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Rethinking the state and education in conflict-affected contexts

a co-constructed auto-ethnography of supportive mentorship and academic friendship

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DOI
10.3726/b17213

Publication date
2020

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
Education, Globalisation and the State

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Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Shah, R., & Lopes Cardozo, M. (2020). Rethinking the state and education in conflict-affected contexts: a co-constructed auto-ethnography of supportive mentorship and academic friendship. In X. Bonal, E. Coxon, M. Novelli, & A. Verger (Eds.), *Education, Globalisation and the State: Essays in Honour of Roger Dale* (pp. 95-106). (Global Studies in Education; Vol. 38). Peter Lang. https://doi.org/10.3726/b17213

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Download date:08 Nov 2026

Edited by Xavier Bonal, Eve Coxon,
Mario Novelli and Antoni Verger

Education, Globalisation and the State

Essays in Honour of Roger Dale

PETER LANG
New York • Bern • Berlin
Brussels • Vienna • Oxford • Warsaw

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Dale, Roger, honoree. | Bonal, Xavier, editor. | Coxon, Eve, editor. | Novelli, Mario, editor. | Verger, Antoni, editor.
Title: Education, globalisation and the state: essays in honour of Roger Dale / [edited by] Xavier Bonal, Eve Coxon, Mario Novelli, Antoni Verger.
Description: New York: Peter Lang, 2020.
Series: Global studies in education; vol. 38 | ISSN 2153-330X
Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2020021065 (print) | LCCN 2020021066 (ebook)
ISBN 978-1-4331-8165-8 (hardback) | ISBN 978-1-4331-8162-7 (ebook pdf)
ISBN 978-1-4331-8163-4 (epub) | ISBN 978-1-4331-8164-1 (mobi)
Subjects: LCSH: Education and state. | Education and globalization. | Dale, Roger.
Classification: LCC LC71 .E299 2020 (print) | LCC LC71 (ebook) | DDC 379—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2020021065
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2020021066
DOI 10.3726/b17213

Bibliographic information published by **Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek**.
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the "Deutsche Nationalbibliografie"; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at http://dnb.d-nb.de/.

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council of Library Resources.

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80 Broad Street, 5th floor, New York, NY 10004
www.peterlang.com

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Printed in the United States of America

10. Rethinking the State and Education in Conflict-Affected Contexts:

A Co-Constructed Auto-Ethnography of Supportive Mentorship and Academic Friendship

Ritesh Shah and Mieke Lopes Cardozo

A Prelude

The relationship between education and the state is a complex one in the context of conflict-affected contexts. Conflict itself, and education's function within it, is often mediated and influenced by a range of political, cultural, social and economic interests and dynamics, embedded in local, national, regional and global struggles over power and influence. Because of this, Roger Dale's education questions and his criticism of educationalist, methodologically nationalist and methodologically statist approaches to understanding the role, function and position of education in relation to its citizens, are particularly relevant. In such contexts, competing interests, actors and agendas complexify education's mandate and function in society, and result in an education system that is often both emblematic and constitutive of the cultural political economy of the conflict itself.

In this short piece, we seek to highlight the contributions which Roger Dale's scholarship has made to our own understanding of these dynamics in conflict-affected contexts. While Dale himself has not done empirical work in such contexts, his theories and ideas have had a significant impact on the way a legion of critical scholars—ourselves included—have come to understand and interrogate the relationship between education and the state in times of conflict and crisis.

As a form of writing, we have chosen to include a conversational style of co-constructed critical auto-ethnography, a method that carries roots in critical theory, critical pedagogy and critical race study, a well-suited method given the ontological anchors of our own and Dale's scholarship (Cann & DeMeulenaere, 2012). This approach allows us to highlight the affective dimensions of Dale's, and Susan Robertson's, supportive, personalised and generous mentorship, and the influences it has had on our own approaches to writing and working together as colleagues and friends. In terms of a structure for our piece, we move between parts we have written individually (labelled as either 'Mieke' or 'Ritesh'), and collectively (labelled as 'Us'). These pieces are not necessarily chronological, but rather highlight how Dale's scholarship has influenced our work within the area of education, conflict and peacebuilding. Our narrative begins in the middle of the last decade.

Recounting Our Stories: The Influence of Dale's Ideas and Approaches

Ritesh: My first meeting with Roger occurred in 2005 when, as a Fulbright Scholar from the United States, I was studying New Zealand's approach to decentralising its education system in the late 1980s, known as Tomorrow's Schools. By the time I met Roger, I was feeling deflated and demoralised by what I had discovered in New Zealand—namely that such reforms had not managed to deliver on the promise of greater community control and voice over education provision, but rather just shouldered responsibility (and blame for failure) onto the shoulders of local schools. What I didn't understand at the time, but did after reading one of his key writings on education and the state (Dale, 1997), was how Tomorrow's Schools was part of a broader crisis of the welfare state, in which its legitimacy and function were increasingly challenged by global and local forces aiming to usurp its authority and mandate. At the same time, it was Roger who reminded me that we shouldn't become disenfranchised by the absolutism of the neoliberal narrative, and that the neoliberal experiment also offered up opportunities for alternative narratives and opportunities, in line with the thinking of scholars like Gibson-Graham (2006) and Santos (2005). It was Roger who encouraged me to explore the context of Latin America, and particularly Venezuela under Hugo Chavez. Later, it was Roger who introduced me to other scholars who were also exploring the changing role of the state in education, and particularly what this might mean for contexts affected by various forms of conflict or crisis. It was through Roger, in 2007, that Mieke and I managed to meet

at the World Council of Comparative Education Studies in Sarajevo . . . and well, the journey has continued since.

Mieke: I also remember very well the first time we met, which was also when I first met Roger and Susan, in Sarajevo in 2007. It was also the first academic conference for both of us, and it was great to be able to navigate such a big event, and to explore an incredibly fascinating city together. It is just much more pleasant to attend panel sessions, go to receptions and to explore the unique historical surroundings of the place with a 'partner in crime', something which we continue to do up to date. I was there to present a paper that I wrote together with Mario Novelli, my PhD supervisor; because Mario was not there I felt quite nervous about the presentation especially because this chapter was aiming to set out a new, critical research agenda for a still relatively new academic field at that time: education, conflict and peacebuilding. The work of Roger Dale was central to the way in which we started to situate this as a field with a 'complex and highly unequal system of local, national, regional and global actors, institutions and practices' (Novelli & Lopes Cardozo, 2008, p. 483).

Us: The work in that and subsequent chapters and articles we worked on individually and collectively was inspired by Roger's engagement with the work of critical theorists (e.g. Cox & Sinclair, 1996; Sayer, 2000) who argue that research should question and challenge conditions perceived to be hegemonic in a quest for social transformation. In the field of education, conflict and peacebuilding, this includes a thorough analysis and understanding of the root causes of conflict, and how these impact on or are impacted by education. In adopting this approach, the aim was to challenge what Dale and Robertson (2009) later coined 'educationalist' thinking in education—which sees all problems within education as internal to the education system itself—rather than noting its position within broader social structures and institutions within conflict-affected environments. This leads to a situation where the underlying root causes of conflict—which often sit outside the education system—remain understudied and unaddressed (see Shah & Lopes Cardozo, 2015). Through this work, we have sought to better understand how both micro and meso level conditions within classrooms, schools and communities intersect with the wider cultural political economy of society to reproduce or transform past injustices and produce variegated forms of peace—negative or positive (see Galtung, 1990). Later on, this work was extended through our engagement in the UNICEF–funded research consortium on education and peacebuilding in which a large team of researchers, many influenced or shaped by Rogers's work, sought to better understand this relationship through in-depth research across a range of conflict-affected

contexts.[1] Out of that work came the development of the 4R's framework which combines dimensions of recognition, redistribution and representation (Fraser, 2005), and adds reconciliation to explore what sustainable peacebuilding might look like through a social justice lens. Rather than claiming to be a fixed theoretical model, and employing a critical cultural political economy perspective (which we discuss below), the 4Rs approach is designed as a heuristic device that promotes a dialogue among key stakeholders on the dilemmas and challenges in the field of education in emergencies, while highlighting the need for locally embedded interpretations (Novelli, Lopes Cardozo, & Smith, 2017).

Mieke: This brings me to reflect a little on Roger's support for the choice and design of my PhD study in Bolivia. While some senior colleagues in the (then still emerging) field of education and conflict actually advised against my choice to work in Bolivia (as it is supposedly not directly 'conflict-affected'), I felt greatly supported by Roger who immediately recognised the unique nature of Bolivia's cultural, economic and political trajectory of (desired) social transformations, which culminated in the design of a 'revolutionary and decolonising' education reform (Lopes Cardozo, 2011). I also remember very well Roger's support to engage in longer-term critical forms of ethnography—from an understanding that fieldwork always changes theory, and that theory evolves through fieldwork. Following Roger's encouraging attitude, Susan's generous support during the design and early analytical stages of my work on Bolivia during her research sabbatical at the University of Amsterdam led me to engage with questions like what is the 'social contract' for education; at its simplest, what does society give to and expect from education? through what 'logic of intervention' does education work; how does it seek to deliver on its part of the social contract? Whenever Ritesh and I got a chance to meet and talk about both of our respective PhD projects, often at those international conferences, I remember how our conversations circled around these questions and left us both feeling we needed to put teacher's roles at the centre. The following quote from Benardo, a senior teacher trainer whom I got to know during my time in Bolivia, illustrates how we came to understand that teachers are often consciously, and sometimes unconsciously, crossing the bridges that make up the social contract, between the state, various populations groups and their demands in society, and the collectives (unions) in which teachers themselves are organised:

> Education does not belong to God, nor Aristotle or Karl Marx. Education belongs to the population, it is a social issue, an issue of social change, against discrimination and racism. Education is like oxygen. It allows me to live well (vivir bien). (Lopes Cardozo, 2011, p. 215)

Ritesh: If we fast forward to another conference, that of the Comparative and International Societies meeting in Montreal in 2011, I remember your stress and anxiety as you sought to finish your thesis, and also think about the next steps in your career. At that time, for me, I was sitting uneasy with competing ways of understanding and thinking through what I had observed in Timor-Leste as part of my PhD, and particularly the ways in which teachers were navigating and understanding their role(s) in a society which has emerged quite rapidly and violently out of a long struggle of occupation and conflict. I remember you encouraged me to look at the Strategic Relational Approach (Hay, 2002; Jessop, 2005), which formed a foundation for your own thesis in Bolivia. Shortly after, Roger was in Auckland, and we discussed critical realism at length. This eventually led me back to Hay and the strategic relational approach which have very much formed the foundation for my later thinking and writing in the area of education and conflict with you.

Us: We started to more actively work together in 2011, when we presented together on our respective doctoral research from Bolivia and Timor-Leste at a seminar in September 2011 in Amsterdam, organised in collaboration with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In our presentation and initial draft of our first joint paper, we argued that teachers can either be ideologically aligned with or resistant to an educational reform, but that there is always a dialectic between teachers and the structures they work in. In order for teachers to be transformative actors, we discussed, they need space to manoeuvre and genuine levels of support and training within the broader strategic selective context. At the same time, we argued that teachers may or may not always be aware of the structures they operate in—within and beyond the education system itself (Shah & Lopes Cardozo, 2016).

In this work, we were influenced by Roger and Susan Roberston's work to unpack the 'black box' on the nature of education and globalisation and to better understand the mechanisms by which what we see is affected by a range of factors which are occurring, but may not always be visible in practice—in line with a critical realist approach. For example, Roger's 1999 piece on Globalisation's Effects on National Policy identified five key dimensions on which the mechanisms associated with globalisation might function differently to traditional mechanisms of policy transfer. They are: (1) the scope of the mechanisms; (2) the locus of viability; (3) the mode of power employed through the mechanism; (4) the initiating source of the policy change and (5) the nature of the parties of exchange. It was here where the concepts of power, scale and locus of control were made quite clear. For conflict-affected contexts which we've worked in either individually or jointly—such as Aceh, Timor-Leste, Sri Lanka, Mynamar, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey—these

issues were quite critical, particularly when it came to the geopolitics of decision-making and power. As our friend and mentor Mario Novelli (a mentee of Roger) observes, 'conflict and its resolution is shaped by a range of structures, institutions and agents that operate below, around, above and beyond the nation-state (local government, national state, neighbour states, regional agreements, supranational bodies, other nation-states)' (2011, p. 7). What we've sought to do is understand both the discursive and material manifestations of this in the work and lives of educational actors working and living in these contexts.

Mieke: We had good role models such as Roger Dale and Susan Robertson, but also many of their former students and colleagues (and our supervisors) such as Mario Novelli, Eve Coxon, Xavier Bonal who showed that critically challenging one another, and shaking things up a little, can go hand in hand with building academic collaborations and friendships. Speaking of shaking things up in academia, this is exactly what I felt Roger managed to do in our department of Geography, Planning and International Development Studies when he was invited to give a lecture for Mario Novelli's farewell, in August 2010. Roger focused his speech on the concept of 'retroduction'. In his own words, the 'Basic argument is that "Education and Conflict" is framed materially by a structurally-inscribed strategic selectivity based on neoliberal hegemony, and discursively by the "tools of modernity" (ism)'. He argued for the need to look into, 'what crucial elements of the retroduced history are ignored in these accounts, and what they assume about the nature of present practices'. While several colleagues felt that Roger's contribution was way too conceptual and not connected closely enough to Mario's work, I remember that Mario and I felt that Roger's lecture was spot on. It helped to further engage with a critical realist exploration of retroduction, or the tracing back of real phenomena in the field of education and conflict, to understand the underlying mechanisms that cause a situation to unfold, or 'fail forward', in Roger's words (Personal notes, 31-08-2010). On another panel at Amsterdam in September 2011, Roger argued, in unison with Mario Novelli, that policy makers have grown dependent on the agendas of bigger nations and dominant institutions such as the World Bank. Development reports published by such institutions are then seen as the most reliable authority in the field, yet they fail to articulate alternative views to the economic growth model.

Us: These interventions by Roger, in our view featured varying forms of his important 'education questions'—about the nature of education practice, education politics, the politics of education and the level of outcomes (Dale, 2000, 2005). They have helped us to separate out and understand education's many faces as a sector and system and have influenced the way in which both

of us have shaped our respective individual, and later on collective, work on education, conflict and peacebuilding. Specifically, the politics of education—namely how an agenda for education is established in the post-conflict/post-disaster moment—as well as the moment of educational politics in which this agenda is translated into problems and issues for policy and practice (Dale, 2005, pp. 139–141), are particularly useful analytical lenses that help to understand the education ensemble in contexts of conflict, including our joint research projects in Aceh (2014, 2016a) and later on our work in Myanmar (2019). Additionally, in thinking specifically about the moment of the politics of education, Dale and Robertson (2009) compel us to think beyond the state level, and consider how other actors such as private agencies, international organisations and local institutions are increasingly involved in such dynamics. To avoid what they identify as 'methodological nationalism', there is a need to explore the relationships between the various scales, spaces and levels of educational decision-making and policy production. The intent of our application of Dale's thinking in our various research projects is that it allows us to move away from state-centric and educationalist accounts, by acknowledging the important role and function that the interplay between social, cultural, political and economic structures, institutions and actors at multiple levels has in efforts to build a lasting peace through education.

In the highly complex contexts that we have worked in together to date, Dale's questions (2005) remain an important tool for analysing: (1) how education is both a reflection of and contributor to past, present and future social relations, experiences, and practices (the cultural); (2) the ways in which education fits into existing relations of production, distribution and exchange in society (the economic); and (3) how and by whom education's purpose, role and function in society has and is being determined and governed (the political) in such contexts. Rather than presenting an evolutionary or consensual process of change, educational policy production, reproduction, modification and adaptation become located within highly contested projects of state, nation and region building. This more critical perspective helps us begin to understand the context, political will, and motivations of various actors involved in education projects in conflict-affected states. It allows us to see the many faces education has in relation to conflict and fragility. As Bush and Saltarelli (2000) identified, a critical and comparative historiography should be at the basis of any education system aiming to foster its positive face. What Roger's work has done is to help to better: (1) articulate a multi-scalar relationship that recognises both external and internal factors and their dynamic inter-relationship in the production and resolution of conflict in education; (2) capture the dynamics of education and peacebuilding

interventions, including the divergent interests and practices that these are part of; (3) ground analysis in an explicit understanding of the historical basis on which existing discursive and material settlements within society have or were formed and (4) provide a method for closely interrogating how actors construct and act on the 'crisis' created by conflict, and the ways in which educational discourses, structures and institutions are (re)constructed in the post-conflict moment.

Inherent in using these approaches is a move away from the post-structural turn, which assumes a flat ontology (Collinge, 2006), and towards forms of analysis which reveals the mechanisms and relations between the realms of the political, economic and cultural, as well as between structures and agents. Here, the critical engagements of Robertson and Dale (2013) with social justice and education also led us to develop a conceptual paper (2016) where we bring the work of feminist scholar Nancy Fraser on social justice into conversation with our growing conceptual thinking on how we could go about studying education's contribution to education and peacebuilding. This work was taken up more broadly and further developed within the research consortium on education and peacebuilding (Novelli et al., 2017).

Mieke: I look back on our work (so far) in Aceh with a mix of retrospective courage, as well as a sense of wonder, mostly driven by a doubt if we managed to grasp the incredible complexities that characterise the context of Aceh: its long history and strong sense of Acehnese identity—as opposed to an Indonesian identity—and consequent conflict and resistance movements against colonial and later Indonesian central government domination; the highly religious context in which Shari'a law is practised and influences the way in which gendered norms and values are embedded in society at large; the way in which multiple education systems are governed by religious and secular state and non-state actors, leading to a complex system where clarity over who rules, who funds and who decides is highly in-transparent; and a context where after the devastating effects of the tsunami in 2004, and the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between the formerly warring parties in 2005, a second 'tsunami of aid and reconstruction workers' came (as one of our research participants described), and also left—after about a decade of 'development and building back better'.

I also remember vividly how in this complex context, during our first fieldwork trip, we were driving back in a *tuktuk* (autorickshaw) from an interview with an international donor, and I felt very frustrated. We stopped along the roadside to buy and eat some Manggis (Mangosteen fruits), with you always being very mindful of what my digestive system might and might not accept, and I think I blurted out that 'in the next interview I am not going

to sit quietly anymore —didn't you notice that in all of our interviews so far, I am not even looked at and I need to really try hard to even get some space to actually pose a question or say something?' You looked at me somewhat surprised, and a bit shocked, and I could see you felt bad for not really having noticed this—perhaps subtle, but in my experience very strongly felt—unequal treatment of me as a female and you as a male researcher. At least, that was how we then together started to interpret this situation, and I was very relieved by your support. You suggested that in all of the next interviews or meetings we would engage in, I would go first and introduce us and our team as the coordinating researcher (which, according to the funding we secured, was also bureaucratically the case), which helped a little—even if it was for my own sense of being heard.

Ritesh: I've always appreciated and valued your Dutch directness, something which is not very common in Antipodean culture! What sticks out for me from that time in Aceh, and our work since, is how important that experience was for us in introducing the 'cultural' turn in our own intellectual journey, and the ways it is helping us to (re)construct and read conflict-affected settings in different ways. I see this is shaped by our introduction into what Robertson and Dale (2015) called the Critical Cultural Political Economy of Education (CCPEE) approach. One of the key things about the framing and positioning of this most recent evolution of Roger's work is that it aims to bring culture back into conversation with political economy analyses. At the same time, this work was also a recognition that there are a variety of cultural, political and economic projects at work, often simultaneously, and in contestation to exhibit hegemonic control in what Roger has often called competing 'civilisational projects'. In my most recent work in the Middle East this has become readily apparent. I've come to see how the varied responses to the Syrian refugee crisis in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria are shaped by cultural politics embedded in different strands of Islam, local and regional geopolitics, and the tensions about what kind of state and society is, has been and is currently being rendered. Within this, the provision (or lack thereof) of education to Syrian refugees affords a ring-side seat in observing how these struggles play out.

Mieke: Since the invitation by Roger and Susan to join a series of panels at the Comparative and International Education Societies (CIES) Conference in Toronto in 2014 to look at the work that they termed the 'four moments' of CCPEE (Robertson & Dale, 2015), I have continuously integrated this line of thinking into my research, supervision and teaching. In the case of Aceh, together with an incredible team of (all female, and primarily Acehnese) scholars, we aimed to bring CCPEE into conversation with critical feminist

perspectives, in order to better understand the creative and seemingly silent, yet sometimes truly transformational, forms of female education leaders' agency for peace (Lopes Cardozo & Srimulyani, 2018). Following a critical realist ontology, CCPEE helped us to see how not all of what goes on in any education ensemble is visible. As a result, our explanations of education ensembles need to take into account those mechanisms and processes that are not observable, but which have real effects, which brings us back to the earlier mentioned concept of retroduction.

Some Concluding Auto-Ethnographic Reflections

Us: The co-constructed story we write here in a way feels like retroductively trying to understand the unique and far reaching impact Roger's thinking and way of working has had on our own academic journeys so far. His work has reminded us of the serious need for proper historical analyses of the (cultural, political and economic) drivers of conflict, and how these were or are connected to educational processes.

Mieke: In my presentation in Barcelona at a seminar celebrating the research and work of Roger in September 2017, I talked about how being mentored by him felt like experiencing the art of Dutch artist Escher—as both inspiration and a need to look beyond what seems visible to the eye. Particularly Escher's depiction of an old castle with stairs flowing up and down in seemingly incomprehensible ways, to me seemed to work as a metaphor of understanding the complexities, and often invisible mechanisms and moments, that constitute what Robertson and Dale (2015) label as the 'education ensemble'. I am deeply grateful to witness the ways in which Roger has shaped his academic work, collaborations and mentorship with integrity, generosity and commitment. In doing so, he inspires us to live and support others and newer generations to stand up against the growing individualising and dehumanising tendencies within education systems, including our own institutes, and imagine alternative and more socially just futures.

Ritesh: One of the things I've come to realise is how there is an entire family tree of intellectuals who have sprung from the roots of Roger's thinking and scholarship. The two of us, along with others like Mario Novelli, have created a branch off that tree focused on the particularities of education in conflict and crisis. Now, this branch is spawning new offshoots and permutations, many of them our own doctoral students who are taking these intellectual traditions and extending them in exciting and novel new ways.

Note

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

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