The need for contextualisation in the analysis of curriculum content in conflict

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Abstract

Westernised peace-promoting curricula have been increasingly imported in conflict-affected countries, but they have limited capacity to adapt to local contexts and address unique issues relating to war-related trauma, political contentions and displacement of teachers and families. In this paper, I argue that this disconnection could be manifested in incoherence and failures to contribute to stability against contradictory positioning of liberal and more radical schools for competitive ideological dominance at the national level, which could potentially serve as drivers of conflict.

Key Words

Peacebuilding Education

Somaliland

Conflict

Fragility

Introduction

Since the 2011 Arab Spring, the designs and contents of education in conflict-affected and fragile contexts in the Middle East, North Africa and West Asia have drawn much academic and practitioner attention, as part of a growing concern about regional radicalisation (Fábos and Isotalo, 2014). Here radicalisation is thought of as a process through which young people adopt increasingly extremist views, contrary to mainstream principles necessary for the promotion of peace and social cohesion (Sieckelinck, Kaulingfreks and De Winter, 2015). In light of the growing global interest in conflict, much of the literature on radicalisation in recent years has examined the processes through which young people have been drawn into overt violent actions through exposure to extremist ideologies (Christmann, 2012). There is deliberate research attention on Muslim identities, given a broader securitisation of Islam in the international media and political discourses (Choudhury, 2007). At the same time, there has been an operational focus on single-action programmes, designed to promote stability through the implementation of peace education (UNICEF, 2011). Such peace education is introduced to young people in order to transform them into agents of positive change, but the impact of projects developed under this framework may be restricted or undermined in those cases where peace education operates in parallel with multiple rival curricula that promote opposing values, or where countries lack the capacity to train teachers to effectively deliver these learning resources. I draw upon preliminary findings of a small scale research project, based on interviews with Somali teachers, Ministry employees, education practitioners,

teacher-trainers and students. They report complex conflict dynamics which are observed in school playgrounds when students within the same school clash over competing ideologies taught to them by different teachers, offering small microcosms of processes that may be happening at a broader, regional level.

The purpose of this paper is to examine how teachers in conflict-affected states translate and interpret liberal and peace-building curricula, and what impact this process of adaptation has on wider peacebuilding. It finds that teachers are more likely to make significant alterations to a curriculum if they deem it to be inappropriate to the local context, or too challenging for students to engage with. These insights emerge from my research in Somaliland over the past eight years where curriculum reform is introduced by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education through support from the international community in order to enhance the role of peace education. Here, success is often measured through the distribution of physical resources, the consolidation of new curricula, and distribution of new textbooks. In my latest research I interviewed 42 people including staff from Ministry of Education and Higher Education, teachers, teacher-trainers, UNICEF and Save the Children education specialists, journalists, and students in Hargeisa, Somaliland, in collaboration with local partners. I found that textbooks produced through reforms do not always reach all public and private schools, and that some teachers do not utilise them even when they do have access, relying instead on their own lesson plans and teaching strategies. While mostly well-intentioned, the un-sanctioned teaching of history, literature and religion, or the omission of these topics, can serve to reinforce antagonistic clan narratives in Somaliland and aggressive clan politics, which have led to violence in the past. Meanwhile, those who do teach from a sanctioned curriculum take the view that only the officially recognised version of history is legitimate, where competing narratives prioritising clan identity become viewed as radical or illegitimate by teachers and students alike.

Based on these experiences, I argue that, in conflict affected states, where central monitoring capacities are weak in education, graduates of Western-facing, liberal education systems are put in direct conflict with graduates of systems that condemn these values; my interviewees reported cases of liberal students refusing to engage in debate with traditionalists on matters relating to politics, religion and culture as well as violent clashes in which liberal and traditionalist students fought in playgrounds, or, more seriously, cases in which radical and extremist organisations like Al Shabaab targeting liberal schools for attack. There are no immediate or obvious solutions to this challenge, but the ideological battles that contradictory curricula generate may antagonise the drivers of conflict within a society if children are given competing information about how to act and behave by their textbooks, teachers, communities and peers.

Education as pacification

Due to the centrality of education as a conduit for shaping hearts and minds, there has been an increasing international practitioner and academic awareness of the role of education in peace and conflict promotion (Bush and Saltarelli, 2000), and on the potential of education to act for peacebuilding, owing to the idea that education is a transformative 'process', 'product' and 'discipline' (Ukeje, 1966: 375). Education is acknowledged to be a way of imparting normative values (Ducasse, 1958). Thus, education can theoretically be used to reinterpret through classroom learning those 'factors that allow war to be considered normal', in order 'to enhance people's consciousness of the mechanisms supporting a war culture', and help them 'to challenge those mechanisms through empowering people for transformation' (Burns and Aspelsagh, 2013: 7). More broadly, education may also hold the key to redressing structural socio-economic inequalities, so as to produce a fairer society and address the underlying causes of conflict by reconciling and improving access to learning and livelihood opportunities across competing groups. However, this likely requires systematic and coherent educational reforms. Yet most practitioners are locked into working on a single school, single-curriculum, or single-intervention basis, limiting the scope of any potential change. In conflict affected societies, the limited capacity of governments to provide access to quality education leads to the emergence of a plethora of charitable, non-profit, faith-based, secular and private schools alongside state schools. Consequently, as it is observed in

Somaliland, this leads to teaching diverse and sometimes, contesting curricular and pedagogical provisions, the relationships and outcomes between which are difficult to discern. Even where integrated curricula are introduced, these may not necessarily reflect the values of teachers and school governing boards, who may manipulate the contents to promote their own ideological positions. In Somaliland, for example, where a new consolidated curriculum has been introduced, teachers would rip pages out of textbooks that they disagreed with, or compensate for perceived gaps in the curriculum with their own understandings of history and identity, which are frequently influenced by clan affiliations and media literacy. These educational processes potentially have far-reaching implications in terms of the way that children's views about the world are shaped.

To date, while much has been written on the difference between peace education and peacebuilding education (Burns and Aspeslagh, 2013; Smith, 2010), as well as the relationship between education and conflict (Bush and Saltarelli, 2000), more research is needed on how peace-facing education reforms impact societies in which multiple rival curricula or multiple interpretations of the same curriculum operate simultaneously. Indeed, peaceful societal transformation through education may not be achievable through project-based educational interventions, particularly when new curricula are introduced that do not take into consideration the broader context of learning and the capacity of the state to deliver necessary teacher professional development.

On the universality of education

As a basic human right, the provision of education is characterized as a universal good that practitioners need to ensure is available, accessible, acceptable, and adaptable (Tomesevski, 2005) both in humanitarian situations and more stable development settings. However, universality should not be confused for neutrality, where the translation of rights into compulsory schooling is divisive (McCowan, 2010). Education is a political endeavour, where the contents and delivery of education are fundamentally connected to the core power structures of a society. The focus on peace-promoting education, which has been promoted through conditional donor funding in education in the Middle East and North Africa (Williams, 2015), has been partly linked with a counter-terrorism and democratising agenda (Carapico, 2002; Bodenstein and Faust, 2017). This approach has accentuated the role of education in promoting allegedly liberal narratives that reject Islamist Fundamentalism, promote women's empowerment, and discredit racial and religious discrimination. Williams (2015: 16) summarises that 'educational ideas from the West and the North carry greater policy weight than ideas from the South, because the model of schooling is Western, and because the West and North have greater coercive, projective, and cultural power' as well as greater financial power in the internationalisation and globalisation of education. The counter movement to this has been the growth of radical organisations that combat Western-style education, including the emergence of the Nigerian group, Boko Haram, in West Africa, whose name famously translates as "Books" (as a shorthand for Western-style education) "are forbidden". It has also fuelled attacks against education in a range of conflict-affected contexts, such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia and Syria, where attacks against teachers and students are justified in defence of local, indigenous and religious values of education.

Once again, drawing upon research in Somaliland, the importation of foreign curricula into contexts that deal with legacies of violent conflicts, with only minimal adaptation to the local context, causes confusion in classrooms. Illustrations and contents in textbooks might be frequently inappropriate: a small girl may be shown playing with a dog in a society where children in general are prohibited from doing so, a drawing of a house might be shown to be built in a Western style with resources and technologies that communities do not have access to, a song about Old MacDonald and his farm may describe a farmer with multiple animals in a society where pastoralists would only ever own either camels or goats. As a former Somaliland faculty member lamented: "The stories are not ours, the geography is not ours, the history is not ours, and the identity is not ours". Thus, many textbooks are unrepresentative of the local identity, and this delegitimises the education sector as a whole, contributing to societal division between those who continue to value the importance of liberal education

and those who reject it as a neo-colonial institution. Perceptions of outside interference in curricula decisions are also pervasive, with another faculty member commenting:

> "Basically, there are international organisations in the system, pushing for more reforms, even though there have already been reforms. When I look at the Somaliland curriculum, in a nutshell, it is more like a cut-and-paste job. The curriculum that we have is simply a dictation from UNICEF and UNESCO."

(A faculty member from a Somaliland University)

The immediate solution to this challenge for the international community, who rightly feel the urgency of the need to strengthen the education system in Somaliland, is not apparent. However, a direct consequence of the delegitimating of any imported curricula is that teachers and students will not always take for granted that the materials they are being taught are valid, particularly in an environment where multiple donors and private financers teach rival lessons, even when working from the same textbooks.

Education as an ideological battleground

Around the world, in conflict-affected states, education has in many ways become an ideological battleground, where the politicisation of education agendas align with donors' interests and in Muslim-majority societies, education has been associated with Islamophobia and securitization of Muslim identities (Cesari, 2009). Educators working in these contexts need to be self-reflexive and critical of their role in exacerbating or mitigating this divide. Not all international programmes are guilty, but many are under pressure to securitise in accordance with counter-radicalisation objectives. Specific associations of radicalisation with Islam have polluted definitions of violent extremism and terror in Western media and Western politics, refocusing them on Muslim violence in a discourse that has been criticised as 'highly politicized, intellectually contestable, damaging to community relations and largely counter-productive' (Jackson, 2007: 395). The Western preoccupation with 'Islamic' radicalisation has led to a corresponding funding focus on education and development as weapons in the War on Terror (Novelli, 2017). It has situated

counter-radicalisation for the international community as a war of ideas, in which 'the "war on terrorism" [is] fought principally (ideally) against the myriad components of the Salafi-Jihadi culture (Salafiyya Jihadiyya) that birthed al-Qaida's campaign against "far" and "near" enemies' (Cozzens, 2006: 2). Unsurprisingly, in this war of ideas, education becomes a strategic resource, where 'winning will entail… gaining the upper-hand in a moral, narrative duel' (Cozzens, 2006: 3). The war will likely be won or lost in schools, and so the purpose of schooling has been critiqued and contested by organisations like Boko Haram and Al Shabaab as a neo-colonial and anti-Islamic initiative. Muslim conflict-affected states that rely on external assistance to provide education are caught between these two positions, with implications for the effectiveness of their programming.

Conclusion

The introduction of Westernised peace-promoting curricula in conflict-affected countries has the potential to aggravate conflict drivers by positioning liberal and more radical schools against each other in national-level competitions for ideological dominance. This does not mean that the promotion of liberal values should be abandoned in education programming in conflict-affected states, but rather than operating on small, short-term scales, or on a project by project basis, without analysing how the introduction of new curricula would impact on communities educated to opposing ideals, could cause more violence in the short term. Inherently, the needs of peacebuilding education require long-term funding commitment, and perhaps a push for consolidated education reform, that addresses the divisions between different education systems. However, reform for the sake of reform is insufficient, unless it is combined with meaningful and long-term support to teachers and teacher training. While more research is needed to compare across conflict-affected states, a greater emphasis should be placed on the role of the teacher in interpreting the official curriculum for their students, as well as on the importance of contextualisation in peace education. The two go hand-in-hand: the role of the teacher in a classroom is to help guide students through new concepts and complex ideas, and they do this by translating those ideas into terms that they deem relevant to their students, to ease

understanding. The more alien a curriculum seems to a teacher, the more aggressive the translation process is likely to be. These decisions are rarely made with the intention to harm students or to obstruct their learning but unless this process is understood, the gap between an intended liberal curriculum and what is actually taught may have far-reaching unintended impacts that harm (rather than support) the peace process, particularly when students graduate from these systems and are confronted with a divided political society that does not share their views.

Author Bio

Dr Alexandra Lewis is author of Security, Clans and Tribes: Unstable Governance in Somaliland, Yemen and the Gulf of Aden (2014). She works as a researcher of peace, conflict and education, and is currently based at the UCL Institute of Education. She has worked at the Universities of York, Leeds and Exeter, and has carried out fieldwork in Afghanistan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Jordan, Lebanon, Northern Ireland, Russia, Somaliland and Yemen. Her research is on the intersection of education, security and youth violence.

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