

## Education and conflict: Essay review

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### Abstract

This review essay looks at three recent publications in the emerging field of ‘education and conflict’ and explores an apparent gap between theory and practice in the field. Recent works by educationalists Lynn Davies, ‘Education and conflict: complexity and chaos’ (2004) and Tony Gallagher, ‘Education in divided societies (2004)’ are contrasted with the World Bank’s 2005 ‘Reshaping the future: education and postconflict reconstruction’, and similarities between the publications are highlighted. Davies’ work uses complexity theory to illuminate the relationships between education and conflict and to establish an argument for ‘complex-adaptive schools’, which would use conflict positively to engage students in the creation of peaceful communities. Gallagher, using a number of well-developed case studies, examines the way education systems have been structured to respond to and operate in divided societies, concluding that classroom agency and flexibility are crucial. The calls, by Davies and Gallagher, for educational re-creation are explored in contrast to the World Bank’s publication, which offers best practice lessons to support post-conflict educational reconstruction. The article probes these differences and points to areas where the practitioner-directed Bank publication and the more academic works do and do not intersect, attempting to indicate areas where bridges may be built.

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### 1. Introduction

A growing body of work is emerging about education and conflict, including the three recent publications by the World Bank (2005), Lynn Davies (2004) and Tony Gallagher (2004) to be reviewed herein. In addition to the recent ‘mushrooming’ (World Bank, 2005) of literature, the ties between education and conflict are receiving increasing media attention. Mention is beginning to be made of mistakes that have happened during educational reconstruction and humanitarian ef-

forts. For instance, the much celebrated UNICEF ‘back to school’ campaign undertaken in Afghanistan in 2002 did succeed in re-starting a scattered educational system that had virtually ceased to function due to internal fighting, and in getting a large percentage (approximately 60%) of Afghani children back into classrooms (UNICEF(a), 2006). With a budget of nearly USD 50 million, the project involved rebuilding schools, developing curriculum, paying teachers’ salaries, providing school supplies and ensuring access to education for girls (UNICEF(b), 2006). In what was its “largest-ever logistical effort” UNICEF purchased and distributed 7000 tonnes of teaching and learning materials across the country (UNICEF(b), 2006).

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Typical of reconstruction efforts, the Afghan project was framed around a sense of urgency, and took place over a very short-time frame, rushing to have conditions ready for children to start school by a set date. While new curriculum materials were produced, the decision was taken to use existing textbooks for certain subjects including Islamic instruction (Stephens and Ottaway, 2002). These textbooks, produced with the support of 43 million USAID dollars in the 1980s and early 1990s (Off, 2004) contained anti-Soviet messages and were filled with violent images. From these books children learned to count using photos of guns and landmines, and received divisive and hate-filled religious messages. That such violent textbooks were reprinted as a part of the ‘back-to-school’ project, at an approximate cost of USD 200,000 (Stephens and Ottaway, 2002), highlights the increasingly recognized need for serious reflection about educational response to conflict, as well as the need for further research into programme evaluation and formulation of best practices. It is important to note that UNICEF has decided to destroy the re-printed textbooks (Stephens and Ottaway, 2002).

The above example also highlights the pressures that practitioners working towards educational reconstruction are under when designing and implementing programming. In the context of postconflict educational reconstruction, where once established systems are often in a state of crisis (Sommers, 2004), where funding is unstable and unreliable (Sinclair, 2001) and where infrastructure and communications are often destroyed (Sommers, 2004), it is understandable that mistakes have been made. In the Afghan situation, the school system had been virtually destroyed by 25 years of war, many students were registered in schools that were, in fact, nothing more than rubble, and girls had been forbidden to attend school for the previous 5 years under the Taliban regime (Off, 2004). Conflicts like those in Sierra Leone and Liberia have created situations where educational reconstruction must address the concerns of large numbers of child soldiers returning to formal education. Government ministries are often not functioning or have recently been re-established, educational records have often been destroyed and communications between different regions are difficult (Sommers, 2004; Davies, 2004).

As agencies have struggled to provide humanitarian response in situations of conflict, the need to

include educational response has emerged as a clear priority. Thus, education has come to be understood as the fourth pillar of humanitarian response (Machel, 2001), joining food and water, shelter and health care as essential needs to be met in situations of emergency. A considerable body of literature has emerged looking at educational provision during and in situations of emergency, a large percentage concentrating upon the education of refugees and internally displaced persons (see, for instance, Crisp et al., 2001).

In addition to being seen as a core component of humanitarian response, educational reconstruction in post-conflict situations is essential for stability, future economic growth and in order to meet Millennium Development and Education For All goals. In the context of these goals, to be achieved by 2015, emergency educational provision and post-conflict educational reconstruction are of central importance. It is estimated that half of the 104 million children who are not attending primary school live in countries that are facing or currently recovering from conflict (Tomlinson and Benefield, 2005). Thus, if MDG and EFA goals are to be accomplished, a focus on the education of those children affected by conflict is crucial.

The salience of the above arguments ensures that educational response to conflict is increasingly understood as an essential and immediate need. Still, research in this area is described by Tomlinson and Benefield as contributing to a “field in its infancy” (Tomlinson and Benefield, 2005, p. 13). While the urgency of a single conflict certainly merits attention, the majority of the literature in this area is grounded in the reality that “there are no signs that the world is becoming a less-conflictual place” (Davies, 2004, p. 3). Since the end of the Cold War we have seen both a change in the nature of conflict and an increase in its frequency (Kagawa, 2005; Sinclair, 2002). The three publications that this article concentrates on all begin their discussions by pointing to the intensification and transformation of conflict.

In ‘Education in divided societies’ (2004), Tony Gallagher cites a University of Uppsala study estimating that there were 82 armed conflicts in the world between 1989 and 1992 (p. 9). The vast majority of recent conflicts are fought within national borders and do not play out on conventional, demarcated battlefields. Lynn Davies, in ‘Education and conflict: complexity and chaos’ (2004), points out that in discussion of

contemporary, conflict related emergencies it is “almost routine” to begin with the fact that these battles take place in towns, villages, and homes of civilians (p. 3). The author of the World Bank’s ‘Reshaping the future: education and post-conflict reconstruction’ (2005) state that more than 2 million children have lost their lives as a direct result of conflict over the course of the last decade, while at least a further 6 million have been seriously injured or permanently disabled (p. xi).

Clearly, in the post-Cold War world, the sense of urgency to address conflict and education extends beyond individual humanitarian efforts, to a broader necessity to develop and understand best practices, to investigate ways in which education systems can contribute to building peace, and to look at the unfortunate ways in which education systems are often complicit in creating conflict. The publications reviewed here all seek to contribute to developing a broad understanding of the ways in which education and conflict relate to one another, and of the ways to best respond to conflict through education. In this paper we seek to provide a useful review of the main arguments and findings of these three works. We hope as well to reveal the perspectives which inform each of the publications, and the ways in which these engage and intersect with each other and also point to each others’s weaknesses. By looking at the publications in this way, we are able to point to tensions and gaps that exist not only in the emerging literature on education and conflict as a ‘field’, but also in the complex practice of educational reconstruction in very real post-conflict situations.

The three publications that we analyze illustrate the conclusion made by Tomlinson and Bénéfield (2005) in their recent review of research in the area of education and conflict: that there exists a research–practice gap. The works of Davies (2004) and Gallagher (2004) contribute to the growing body of academic and theoretical research on the topic, while the World Bank (2005) publication speaks to practitioners and policy makers, providing recommendations for how to practically proceed in situations of educational reconstruction and reform. Davies’ work questions the assumption that schooling, as currently conceived, is necessarily a good thing. Gallagher’s case study analysis of various (mainly western) education systems’ ways of responding to divisiveness in their societies concludes that there is no equation to guarantee

that an education system will contribute to peaceful pluralism rather than to conflictual division.

In focus and in vision there appears to be a significant disconnection between literature produced by academics and literature produced by practitioners, in which few bridges are being built. Theoretical and epistemological recommendations made by academics are rarely fleshed out into ideas that could be used to construct practical programming able to be implemented in the constrained situations where practitioners actually work. An identified lack of evaluative research (see Tomlinson and Bénéfield, 2005) that reflects upon the effectiveness and suitability of initiatives taken in post-conflict situations and the unavailability of theoretical research, due both to its “location and style” (Tomlinson and Bénéfield, 2005, p. 8), mean that practitioners turn instead to documents by fellow practitioners. It appears, therefore, that the theory and the practice of education and conflict work are not speaking to each other. It is not our aim in this paper to take sides within this silence, but rather to point to ways in which both sets of research could benefit from greater attention to the other.

## **2. Reshaping the future: education and post-conflict reconstruction**

Regardless of one’s views of the World Bank, its recent publication—‘Reshaping the future: education and post-conflict reconstruction’ (2005)—merits its careful attention. Given its enormous resources and dominant position worldwide, the Bank is likely to play a powerful role in post-conflict situations anywhere and everywhere that they arise. Recall the Bank has spent, in just the last 3 years in Iraq, \$40 million for textbooks, \$60 million for school construction, and \$100 million to alleviate overcrowding in schools (Investors Iraq Forum, 2006). The World Bank is clearly a ‘practitioner’ with few peers in post-conflict situations. For those inclined to view the Bank’s policies in a negative light, this degree of involvement and influence is a frightening prospect. Yet, the language of this latest report is not the stuff of callous bureaucrats or hungry moneylenders in Washington. Consider the following extract from the report: “educational programming in post-conflict societies cannot be ‘business as usual’. Education has a critical role to play 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 track” (p. 27). The report also warns that “without reform, reconstruction runs the danger of reproducing the factors that contributed to the conflict in the first place” (p. 85). That the World Bank would adopt these ideas, which form some of the central precepts of ‘peace education’, makes the report worthy of particular interest and closer scrutiny. One must ask: to what degree are the above statements simply rhetoric? And, how do such statements translate into Bank recommendations for reform?

The report conceptualizes conflict as “development in reverse” — a frequent mantra throughout and one long since established in World Bank thinking. It begins with a succinct analysis of the connections between conflict and poverty, stating “economic stagnation or decline preceded the outbreak of conflict in all [12] the case study countries” (p. 8). The report then examines the impact of conflict on wider development goals such as poverty reduction, MDGs, and EFA targets. To that end, the report draws on much of the existing literature and on a database of “key indicators” for 52 conflict-affected countries, arguing that “clearly conflict constitutes a major obstacle to achieving EFA and MGD targets” (p. 29). While the Bank’s analysis of conflict and its impacts are well developed, its conclusions and insights are neither new nor surprising. It is not clear how much the conceptual frame of ‘development in reverse’ actually enhances our understanding of conflict. Though its language may bring in more aid dollars, the ‘development in reverse’ framework does little to help unravel the complex interface between education and conflict.

Perhaps more remarkable than the conceptual framework applied is the apparent optimism that runs through arguments that “the post-conflict reconstruction environment is the best of times and the worst of times, both an opportunity and a constraint” (p. 25), concluding that post-conflict circumstances can offer ideal climates for reform. Among the report’s reasons are that old political regimes are replaced, high expectations prevail in the community, the resistance of bureaucracies is weakened, and new resources become available (p. 25–26). However, the Bank argues, these conditions form part of a “conundrum” that also finds a weakened education system less able to respond because of a lack of strong central direction, a civil society in disarray, lack of effective

administration, and the unpredictability of financial flows. While very clear on the potential for reform offered by post-conflict situations, the report is less clear on the ways to maximize opportunity and minimize constraint. There is an interesting focus on using quick educational reform as a ‘peace dividend’ in order to build confidence in the reconstruction process, and in the need for large ‘symbolic’ gestures (such as purging textbooks) to demonstrate quick and concrete reforms (p. xvii).

The strength of report is undoubtedly in its fifth chapter entitled “Promising directions in system reconstruction”. Therein, the Bank attempts to distill a list of ‘key lessons’ to be learned from reconstruction experiences over the past two decades. With examples drawn from around the world—Timor Leste, Afghanistan, Iraq, Kosovo, Sierra Leone, El Salvador—it organizes these key lessons into eight categories: sector assessment, challenges for decentralization, access, quality, teachers, curriculum, finance/governance, and ‘unique’ post-conflict challenges. Each of these categories is then further sub divided to illustrate each sub division with several concrete examples. Under curriculum—for example—the report highlights ‘reviewing textbooks’, ‘implementing reform gradually’, and ‘revising the assessment system’ and draws on a range of experience from Iraq, Rwanda, Bosnia, Nicaragua, and Sri Lanka. With bullet points and brevity, one feels that the Bank has leaked its own ‘things-to-do’ list of post-conflict reconstruction chores. The conciseness of this section is likely to be seen as a useful format for the constrained practitioner.

The World Bank’s familiar policy themes are present—such as decentralization, private schooling, and finance—but so too are issues outside on this policy agenda. There is stress on the importance of ‘helping the vulnerable’ including refugees, child soldiers, orphans, and disabled of all ages. The report also briefly tackles the linkages between HIV/AIDS and conflict. Towards the end of the last section, is a brief treatment of ‘peace education.’

In looking at the report’s assessment of peace education, however, weaknesses do begin to emerge. The Bank writes in a tone that is quite dismissive, explaining that peace education is “a generic term used to describe a range of formal and informal educational activities undertaken to promote peace” (p. 60). They follow this by stating “ill-conceived, stand-alone initiatives emanating from well-meaning outsiders have little positive impact, tend to

crowd an already overcrowded curriculum, and collapse as soon as external funding does” (p. 60). While there maybe some truth therein, these words are not likely to endear the Bank to its critics, nor do they illustrate a strong commitment to developing peace education initiatives. One wonders, in light of this, how sincere the Bank is when it repeatedly calls for a “shift from post-conflict reconstruction to conflict prevention” (p. 75). How can preventative education be developed without a conscious focus on educating for peace? Is the bank willing to put some degree of the faith that it has in economic models into to creative, peace education models? What could be more important in an ‘overcrowded curriculum’ than ‘peace building’? What good is math if children use it to count bullets or land mines? These are crucial issues that cannot and should not be dismissed.

### 3. Education and conflict: complexity and chaos

The topic of peace education is addressed with more depth and expounded with more conviction in Lynn Davies’ ‘Education and conflict: complexity and chaos’ (2004). In what she describes as “her life’s work” Davies ambitiously (though she candidly prefers “hopelessly ambitious” (p. 7)) attempts to address a continuum of issues in education and conflict, moving from theory to practice. As with any work of such breadth achieving an in-depth treatment and a coherent structure pose problems. Davies readily admits to these troubles, and to a large degree overcomes them with clear style and straightforward structure. She describes her effort as follows: “I attempt to show that everything is interlinked, that you need a robust sociological theory as well as examples of good practice, and that you need some sort of vision” (p. 7). The book proceeds accordingly.

Early chapters introduce ‘complexity theory’, an eclectic conceptual tool that frames Davies’ theoretical understanding of conflict, and offers hints at how to engage with it. Complexity theory — we are told — is an all-encompassing, ever-changing theory of conflict that draws upon artificial intelligence, game theory, computer science, ecology, evolution, and philosophy. The theory is complicated, and, in this case, is perhaps not sufficiently developed to provide a useful framework for those not previously initiated. Theorists are likely to come away with something to mull over, while practitioners may move on to further chapters.

Davies devotes her next section to an analysis of the roots of conflict; continually connecting her insights back to issues in education. Drawing on theorists of the critical tradition she lists economics, class relations, gender and identity as the sources of conflict. The analysis seems at times unfocused, following the tenets of complexity theory and urging the reader (somewhat unhelpfully) to ‘consider everything’. However, it is this same impressive breadth that allows Davies to conceptualize various manifestations, interrelationships, and tensions between conflict and education. One has to admire and sympathize with her attempt to show the multiple and common roots of conflict and the connections these have with education. Her arguments are made more forceful by examples drawn not just from violent conflicts in the developing world but also from classrooms in the developed world.

Thankfully, from the perspective of the more practically oriented, Davies dedicates the third and fourth chapters of this book to concrete description of, and strategies for responding to, conflict. Here lies one of the greatest strengths of this work — the potential bridge it can build to the work ‘practitioners’ such as the World Bank, particularly in its concise, useful and insightful treatment of peace education. Davies draws on a wide range of examples, providing vivid descriptions of success and innovation and filling the silence left by the Bank’s terse, almost dismissive attitude toward this area of research. Davies also includes a focus on ‘war education,’ agreeing with the ideas of [Bush and Saltarelli \(2000\)](#), that education, while having a potential to foster peace, also has the potential to foster war.

The ninth chapter of this book speaks to the tension that exists in emerging literature in this ‘field’, a tension between education in emergencies and education for development (see for instance [Kagawa, 2005](#); [Vargas-Baron and McClure, 1998](#)). Davies rightfully recognizes that education often carries on in times of conflict and that education (broadly conceived) must be supported by various measures during conflict and until regular schooling can resume. In this section she deals with issues such logistics of supplies, the education of child soldiers, and the difficulties of refugee education. Here Davies identifies, as does the World Bank and parts of [Gallagher’s](#) analysis, the resilience of schools and of schooling during times of conflict.

While still opposing a strong dichotomy between emergency and reconstruction education, Davies’ next chapter examines the “aftermath of conflict”

reflecting upon the merger of humanitarian relief with reconstruction. She reiterates, “education for reconstruction should not be a restoration of equilibrium” (p. 182). In this way Davies introduces her understanding of reconstruction as a transitional period to “new ways of learning and living which is to not reproduce the same causes of conflict” (Davies, 2004). Thus calling for a re-creation of education rather than a reform. That Davies ignores what the World Bank report labels as a ‘neglected area’ (2005, p. 64) in research — the challenge of interagency cooperation in humanitarian response and reconstruction — is at once a weakness and a further indication of the gap between theory and practice in this area.

The idealistic position with respect to creating new ways of learning and living extends into the next chapter (Chapter 11) where Davies launches her case for international conflict resolution techniques to be taught within the school. Her vision is laid out for the development of “complex adaptive schools” schools structured to maximize connectivity by providing the ‘possibility space’ for thinking and for conflict resolution (p. 217). The work returns to ‘complexity theory’ envisioning the school as a place that ‘fosters positive conflict’ by bringing teachers and learners to ‘edge of chaos’ (p. 222). Deep philosophical arguments and an underpinning faith in human agency paint an appealing picture of these model schools but the practitioners will again have their doubts, especially when seeking clear guidance on how such schools could be developed.

#### 4. Education in divided societies

Tony Gallagher’s ‘Education in divided societies’ (2004) investigates various ways in which education systems have been structured in societies where questions of identity and ethnicity are central. Despite the fact that his case studies are largely historical investigations of education systems coping with difference (in America, Britain, South Africa, continental Europe, Nazi Germany and Northern Ireland), the second chapter, entitled “we are all ethnic now” locates his conclusions in contemporary discussion of education and conflict. Despite the promises of modernity to render identifications based on linguistic, religious, and cultural affinities meaningless, Gallagher argues that the post Cold War period has seen a ‘resurgence of ethnicity’. In the 1970s 18 states faced internal linguistic conflicts

and 19 were characterized with significant internal religious conflicts, by the mid 1980s these numbers had increased dramatically, with 76 states facing active opposition from organized groups while a further 36 faced unorganized minority grievances (Gallagher, 2004, p. 11).

Thus, Gallagher attempts to demonstrate the failure of the modernist faith in the ability of the nation state, through industrialization, urbanization and secularization, to minimize social and identity differences. Rather than the ‘imagined [and unified] communities’ that were hoped for as a result of modernization, contemporary states are characterized by their plurality, which “contains within itself the seeds of conflict and separation” (p. 21). Gallagher, therefore, centers his work upon questions of how mass education systems, designed around the ideals of mass industrial society, have responded to plural realities and how they ought to better equip themselves to do so in response to changes in modernist assumptions.

He provides useful and detailed historical case studies of positive and negative educational choices made to address diversity within nations. These studies, which show the strong relationship between education systems and societies, are the sort that practitioners in post-conflict situations must hope will emerge to evaluate and document recent reconstruction efforts.

Through an interesting investigation, in chapter four, of decentralized educational systems in Europe (Switzerland, Belgium, and Spain), Gallagher points to the ways in which these systems have dealt with identity difference by granting differing degrees of autonomy while still hoping to maintain some sense of national unity. These “structural solutions” to difference, Gallagher concludes, “contain less than predictable consequences and depend on their own specific context” (p. 49).

From here, Gallagher turns to case studies dealing directly with conflict and difference. In some he shows the negative consequences of educational policies on society, exploring for instance, the negative impact of the National curriculum in Britain on tackling anti racism. In others Gallagher explores the processes of educational change occurring as negative social and political realities are worked against, here studies focus on overcoming apartheid in South Africa and segregation in the United States. While all of the case studies are interesting and nuanced, Gallagher’s treatment of his native Northern

Ireland in chapter nine is, possibly, the strongest. As Harber points out, “the discussion really gets into the content, processes and ethos of schooling, unlike the previous broad overview case study chapters” (Harber, 2005, p. 506). It is not surprising that it is in this chapter that Gallagher begins to lay out his concluding arguments, stating that,

... simply changing the structure of the schools does not, in itself, solve all the problems of a divided society a more pro-active approach is not only needed, but arguably the problems of a divided society will only be addressed if they are constantly and explicitly addressed (p. 130).

Having usefully shown how social changes are reflected in changing education systems, and how education systems can reinforce, change and exacerbate social realities, Gallagher argues that diversity need not lead to divisiveness. Diversity can be an excellent circumstance for the promotion of growth and cultural change. Gallagher’s conclusions are concerned with the best ways in which to harness diversity and use it to promote peaceful education systems. While the focus on ‘divided societies’ is certainly well grounded and important, Gallagher neglects analysis of other factors (such as poverty, class structures, and gender disparities that are highlighted throughout the works of Davies and the World Bank) and the complex interplay between factors that may contribute to the outbreak of conflict.

Though his method is very different from Davies’, Gallagher’s work finishes by calling for “the establishment of dialogic processes in and between inclusive institutions, providing for a range of possible futures” (p. 155). While Gallagher does not develop these ideas to the extent that Davies does with her ‘complex adaptive school’ one can imagine the conceptual similarities. Gallagher argues for a move away from faith in the nation state to create homogeneity towards education systems based upon faith in diversity. This will allow for education systems to open spaces for pupil’s creation of possible futures in heterogeneous nations.

## 5. Bridging the theory–practice gap

These three works each focus, to at least some degree, on constructing education systems that mitigate potential conflict and construct peace,

and on designing educational interventions to act as preventative measures before conflict erupts. This similarity presents a promising venue for increased dialogue between theory and practice in the area of education and conflict. It is urgent that this dialogue emerge and that the gap between theory and practice be bridged. The Afghan textbook example provides concrete evidence of this, while continued conflicts in Darfur and Iraq and brewing instability in Nepal, West Africa, and parts of the Middle East call for preventative response.

Perhaps the theory–practice gap exists primarily due to diverging answers to the question of whether educational response to conflict ought to be about reconstruction or re-creation. This may, in part, be because some key definitions often go unexamined. One promising venue for engagement of the two sides would be a discussion of the highly ambiguous (and possibly unnecessary) distinctions between prevention, humanitarian relief, re-construction, and reform.

Davies and Gallagher use theory and analysis to build strong arguments for the need to create new education systems equipped to build peace. The World Bank is certainly interested in peacebuilding, but, perhaps due to lack of evaluative work and clear programming advice, prefers to support reconstruction to get education back on a conventional development path. It is a strength of Davies work that she engages meaningfully and unapologetically with ‘fuzzy’ concepts such as ‘building consensus,’ ‘creativity,’ ‘agency,’ and ‘peace education’ itself. That Gallagher begins with structural analysis and concludes with classroom agency is striking. However, theorists must offer tangible, practical bridges towards ideas for reform such as ‘interruptive democracy’ and ‘dialogic relationships’ if the sincerity of the Bank’s interest in peace education is to be tested. The critique that the World Bank includes such concepts simply as rhetoric rings hollow if efforts have not been made by theorists to offer guidance on their potential implementation.

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