Understanding the education-war interface

by Lynn Davies

There is an urgent need to improve understanding of education's role in contributing to conflict. The Birmingham International Education Security Index is an attempt to generate qualitative and quantitative indicators to assess the contribution of education to human security/insecurity

Schooling potentially contributes to conflict by reproducing or hardening inequality, exclusion, social polarisation, ethnic/religious identities, aggressive masculinity, fear and militarism. Schools may legitimate inequality and act to suppress action to challenge it. Schools engage in 'war education' through supporting or condoning physical and symbolic violence and fostering cycles of revenge and punishment.

Schools need to challenge fundamentalist beliefs by teaching alternative realities and encouraging students to develop secure identities. Schools must be enabled to improve skills in political analysis and to gain confidence to teach about conflict. In order to help them do so, we have been preparing a typology of how war and peace are taught. It is a continuum of ten modes, some of which contribute to negative conflict, some appear neutral and some contribute to positive conflict.

The extreme poles both represent an 'active' approach and the middle a more passive one.

Moving down the negative pole:

1. The 'hate' curriculum denigrates the enemy and extols the virtues of one's own side.

2. The 'defence' curriculum presents conflict as a constant threat and teaches students to use weapons.

3. Stereotypes about 'peoples' or religions promote cross-border solidarity with those 'like us'.

4. War is presented as routine, normal and continuous: history lessons are mostly devoted to conflict, not peace.

5. Schools, particularly in conflict zones, omit mention of conflict lest it raise tensions.

Moving up the more positive side comes:

1. teaching of 'tolerance' and respect for diversity – this can be dangerous if everything is to be tolerated without tools for analysis

2. teaching of conflict resolution techniques

3. projects specifically focused on humanitarian law and rights during hostilities

4. projects in divided communities encouraging dialogue, encounter and bringing people together

5. active teaching about local, national and global conflict, providing skills to challenge aggression and to hold governments to account.

We are working to assess the contribution of education to human security in four interlinked areas:

- economic security (employment destinations, skills base for social and cultural capital, inclusion and exclusion, and measures of corruption)

- national security (degree of segregation or integration, policies on racism, stereotypes in curriculum materials, how conflict is taught)

- political security (active citizenship education, critical thinking, practice in democracy, building civil society)

- personal security (protection of rights, policy on non-violence, health/sex/relationships/ HIV/AIDs education, secure buildings)
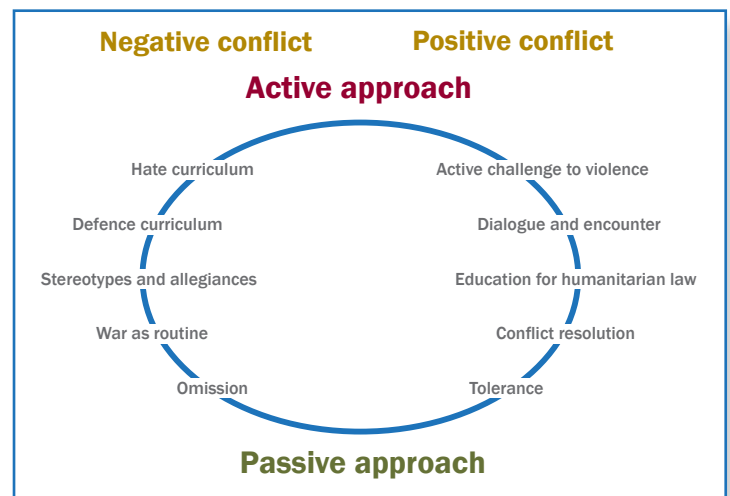
The aim of the index is to act as a counter to the conventional comparative achievement studies to scrutinise the much more important and broader role of the school in the key area of human survival.

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