advocate for educational access and its protection in times of crises whilst critiquing the contested role of education is crucial to promote peace.

### Politics of education in conflict-affected contexts

There is a growing recognition that the provision of education in conflict-affected settings needs to account not only for the technical challenges such as the lack of school buildings, textbooks, trained teachers and institutional capacities, which are undoubtedly crucial, but also broader security and political economy factors involving, ‘the distribution of power and wealth between different groups and individuals, and the processes that create, sustain and transform these relationships over time’ (Collinson, 2003: 3). In this domain, the education and conflict field can be loosely portrayed under five main thematic

areas: **education as conflict-hardening process; securitisation of education; education and violent extremism; education for liberation; and education for peacebuilding.**

Firstly, education is a process of cultivating national identity and collective imaginations among citizens through which loyalty towards national ideals (e.g. national sovereignty, territorial integrity, linguistic and cultural distinction and glorified national histories) is reproduced. Education can be complicit in producing ‘virulent’ and ‘exclusionary’ nationalism that ‘inspires devotion to one’s community or love of country, for others it is linked to feelings of fear, anger, revenge and resentment’ (UNESCO, 2018: 2). In conflict-affected contexts, as Ben-Porath (2006: 11-15) argues, citizen identities are recreated as ‘belligerent citizens’, ‘as a response to perceived threats to national and personal security’. Here, the notion of democratic citizenship is reinterpreted in three main domains. Firstly, the nature of civic participation during periods of conflict is securitised and shifted from open and voluntary civic engagement to directed and mandated participation, in which citizens are expected to be compliant and contributing to the war and security measures. Secondly, violent conflicts fuel ‘overpowering patriotic unity’ and undermine tolerant pluralism. In this process, democratic contestations are compromised in the name of national solidarity and patriotism. Finally, public debates on controversial social and political issues are discouraged; public agendas often dominated by security issues; and commitment to free speech diminished in the name of national security. To transmit these values to learners and legitimately ‘enhance the civic commitments of future citizens’, civic education is particularly used as ‘the institutional tool’ (Ben-Porath, 2006: 36). Hence, education is complicit in hardening uncritical solidarity with violent response to conflict.

Educational systems that are insensitive to social inequalities often play a socially destructive role by maintaining unequal access and quality to education among different social groups, offering a segregated and unjust educational provision, manipulating history and textbooks, denying education to certain social and ethnic groups, and repressing minority languages and culture (Bush and Saltarelli, 2000). For example, Lall (2008) shows how educational resources including textbooks often glorify military victories and engage in collective demonization of their opponents, which serves as a political machine to manufacture ideological consent in favour of the state.

Secondly, since the events of 9/11, education has been hijacked as a battle tactic to win hearts and minds of the people in conflict zones. The Western countries engaging in conflict in Islamic states such as, Iraq and Afghanistan have pursued a politically motivated 'development' agenda that legitimises the use of education aid to strengthen national 'defence' and 'diplomacy' (Novelli, 2011). The outcome of this approach is that the decision about aid allocation is likely influenced by security interests of donor countries (Duffield, 2007) rather than educational needs of children in the poorest countries. The military involvement in dispersing education aid, as observed in Afghanistan and Iraq, is a worrying trend, which has blurred the lines between security and development work, consequently increasing risks to school children and aid workers in conflict zones; undermining the goals for poverty reduction; and skewing education aid towards 'frontline' states (UNESCO, 2011).

Thirdly, extremism is increasingly becoming a global concern due to its links with religious fundamentalism and terrorism, and formal education is inadequately equipped to provide learners with critical skills to analyse fundamentalism, or to prevent violent actions that are inspired by extremist ideologies (Davies, 2008). Atran (2015) notes that violent extremism is '...the use of violence in line with an ideological commitment to achieve political, religious, or social goals'. In this process, education is implicated in a number of ways, including, educational spaces being used to spread extremist ideologies; or formal education failing to challenge the views that learners are exposed to outside the school (e.g. the internet, social media and community settings); institutions implementing *Prevent* strategy<sup>1</sup> and being legally required to identify and report signs of radicalism to the authority; and most importantly, education as a safe space to debate controversial issues, promote diversity and plurality of views (Gereluk, 2012; UNESCO, 2018). The drivers of violent extremism are often presented as push factors, the conditions that are conducive to violent extremism and the structural context from which it emerges (e.g. lack of opportunities, ethnic and regional marginalisation, absence or weak governance of legitimate state, protracted conflict, collective sense of persecution) and pull factors, the individual motivations and processes, which play a key role in transforming ideas and grievances into violent extremist action (e.g.

social networks and peer pressures, sense of identity/purpose, ideological attraction, employment, promise of justice) (INEE, 2017). Even though education is perceived as mitigation to push factors, the relationship between the 'lack of education and structural development' and 'violent extremism' is empirically unfounded.

Lately, even though the state-driven strategies on countering violent extremism (CVE) have been criticised by some scholars as securitisation of schools systems (Novelli, 2017; Mattsson and Säljö, 2018), there is an extensive response of international organisations and agencies such as UNESCO, United Nations, European Commission, and Council of Europe to challenge extremism and radicalisation (Davies, 2018). International agencies, particularly the European Commission's Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), through its ten different working groups of grassroots practitioners, including, teachers and youth workers across Europe works with people who have been radicalised or are vulnerable to radicalisation (European Commission, 2019). Similarly, the Hedayah Global Counter-Terrorism Forum, based in Abu Dhabi engages in training and has produced extensive literature to promote an understanding of CVE (Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation and Hedayah, 2013).

Fourthly, critical education involves the process of praxis involving reflexivity, theorising and transformative action through which learners understand and facilitate change in the world they live. Critical pedagogy is a philosophy of education which 'unapologetically' embraces education as a political process to nurture the struggle for democracy; and is primarily 'concerned with the relationship between education and power in society and, thus, uncompromisingly committed to the amelioration of inequalities and social exclusions in the classroom and society at large' (Darder, Mayo and Paraskeva, 2016: 1). As learners and educators engage, realise and reflect on their lived experiences, disruptive modes of thinking can also emerge within what Freire (1974) would term as 'the banking model' of education (see Magee and Pherali in this issue). The process of 'conscientisation' through critical education enables learners to challenge social injustices and oppressions (Freire, 1974). From this perspective, conflict, as a process of resistance to hegemonic structures is a 'development success' (Rappleye, 2011) and an opportunity to promote social transformation.

<sup>1</sup>*Prevent* is a UK Government's counter-terrorism strategy under the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015, which aims to stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism. See the guidance for authorities in England and Wales: [www.gov.uk/government/publications/prevent-duty-guidance](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/prevent-duty-guidance)

Finally, education is a crucial domain for building sustainable peace in post-conflict societies. At structural levels, educational reforms that promote equity and social justice can contribute to building 'positive peace', a societal condition that is free from not only physical violence but also structural violence and conditions of war (e.g. poverty, discrimination, exclusion and unequal life chances) (Galtung, 1976). The following theoretical frameworks offer some modalities for peacebuilding through education:

**1) Social justice reforms in education**

As inequalities in education are likely to perpetuate social injustices and trigger violent conflict (FHI 360 Education Policy and Data Center, 2016), disruptive educational policies, based on the 4Rs framework (redistribution, representation, recognition and reconciliation) can promote social justice and build conditions for peace (Novelli et al, 2017).

**2) Global citizenship education**

Within institutional settings, the provision of Global Citizenship Education can help learners develop skills for critical inquiry in 'order to dissect claims that do not stand up to rigorous scrutiny, logic and rational inquiry' and enhance their civic and political participation (UNESCO, 2018: 9). Education should provide learners with critical skills for civic and political engagement through which learners adopt dialogue and discussion as constructive and peaceful means to find cooperative solutions to conflicts in society.

**3) Promoting political citizenship education**

As Davies (2008: 181-182) proposes, an educational model of 'critical idealism', as opposed to conventional tolerant multiculturalism, can help tackle violent extremism. Anti-extremism education should primarily be concerned with critical political education that enables youth to cast doubts on 'ideals' and to reject uncritical acceptance of single truths. Political citizenship education can promote critical thinking and dialogic skills to enable people to critically engage with dominant cultural, political and religious ideologies and develop dynamic citizen subjectivities.

**4) Improving integrative complexity**

There is an emerging body of work on 'integrative complexity thinking' out of University of Cambridge, claiming that educational interventions that help increase cognitive complexity can improve learners' abilities to deal with conflict peacefully (Savage et al, 2014; Liht and Savage, 2013). It is claimed that low cognitive complexity characterised by simple, narrow, categorical ways of thinking is a

predictor of violent conflict whereas, high cognitive complexity, as manifested through broad flexible thinking and value pluralism is capable of appreciating multiple dimensions and perspectives. Based on the assumption that violent extremism is an outcome of a constricted view of the world, the integrative complexity model can help learners to improve cognitive complexity to question their own beliefs and counter extremist ideologies.

**5) Democratising 'belligerent citizenship':**

Ben-Porath's (2006) expansive education model outlines three critical aspects of education to combat the 'belligerent citizenship' that is created during the wartime. She argues that schools should diversify the conceptions of patriotism in their civic education; promote inclusion of diverse social perspectives and of dialogue as a form of pedagogy; and form student identity on the basis of a 'shared fate' in the society (Ben-Porath, 2006: 114).

**Conclusion: Towards a framework of peacebuilding education**

In conclusion, education and conflict has grown as a distinct field of research, theory and practice that, at its core, has the moral obligation to produce knowledge and understanding that help reduce human suffering caused by conflict and protracted crises. Research agendas have also diversified due to the nature, scale and geographies of conflicts and protracted crises; and there is constant pressure to continuously produce policy-relevant evidence for educational work in contexts of fragility, acute emergencies and post-conflict educational rebuilding (Burde et al, 2015). In a broad sense, the basic plea of education in conflict-affected contexts is concerned with its potential contribution to peace and social cohesion. I would argue that there are two levels of interventions in and through education for promoting peace in conflict-affected societies.

Firstly, from a critical standpoint, education should rupture societal conditions that reproduce structural violence and systemic inequalities. To this effect, educational systems should undergo radical shifts in governance structures, resource allocation, curricular revisions, language policies, pedagogies and teacher development in order to redress educational grievances of marginalised communities. Even in contexts of protracted crises such as internal displacement and refugee situations, education must be provided equitably to prevent fuelling inequalities; to provide a sense of care and dignity to displaced populations; and minimise the loss of important social qualities such as, good health,

public self-esteem and hope for the future. However, as an integral part of the national political system, the provision of public education is often defined in terms of political rights and citizenship of the beneficiaries. Unless there is a strong political commitment to reconfigure conventional power structures or in humanitarian situations, the state's willingness to bear humanitarian responsibility, transformative policies, as suggested in the 4R framework (Novelli et al, 2017), are difficult to transpire. But the post-conflict policy landscapes often render crucial policy innovations to establish peacebuilding mechanisms which have the opportunity to respond to educational needs and aspirations of the communities at the social and political periphery. This is only achievable through influential grassroots movements, progressive political leadership with social accountability; and in most cases, support from humanitarian and development partners.

Secondly, education's role in promoting the culture of peace is of utmost importance in societies that inherit legacies of violent conflict. Hence, teaching and learning about peace should be a core component of the school curriculum but should not be restricted to formal educational settings, instead, it should be equally championed through non-formal educational programmes, public debates and civil society activities. Respect for diversity, critical political citizenship, skills for civic and political engagement, global citizenship education and critical inquiry are some of the key tenets of peacebuilding education which should form the basis of post-conflict educational discourse. The success of educational interventions in promoting peace may well depend upon the nature and effectiveness of the reforms as outlined above.

### Author Bio

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