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Textbook content as a symptom of deeper struggles: A '4Rs' framework to analyze education in conflict-affected situations

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ABSTRACT
Education content matters but cannot be understood in isolation from its historical, socio-cultural, political and economic contexts. In this text, we discuss the '4Rs' framework that we have designed as an analytical tool that allows researchers, policy-developers and practitioners to grasp the interconnected dimensions that shape and drive education systems, practices and outcomes. The framework's central normative position is that inequalities and injustice (including within the education system) are important for understanding the reasons for the outbreak of violent conflict (the drivers of conflict) and that addressing inequalities (including in education) is necessary to bring about sustainable peace and overcome the legacies of conflict. Drawing on examples from the case of Myanmar, we illustrate how when applying the framework to look at the peacebuilding potential and pitfalls of education content, the four dimensions of the framework are closely interconnected, and can work in support or in tension with each other. We see the 4Rs as a small contribution to the collective endeavor of building theoretically informed, but practically accessible tools to support better education policy and practice in conflict-affected contexts.

KEYWORDS
sustainable peace, social justice, textbook content

Content matters, but cannot be understood in isolation

> 'Our heroes are their enemies and our enemies are their heroes'
> (Mon ethnic teacher in Myanmar, quoted in Maber et al, 2019: 132)

Educational content and textbooks are critical elements in processes of nation- and peace-building. For example, there is a legacy of control over textbooks by the military state for purposes of state building in the context of Myanmar (Salem-Gervais and Metro, 2012). Recent research highlights how in the segregated schooling system in Myanmar, teachers in both government schools and so-called (non-government-led) ethnic schools equally struggle with the partisan nature of their respective prescribed history curricula (for more details and background information on the context of Myanmar, please see Maber et al, 2019). History textbooks used in government schools are perceived to be 'Burman-centric' by ethnic minorities, while 'ethnonationalist organizations that run schools aspire to teach children the history of their own ethnic group as opposed to the history of Burma as a whole' (Metro, 2013: 150). As the quote above by a Mon ethnic teacher illustrates, historical narratives as presented in textbooks can work to establish a process of 'othering', which establishes a set of protagonist and antagonist actors in contemporary national discourse.

To develop a more complete understanding of what 'history content' means for processes of social cohesion in societies, we need to analyze the sector and broader socio-political and economic systems within which that educational practice is situated. Education content cannot be understood in isolation from its historical, socio-cultural, political and economic contexts. In other words, we need to take into consideration various layers of complexities of—in this case—Myanmar's segregated education system, the existence of multiple (history) curricula and systems of teacher training, the historical context of military domination and

diverse oppositional movements in which the education landscape has been shaped and utilized and the current socio-political and economic panorama. In order to conduct such research, we developed the 4Rs framework as an attempt to design an analytical tool that allows researchers, policy-developers and practitioners alike to grasp the interconnected dimensions that shape and drive education sectors, its practices and societal outcomes.

Why we developed the 4Rs framework

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition both of the importance of working in conflict-affected contexts and of the increasing evidence for the very particular effects of conflict on educational access and quality and vice versa—the importance of education in driving conflicts or building peaceful societies (Smith, 2005; Novelli and Lopes Cardozo, 2008). This has also led to an interest in understanding the particularities of the educational challenges faced in conflict-affected contexts and to a growing recognition that policymakers, donors and practitioners working in the education sector in conflict-affected contexts are faced with huge and distinct challenges and priorities requiring new and innovative ways of funding, planning, governing and evaluating education policy interventions (Davies, 2009). As a result of this rising interest and growing field of education in emergencies (EiE), the literature on education and conflict has expanded greatly over the last decade (Bush and Saltarelli 2000, Smith and Vaux 2003, Davies 2004, Novelli, 2014). There is also interest in better understanding the relationship between education, conflict and peace and the way education systems might become more conflict-sensitive (Smith, 2010; Novelli & Smith, 2012). Linked to this is interest in political economy research in the sector and a mushrooming of political economy tools to facilitate policy development and planning (Novelli et al, 2014).

The 4Rs framework was developed with colleagues from the University of Sussex, University of Amsterdam and Ulster

University (Novelli, Lopes Cardozo & Smith, 2017) and has been applied in research in various conflict-affected contexts (Pakistan, Rwanda, South Sudan, Kenya, Myanmar, Uganda, Rwanda, Sri Lanka and South Africa) to examine educational governance and policy in relation to education, conflict and peace. The framework's central normative position is that inequalities and injustice (including within the education system) are important for understanding the reasons for the outbreak of civil wars (the drivers of conflict) and that addressing inequalities (including in education) is necessary to bring about sustainable peace and overcome the legacies of conflict. By 'sustainable peace' we refer to a situation where both negative peace—or a cessation of violence—and positive peace—addressing the underpinning drivers of conflict—are addressed.

Building on Nancy Fraser's (2005) work, we position the potentially transformative role education can play as inherently connected to and embedded in processes of social justice and societal transformation. Fraser, a philosopher by training who brings (but is not limited to) a critical feminist perspective, asserts that a socially just society would entail 'parity of participation.' She argues further that, to ensure 'participation on a par with others, as full partners in social interaction' (73), one should adopt the economic solution of redistributing resources and opportunities and include sociocultural remedies for better recognition and political representation. When reflecting on inequalities, and inspired by Fraser's work, we had a strong sense that we needed to go beyond the economic dimension of societal injustices.

For this reason, we drew on a version of Fraser's theory of social justice, exploring educational inequalities more broadly in terms of *redistribution*, *recognition* and *representation* (Fraser 1995; 2005). In our understanding of these concepts they were linked respectively to economic inequalities related to the funding and management of education (*redistribution)*; inequalities and injustices related to cultural representation and misrecognition (*recognition);* and finally, inequalities linked to participation and democratic deficits in the

governance and management of education (*representation)*. These three 'Rs' helped us to explore different dimensions of educational inequalities (economic, cultural and political) as drivers of conflict in education. We then added a fourth R (*reconciliation)*, which allowed us to explore not only the potential drivers of conflict, but also the legacies of conflict and how education might bring communities together through processes of healing and psycho-social interventions and transitional justice (truth, justice and reparations).

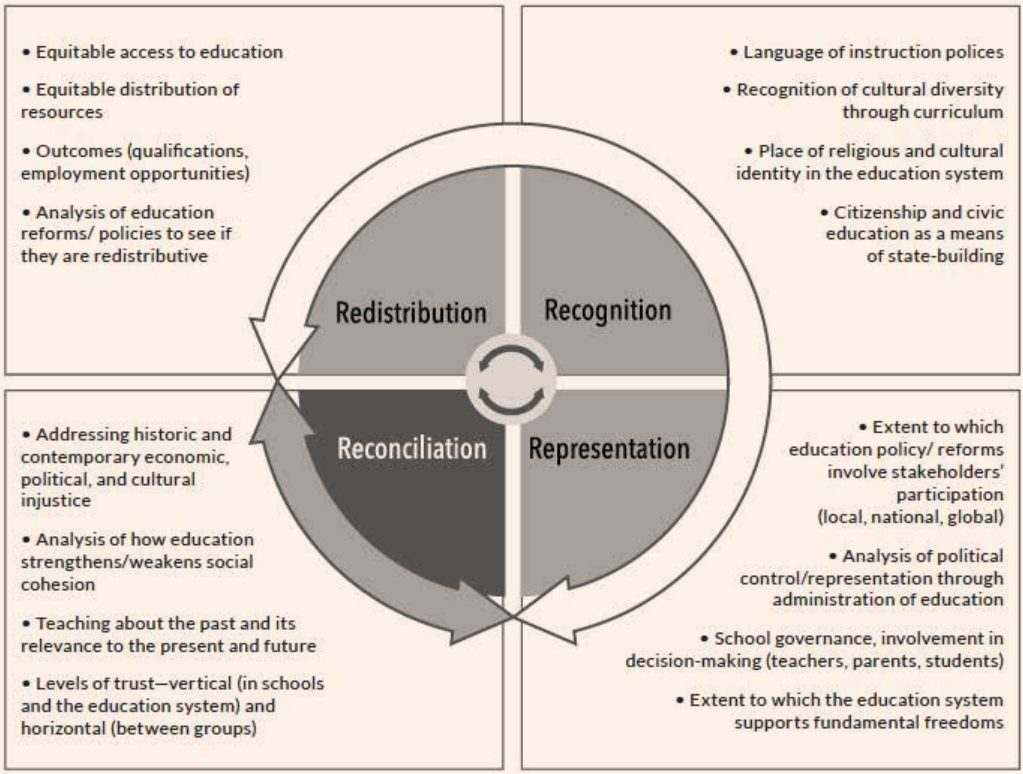

Figure 1: Sustainable Peacebuilding in Education: The 4Rs Analytical Framework

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Source: Novelli, Lopes Cardozo & Smith, 2017

We believe that there is a dialectical relationship between the drivers of conflict and the legacies of conflict, and that we need to reflect carefully on the balance between addressing inequalities and developing processes that build trust within and between communities affected by conflict. That is to say, a political discussion is needed to balance the needs of historically marginalized communities who demand reforms to redress inequalities and the need for policies to be inclusive of both victims and perpetrators who would need to live side by side and reconstruct new relationships out of the violence and pain of war. The 4Rs approach thus allowed us to develop a theoretically informed heuristic device to explore the multi-dimensional ways that education systems might (re)produce or reduce educational and societal inequalities, and in so doing undermine or promote sustainable peace and development in and through education.

As with much of the work in our field of inquiry, we sought to develop a tool that was policy-relevant but informed by ideals of promoting peace with social justice–which we continue to believe is the only way that long-term sustainable peace can be achieved in countries affected by conflict. We developed the 4Rs approach as a heuristic device to support the process of design, data collection and analysis in order to reflect on the dilemmas and contradictions inherent in supporting the positive role that education might play in conflict-affected contexts. Our aim is that this framework becomes a diagnostic tool that will spark a dialogue among key stakeholders and be adapted in ways relevant to different cultural, political, and economic contexts (see Figure 1).

While we view this analytical approach and its application as a constant work in progress, it already allows for a much sharper focus on the complex ways that inequalities within education, in their multiple and varied manifestations, might be linked to drivers of conflict. Furthermore, it allows us to go beyond the narrow 'access' and 'quality' debates prevalent in the field of education and international development–both from a human capital and

a rights-based perspective–and to reflect more holistically on the relationship of education systems to economic, social, cultural and political development processes and to the production of inequalities that fuel the grievances that often drive conflicts. Viewing education as being an integral part of a living ecosystem encourages an analysis that accounts for the spatio- and temporal specificities (in other words, time and space matter when designing research and interventions). It invites us to reflect backward, inward, outward and forward, directing attention to imagining sustainable and peaceful futures that take seriously the material and discursive challenges at multiple levels.

Recognizing the tensions within and between social justice and reconciliation

In keeping with Fraser's line of thought, while the dimensions of the 4Rs are separated for analytical purposes, they are actually closely interlinked. We also need to acknowledge how internal relations between these 'Rs' can be reinforcing or conflictive. If we briefly return to the earlier example on Myanmar, recognizing formerly-excluded ethnic languages in education and redistributing resources to train teachers and develop textbooks and educational content to enhance this process could lead to greater representation of ethnic minority graduates in decision-making positions at the school governance level or in political positions. However, opening up to diverse languages also might hinder the reconciliation process, as some minority languages might be included as a language of instruction while others are not, thus creating resentment among various groups of students. This is particularly a concern in a context like Myanmar, where education service provision has been on the table at various levels of peace talks between government and non-government parties (Maber, 2019).

Similarly, addressing and redressing inequalities that drive conflicts is not necessarily a win–win process. Previous or current

dominant social groups might feel threatened by redistributive policies that seek to rebalance societal privileges in favor of oppressed groups. This is where tensions might emerge between those who want to emphasize social justice and those who seek to emphasize peace and reconciliation. For example, while treating everyone the same—for example, by equalizing the per capita education spending on all children might work as a mechanism for 'reconciliation' where all citizens feel they are being treated the same regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender etc—this equality of treatment in a highly unequal society might inadvertently reproduce the historical inequalities that underpin social injustice. Such an approach to education policy might give the illusion of change without any real transformation.

Applying the 4Rs to analyze the relation between education and peacebuilding

So, what does this analytical framework mean in terms of examining the relationships between education, armed conflict and peace, whether in research projects or when designing or reviewing policy-related or programmatic work? Sustainable peacebuilding should not be conceptualized just as a means 'to' education (access) but also 'in and through' education. It should consider how teaching and learning processes and outcomes can reproduce certain (socioeconomic, cultural, and political) inequalities (Keddie, 2012) and thus can stand in the way of, or reinforce, processes of reconciliation and foster education's negative, or positive, face (Bush and Saltarelli, 2000).

We also see the 4Rs model as a possible approach to designing and structuring research and programs, whereby starting from a comprehensive 4Rs-inspired context-and-conflict analysis informs the choices made. The 4Rs framework has also been applied to analyze and examine the way specific interventions positively or negatively impact sustainable peace outcomes on various fronts, for instance in the cases of Myanmar, Kenya, Pakistan, South

Sudan, South Africa and Uganda, in the context of the Research Consortium on Education and Peacebuilding[1]. To do justice to education's full potential, the model aims to move away from narrow technical approaches to understanding, designing, and implementing education in conflict-affected regions, and toward a model that allows for the examination of and positive engagement with a wider range of conflict drivers and legacies.

Moving beyond a focus on textbooks

A number of important aspects emerge when exploring the four interrelated Rs. The affirmation and recognition of learners' diversity and everyone's learning needs in educational processes, structures, and content can be referred to as 'curricular justice' (Connell 2012). This aspect of recognition is strongly related to the redistributive aspect of equal opportunities and outcomes for children and youth of different groups in society. The structure and content that feed into pedagogical processes are again connected to both reconciliation (e.g., if and how history is taught or if attitudinal change is part of an educational initiative) and representation (e.g., whether learners are made aware of their various rights and responsibilities as citizens, and if, how and why (certain) political and conflict-related issues are discussed or negated). Issues around representation extend further into the actual 'equitable participation' of various stakeholders, including teachers, students, youth, parents, and community members of all genders at the grassroots level. This can be illustrated with examples from Myanmar and Pakistan derived from studies conducted in the context of the Research Consortium on Education and Peacebuilding. In interviews with ethnic minority students in Myanmar, they expressed their frustration at a curriculum that did not recognize their

1 For all outputs of the Research Consortium on Education and Peacebuilding, see https://educationanddevelopment.wordpress.com/rp/research-consortium-education-and-peacebuilding/

particular historical traditions and failed to incorporate diverse perspectives. Such youth responses were not only linked to the nature of the content, but also to the pedagogical processes through which such subjects were taught. Myanmar ethnic minority youth emphatically called for approaches that were less teacher-led, lecture based and authoritarian and which gave them opportunities to do their own research and express and develop their own views within a more participatory approach (Higgins et al., 2016: 56). In Pakistan, the research team noted that 'when students are able to engage in activity based learning and are exposed to alternative historical narratives they develop a relatively open and critical understanding of history' (Durrani et al., 2016: 177).

The actual decision-making power over education is often related to the allocation, use, and (re)distribution of human and material resources (Young, 2006; Robertson and Dale, 2013). Especially in conflict-affected societies, an important aspect of redistribution is for all students to have equal access to a safe journey *to* and *through* their learning environment. Finally, and connecting all intersecting dimensions of recognition, representation, redistribution and reconciliation, the inclusion of all students—regardless of age, gender, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, race, language, class, among others—requires a genuine and long-term commitment by both government and non-government actors to encourage and support formerly marginalized or disadvantaged youth in their educational and (early) professional careers.

Theory-building in process: implications and suggestions

In this short piece, we have shared the 4Rs analytical framework, calling for a peace with social justice and reconciliation approach to education systems affected by violent conflict. While aspects of the model are potentially relevant across different contexts, it must be tailored to the specific needs of each area of research or

intervention. This will allow researchers and practitioners alike to produce high-quality, relevant understanding of the challenges, roles, and possibilities of education's contribution to promoting sustainable peace. As highlighted at the start of this text, the 4Rs framework acknowledges the crucial nature of textbooks and education content in terms of both its transformative and reconciliatory potential, as well as its potential to reproduce negative stereotypes and harmful perceptions. In doing so, the 4Rs framing situates and scrutinizes the role of educational content and curricula as part of a multidimensional, social justice-oriented analysis.

We are conscious that, like any research tool, it is the skill of the researcher(s) that will determine whether its application is powerful enough to capture the complex interactions between the different Rs. We are also aware that the research is grounded in sufficient depth and knowledge of the particular historical, political, economic, social and cultural conditions of the research context. We therefore hope the 4Rs framework is treated as a starting point for critical reflection rather than a normative and simplistic endpoint.

We hope to refine, develop, sharpen, and transform the framework so it can more accurately reflect the combined knowledge that emerges from ongoing research processes in academia, practice and policy fields.

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