Education and social change in post-conflict and post-disaster Aceh, Indonesia

Ritesh Shah [a,1,*], Mieke Lopes Cardozo [b,1,2]

[a] School of Critical Studies in Education, University of Auckland, Faculty of Education, Private Bag 92601, Symonds Street, Auckland 1150, New Zealand
[b] University of Amsterdam, AISSR, Plantage Muidergracht 14, Room 2.10, 1018 TV Amsterdam, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

The paper analyses the context in which education in Aceh acts strategically to advance an agenda of social transformation. Applying a cultural, political economy analytical framework, it identifies ways in which education is embedded in key cultural, political, economic and social struggles at present. They include: (1) the redistribution of educational opportunities and access; (2) ambiguous spaces for democratic representation in a decentralised educational structure; (3) competing notions of how diversity is acknowledged within Indonesia and Aceh Province; and (4) conflicted approaches to reconstruction following the 2004 tsunami and end of conflict in 2005.

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1. Introduction

Four years after the signing of the Helsinki memorandum, Aceh is transformed. The tsunami provided a unique opportunity to pursue peace and resulted in billions of dollars of aid...Cement-Cementing peace, however, is an ongoing long-term process. International experience shows that post-conflict societies face immense challenges and the ongoing risk of relapse into violence. (Utomo et al., 2009, p. 171)

For nearly 30 years, the province of Aceh was embroiled in a separatist struggle against the Indonesian government. This conflict was the product of a long-standing belief of Aceh as 'distinct' to the rest of the country historically and culturally; as well as tensions over the spoils of the province's immense natural resources. With the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between separatist rebels and central government in 2005, Aceh officially emerged into a post-conflict 'moment' where, for the first time in nearly two generations, there was real hope that peace could be sustained. Public expectations were that the peace accord would redress long-standing grievances regarding social

injustices that had left the province lagging behind other parts of the country in terms of social and economic development. As part of the post-conflict peace settlement, education came to occupy a critical role in helping the provincial government to meet high public expectations of improved service delivery, and the redistribution of entitlements and opportunities which had traditionally been in the hands of a privileged few (Barron et al., 2013). Within the provincial government's first educational strategy plan of 2008, specific mention was made of education serving a transformative role in Acehnese society by redressing past inequities caused by conflict, and working to (re)build a peaceful future for the province (Bailey, 2008).

In recent years, it has been clearly shown that conflict-affected communities place high value on education and perceive it as one of the few protective measures in situations of insecurity or instability externally (see for example, Smith and Vaux, 2003; Smith, 2005; Winthrop and Kirk, 2008; Save the Children, 2013). Great importance has been given and continues to be given to the restoration of education provision due to its visible and important role in restoring/reconstructing state legitimacy and the important function as a "peace dividend" it can play (Rose and Greeley, 2006). Education has often also been noted as having an important role in reconciliation goals, through the messages and shared valued it can promote—in essence promoting a form of social cohesion that can be often lost during conflict (Tawil and Harley, 2004). Each of these rationales has shaped the role of education in the post-conflict/post-disaster 'moment' that Aceh continues to be in.

Yet research in the past decade has clearly proven how particular educational aspects (such as equity, relevance, and

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +64 9 623 8899x46356.
E-mail addresses: r.shah@auckland.ac.nz (R. Shah), t.a.lopescardozo@uva.nl (M. Lopes Cardozo).
[1] This paper reflects the equal input and scholarly contribution of each of the two co-authors irrespective of the order in which the names appear.
[2] Tel.: +31 20 525 4089.

management considerations) and conflict dimensions (such as security, economic factors, and political representation) operate in mutually constitutive and contingent ways in conflict-affected settings; often leading to outcomes that sometimes challenge education's restorative and transformative qualities in such contexts (Bakarat et al., 2008; Paulson, 2008; Davies, 2010, 2013). New conceptual and methodological approaches that draw from critical theoretical positions are helping academics and practitioners to map these associations (Novelli and Lopes Cardozo, 2008; Novelli, 2011; Novelli and Smith, 2011). Ultimately the goal is to understand, how, if and why education might effectively promote social cohesion, improved levels of trust between the state and citizens, and rebuild a better society after crises or internal conflict. Much of this work is founded on a shift away from grand narratives towards more contingent, specific and contextually driven understandings of how educational processes, decisions and actions unfold in such settings. The scholarship in our paper is representative of this.

In this paper we illustrate how the complex relationship between education and a sustainable peace can be better theorised and represented using the context of the case of Aceh, Indonesia.[3] We begin by suggesting how we conceptualise the complexity and contingency noted above, using the methodological lens of Cultural Political Economy (CPE) analysis and the Strategic Relational Approach (SRA). We then move to demonstrate how we apply this framework to understand the context within which education operates in Aceh, showing its relevance not only for academic research but also its added value to the world of policy and practice.

In recent years, political economy of education approaches have been strongly advocated for by actors such as the World Bank and DFID for its usefulness in identifying the upstream factors that might impede systemic education reform. Analysis has tended to focus on political mechanisms that might impede effective governance of the education system. A shortcoming of this type of analysis has been neglect of structural and systemic inequalities produced through economic regimes (namely neoliberalism) or historical precedent (colonialism/neo-colonialism) that effect not only political practice, but also systems of exchange, and relations and notions of education, the state and the citizen in such contexts. Some scholars have noted that it is imperative that political economy analysis of education make visible that which might otherwise remain invisible, namely the tensions, contradictions and inequalities that are part of education's relationship to economic, social and political regimes (Boak, 2011; Novelli et al., forthcoming).

We aim to show the usefulness of combining a CPE analysis with a Strategic Relational Approach (SRA), to achieve this aim. We argue that these tools help to uncover the dialectic between structured contexts and the range of stakeholders and actors (in-)directly involved in the field of education, reconstruction and peacebuilding. In doing so, we work to expose the divergent logics, agendas, actors, levels of power/funding, and role of vested power interests across the humanitarian, development, and diplomatic sectors in conflict-affected/disaster-affected settings, and the often

differing objectives underpinning humanitarian, reconstruction and rehabilitation interventions (Novelli and Smith, 2011; Winthrop and Matsui, 2013; Novelli et al., forthcoming).

We also uncover the discursive and material struggles engrained in Aceh's strategically selective context on education transformation at present. We do so through our own adaptation of Nancy Fraser's (1995, 2005) social justice framework. Specifically, we examine how the post-conflict/post-tsunami cultural political economy has positioned education discursively, ideologically, and materially in terms of Fraser's notions of redistribution, recognition, and representation. We contend that these aspirations are central to any credible effort at building a sustainable peace in the Aceh province. The paper summarises findings from a critical analysis of research literature and policy-documentation along with preliminary themes that arose out of an initial visit to the field in February 2013 by the two authors.

2. Theoretical positioning: critical realism and cultural political economy

A key assertion of those employing a critical theoretical perspective to the field of education and conflict is that education has multiple faces and dynamics in relation to conflict and reconstruction, and does not exist devoid of the broader (political, economic, and religious) structures and institutions within society. Education is deeply embedded in the context, history and cultural norms of societies, as well as current socio-political realities, making observed outcomes contingent, dynamic and inherently partial within the full realm of possibility. In an attempt to make sense of such contingency, we argue that a critical realist ontological lens is best suited within the broad field of critical theory to doing so. The role of the researcher is to investigate and identify relationships and non-relationships, respectively, between what we experience, what actually happens, and the underlying mechanisms that produce the events in the world, through what is labelled a process of *retroduction* (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 21). Critical realism differs from positivist forms of enquiry in its explicit focus on *how objects work in relation to their context*, acknowledging that structures and institutions of society do, in fact, matter in a myriad of outcomes. As Sayer (2000, p. 15) describes, "critical realism acknowledges that social phenomena are intrinsically meaningful and hence that meaning is not only externally descriptive of them but constitutive of them." The contingent and spatio-temporal nature of education's relation to society in post-conflict society comes to the fore, largely because analysis becomes situated in the relationship between events and underlying mechanisms (structures, institutions, discourses, and beliefs/values). According to Fairclough (2005), this study of discourse and the beliefs/values which underpin them, help us to understand the politics of knowledge production and its dissemination within society. They construct 'truths' about the social and natural world with the aim of becoming taken for granted definitions and categories, legitimating power structures and the position of individuals within society (Luke, 1996, p. 10). In sum a critical realist epistemology and ontology works to, "establish the presence of [processes and mechanisms], how they work and with what outcomes" (Robertson and Dale, 2014, p. 5), with the aim of revealing how hegemonic conditions might come to be.

Concretely, we draw on Bob Jessop's work on CPE and Susan Robertson's and Roger Dale's (2013, 2014) and Robertson (2012) *critical* application of this to *education* (CCPEE) to inform our analysis. The CPE approach developed by Bob Jessop and colleagues at Lancaster University takes "the cultural turn" in political and economic research seriously (Jessop, 2004, p. 160). It stresses the importance of including semiosis in political economic analysis,