



## Teaching on the frontline: The confines of teachers' contributions to conflict transformation in Lebanon



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- Critically examines the expectations invested in teachers' roles as peacebuilders.
- Introduces teaching work in debates on education's role in conflict transformation.
- Presents findings from ethnographic field research with teachers in Lebanon.
- Shows how conflict shapes teachers' lives, social relations, and pedagogies.
- Calls for tailored interventions to bolster teachers' peacebuilding potential.

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### ABSTRACT

Current education and peacebuilding literature invests high expectations in the ability of teachers to catalyse positive transformations in societies affected by armed conflict. Yet, very little is known about the actual experiences of teachers in such situations, or the strategies they employ to generate conducive learning environments. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in Lebanese schools, this paper proposes a framework to understand the confines of teachers' peacebuilding capacities. Of central importance herein are the socio-political context of teaching; teachers' relationships with students, colleagues, and parents; teachers' personal biographies; as well as the tools available to confront conflict inside the classroom.

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High expectations are invested in the capacity of teachers to act as catalysts of positive change in societies affected by armed conflict. Teachers are expected to act as

- \* *Peacebuilders* who “teach children how to live together in peace by overcoming prejudice within and between individuals and communities” (Sindhi, 2016), while fostering “values and attitudes that offer a basis for transforming conflict” (Novelli & Smith, 2011);
- \* *Guardians of quality education* whose “behaviour, attitudes, motivation, and training are key to ensuring that a quality learning environment is maintained” (Dupuy, 2008; see also; Kirk & Winthrop, 2008, p. 877);

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- \* *Socialising agents* responsible for providing the environment and encouragement for learning (Berns, 2001 as paraphrased in Dupuy, 2008) while conveying their own and their students' national identity and ambitions (Makkawi, 2002);
- \* *Proponents of civic standards* who “teach the skills required for civic participation and employment [...] in conflict zones” (Sindhi, 2016);
- \* *Catalysts of political change* who deepen students' critical awareness through “active learning methods” such as “reflective discussions [...], debates, presentation, and group and cooperative projects” that “encourage the exploration of different viewpoints” (Sindhi, 2016);
- \* *Graduates of appropriate teacher education programmes* in which teachers are equipped with conflict analysis tools that enable them to “understand their own experiences in relation to the conflict” and establish “context sensitive and learner appropriate classrooms and pedagogies” (Sindhi, 2016).

This paper suggests that many of these expectations, however valuable, do not or only to a limited degree reflect the lived realities of teachers in situations of armed conflict. To put it more strongly: no evidence exists that teachers working in divided societies necessarily engage with questions of peacebuilding or conflict prevention in the first place. We may understand their perspectives on, and responses to, violent strife by looking at the ways in which conflict permeates, firstly, the wider socio-political and economic context in which teachers work, secondly, their relationships with students, colleagues, and school administrators, thirdly, teachers' personal biographies and, finally, the tools at their disposal to confront conflict inside the classroom. Hence, appreciating the confines of teachers' potential roles in conflict transformation, and formulating strategies that can enable teachers to fulfil their peacebuilding potential, necessitates insight into the ways in which armed conflict shapes their everyday work and life. Only then will we be able to provide relevant teacher support that is in line with teachers' actual experiences, priorities, and needs.

The paper commences by reassessing education's peacebuilding promise in general, and teachers' anticipated contributions to conflict transformation in specific. Drawing on scholarly and applied literature, I note that the perspectives and experiences of teachers are rarely reflected in the literature, and so are efforts to understand teaching work in its wider socio-political context. Joining insights from studies that relate to teaching in situations of armed conflict with findings of my own ethnographic research, I propose a framework that can help us better understand how teachers' capacity to act as agents of change is confined. This framework is subsequently applied to a discussion of findings from ethnographic fieldwork with teachers in Lebanese elementary schools. The conclusion further refines the framework and is followed by recommendations outlining how teachers' capacity to contribute to transforming conflict can be strengthened.

## 1. Reassessing education's peacebuilding potential

The hopes invested in teachers' contributions to conflict transformation mirror the positive outcomes usually associated with the provision of education<sup>1</sup> in conflict-affected societies. Both scholarly and applied work tends to approach education as an inherently benign factor in war-torn countries, lauding its "critical role [...] in the wider reconstruction of the society, from building peace and social cohesion to facilitating economic recovery and getting the country onto an accelerated development path" (World Bank, 2005, p. 27). Significantly, the UN Special Envoy for Global Education claimed early on in 2016 that a failure to extend access to education to conflict-affected societies would result in "a 'full-blown global crisis' that would haunt the world for three generations."<sup>2</sup> Claims like these seem oblivious to literature that highlights education's inherently political character and, as a consequence, its potential to exacerbate, rather than resolve, political conflicts by promoting political divisions, cultural repression, manipulation of children's self-worth and socio-political allegiances, reinforcement of stereotypes and xenophobia, violent indoctrination, reproduction of gender inequalities, fuelling of essentialist identities, as well as corporal and sexual punishment of students and teachers (see for instance Burde, 2014; Bush & Saltarelli, 2000; Davies, 2004, 2005, 2010; INEE, 2010; Novelli &

Lopes Cardozo, 2008; Salmi 2000 in Seitz, 2004; Smith & Vaux, 2003; Van Ommering, 2011; Zembylas, Charalambous, & Charalambous, 2011).

The failure to recognise education's political and potentially disruptive underpinnings, not least in contexts where legitimacy and authority are heavily disputed, is reflected in a good deal of policy discussions. Novelli and Lopes Cardozo (2008) note, for example, that much education policy work is donor-driven rather than based on in-depth research. Accordingly, they argue, it tends to avoid critical analysis, fails to situate education in its socio-economic, cultural, and political context, and disregards the perspectives of education's most central stakeholders: students and teachers (see also Cardozo & Hoeks, 2015; O'Sullivan, 2002; Van Ommering, 2015; Vongalis-Macrow, 2006; Weinstein, Freedman, & Hughson, 2007). The lack of accounts that acknowledge the socio-political contexts in which schooling is situated, and relate this to teachers' and students' perspectives of teaching and learning, is salient. Especially so when considering the substantial funding that is channelled to education programming in conflict-affected countries, and the ubiquitous calls for 'quality,' 'relevant,' 'contextualised,' and 'conflict-sensitive' education (cf. Smith, 2005). These concepts all necessitate a degree of grounding in the lived realities of education's prime protagonists.

Research that foregrounds how teachers' and students' experiences of schooling are tied to armed conflict in particular settings is therefore urgently needed, and so are studies that explicate more comprehensively how curricula, textbooks, training, didactics, and modes of assessment can preclude the harm that education may potentially inflict or reinforce. This plea for research echoes in academic accounts calling for studies that illuminate "the realities of teachers' lives" (Wolf, Torrente, McCoy, Rasheed, & Aber, 2015) and teachers' perspectives on social transformation and peacebuilding (Kirk, 2004, p. 57). Such studies should recognise that "the reality of everyday life [for teachers in conflict settings] is a maelstrom of ongoing conflict, the emotional consequences of trauma, the promulgation of stereotypes, the fear of violence in classrooms, and fractured attempts to find a way to live together with former enemies" (Weinstein et al., 2007, p. 57).

Despite appeals for more research, scholarship on teaching in conflict-affected communities remains scarce (Kirk & Winthrop, 2008; Weber, 2007; Wolf et al., 2015). This can partly be attributed to challenges related to gaining access to research sites, as well as to this field's positioning in between disciplines that focus on either teaching or on conflict, but rarely on both simultaneously. Within the realm of education sciences, on the one hand, elaborate scholarship exists on teaching, teacher education, and teachers' perceptions of their work. The geographical scope of this work, however, has been "lopsided in favour of [...] the situation in industrialized countries over the past two decades" (Weber, 2007, p. 293; see also; Wolf et al., 2015). As a consequence, educationalists define teaching almost exclusively in terms that apply to only a minority of educational settings worldwide, while the experiences of the global majority of teachers go unnoticed (Weber, 2007; see also; Kirk, 2004). This is a noteworthy gap in itself, but becomes particularly problematic in light of educationalists' attempts to contribute to debates on globalization and modernity (Weber, 2007). Anthropological accounts, on the other hand, explore the experiences of young and old caught up in conflict and distress. In view of the discipline's longstanding focus on childrearing and, more recently, on young people's encounters with war, as well as its powerful contributions to debates on modernity and power, the discipline's lack of attention to formal schooling in conflict settings is rather puzzling (see also Burde, 2014; King, 2014; Paulson & Rappleye, 2007).

<sup>1</sup> 'Education,' in this article, refers to standardized, certified, mass education (whether public or private) that has become commonplace across the globe.

<sup>2</sup> [www.aworldatschool.org/news/entry/Gordon-Brown-donors-must-act-now-to-make-emergency-education-fund-work-2672](http://www.aworldatschool.org/news/entry/Gordon-Brown-donors-must-act-now-to-make-emergency-education-fund-work-2672) (accessed on 19 May 2016).

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