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# Toward a conflict-sensitive approach to higher education pedagogy: lessons from Afghanistan and Somaliland

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## ABSTRACT

Higher education has become an important agenda in the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. A major aspect of this agenda is the conceptualization of education as a tool not just for development but for peacebuilding. Yet there are few studies examining how university educators might be equipped as frontline peace workers. This study explores: How might conflict affect teaching in higher education, especially in and with students from conflict-affected contexts? In what ways does higher education pedagogy serve to ameliorate or exacerbate conflict? How could the practices of academics working with students in conflict-affected contexts inform approaches to higher education pedagogy? Data for the study was collected through interviews with university educators working in Afghanistan and Somaliland, and analyzed through the lens of Santos's 'post-abysal thinking'. Findings indicate that educators who work in conflict-affected contexts have numerous practical strategies that inform their thinking, curricular decisions, teaching, and policymaking. Implications are discussed.

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## Introduction

Peace in and through higher education has become an important agenda in the international education and global development communities as they strive toward the achievement of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (Burde 2014; King 2013; Novelli and Smith 2011). Yet, there are few studies examining how university educators<sup>1</sup> might be conceptualized as frontline peace workers. Here, educators as peace workers refers to the potentially transformative role that university faculty might have in addressing conflict sensitively by considering the conflict context, minimizing the negative impact of conflict on education, or education on conflict, and fostering the values of inclusion, justice, mutual understanding, and sustainable peace (INEE 2013; Novelli and Sayed 2016; Zembylas, Charalambous, and Charalambous 2016). Moreover, there are no known studies as of yet investigating the contributions of university academics in conflict-affected contexts toward mitigating the negative consequences of conflict and violence on education, and toward teaching with a conflict-sensitive approach. This paper then critically examines how university educators working in contexts

affected by crisis and conflict understand, experience and respond to the challenges of conflict and peace in the classroom. Data for the study was collected with university educators working in two conflict-affected settings, Afghanistan and Somaliland, and compared with the global literature on education and conflict more broadly. Findings indicate that educators who work in conflict-affected contexts have numerous practical strategies that inform their thinking, curricular decisions, teaching, and policymaking.

The paper identifies the challenges and opportunities of teaching through a conflict-sensitive approach in higher education, and further contributes to generating good practices<sup>2</sup> and theorizations on the transformative possibilities for conflict-sensitive higher education in the early twenty-first century contemporary society. The educational implications of this work are far-reaching, as conflict and migration in recent years has boomed, armed violence and terrorism around the world shows no signs of slowing, the climate crisis is worsening, liberal democracy and human rights are under attack, and local communities are becoming more globalized and multicultural (Appadurai 1996; Kleinfeld and Muggah 2019). These social changes impact heavily upon universities, especially those in conflict-affected contexts and countries/communities where refugees are migrating (Dryden-Peterson and Giles 2010). Hence, university educators should prepare for teaching more diverse sets of students in the future, including those students in and from conflict-affected contexts. Educators around the world, then, have much to gain from examining and scrutinizing the philosophies, policies, and conflict-sensitive pedagogies of university educators working with students in/ from conflict-affected regions. The driving research questions for the study include:

- How might conflict affect teaching in higher education, especially in and with students from conflict-affected contexts?
- In what ways does higher education pedagogy serve to ameliorate or exacerbate conflict?
- How could the practices of academics working with students in conflict-affected contexts inform and enhance approaches to higher education pedagogy?

In the pages that follow, I will first review the literature and overview the post-abysal theoretical framework of Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007) that informs my analysis. Next, I turn to detail the methods and higher education contexts in Afghanistan and Somaliland where I collected data. Then, I present the findings in four sections: onto-epistemic shifts, curricular changes, sensitive pedagogic relationships, and institutional policies. Before concluding, I discuss the implications focusing on good practices for educators in general. I argue that it is critical to consider the specific context of particular practices, and that it is also valuable to learn from the conflict-sensitive pedagogies and policies used in conflict-affected settings toward increasing the techniques and strategies available for educators facing similar challenges in other locales (Davies 2004; Lederach 1995). In the end, the paper contributes to diverse literatures on higher education in conflict zones, conflict-sensitive teaching, and peacebuilding education more broadly (Bickmore 2017; Burde 2014; Bush and Saltarelli 2000; Cremin 2016; INEE 2013; King 2013; Kirk 2007; Novelli, Lopes Cardozo, and Smith 2017; Zembylas, Charalambous, and Charalambous 2016).

Yet, before proceeding, I must first position myself in this study. This is particularly the case given my argument throughout the paper that educators and researchers should be reflective in their teaching and research. Here, I draw on arguments from Ellsworth (1989), Lather (1992), and Brookfield (2009) who each contend the importance of positionality in the process of knowledge production. Positioning myself: I am a white middle-class male scholar from North America with experience working in the Global South in both developing and conflict-affected contexts. Currently, I am situated in a prestigious higher education institution in Korea. I contend that efforts toward peace through education are intrinsically worthwhile, and that a just conflict-sensitive praxis in higher education is both socially exigent and the responsibility of educators to ensure inclusive education for all. I explore these issues in this paper as an outsider-insider in each of the study contexts, having worked in different capacities in each setting. I turn now to the global literature on education in conflict-affected contexts.

## Education and conflict

A review of the literature indicates there are nearly 60 million primary school age children out of school today and over half of these children are in conflict-affected contexts (Bush and Saltarelli 2000; McCowan and Unterhalter 2015; Mundy and Dryden-Peterson 2011).<sup>3</sup> It is expected that by 2030 two-thirds of these children, and 80% of the world's poor, will be living in conflict zones (OECD 2018). What is more, what happens in these contexts is intimately linked to and affects the policies of other states (Kleinfeld and Muggah 2019). In response, the World Bank (2011) declared that conflict and insecurity 'is the primary development challenge of our time' (1). UNESCO (2011) concurs, 'An important starting point for conflict prevention and post-conflict reconstruction is to recognize that education matters. What people are taught, how they are taught and how education systems are organized can make countries more or less prone to violence' (257). The UNESCO report continues, 'Policies in areas ranging from language of instruction to curriculum and the devolution of planning all have a bearing on conflict prevention and prospects for a lasting peace' (ibid). Hence, if the international community wants to ensure universal access to quality education, and safe places for learning – at all levels of education, and in all countries – then addressing conflict and peace everywhere is an imperative (Kirk 2007; Novelli, Lopes Cardozo, and Smith 2017; Novelli and Smith 2011).

Furthermore, higher education has until now been omitted from close examination in terms of its potential (and limitations) to contribute to security and peacebuilding (Milton 2018). Yet, the conflict and peace literature reveals it is in higher education that professionals are trained and important skills upgraded in areas such as education, healthcare, policing, and law – all necessary sectors for a well-functioning and healthy society (Omeje 2015; Schendel and McCowan 2015). Additionally, the literature indicates that universities support the development of critical thinking, civic values and constructive debate – areas integral to supporting strong democratic societies (Bickmore 2014; Laker, Naval, and Mrnjavs 2014). In addition, Omeje (2015) contends that universities can specifically offer conflict-sensitive education 'aimed to understand, deconstruct, and transform deep-rooted structures of prejudice, suspicion, and hostilities in a society' (35). Moreover, universities in conflict-affected contexts can serve to preserve

and promote (or not) the study of local culture, language, and heritage – subjects crucial to culturally relevant education and conflict-sensitive teaching (Kester et al. 2019; Schendel and McCowan 2015). Thus, higher education in conflict-affected contexts is a critical avenue for promoting peace and development (Pherali and Lewis 2017).

For example, Davies (2017) and Milton (2018) have illustrated the crucial role of higher education to support transitional justice and sustainable post-conflict recovery in locales such as Cambodia, Sri Lanka, and the Middle East; and Kester (2017) has written about the need to use globally diverse pedagogies within higher education – beyond the Western rational lecture – that takes into account the learning experiences and preferences of students from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Moreover, the literature indicates that changing curricula and teaching methods does not need to be dramatic; conceptual and pragmatic changes can have a significant effect. Paulo Freire (1970/2005), for instance – whose scholarship much education for social change draws upon (Bajaj 2015) – argues that micro-changes in learning spaces regarding curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment have a large impact on students and society; and Burde (2014) claims that small educational interventions in periods of crisis may produce significant outcomes both during and after conflict. Hence, a pragmatic change to teaching and learning in diverse classrooms could significantly better support the inclusion of diverse students from around the world across the entire teaching and learning process.

Some education scholars have gone further to apply postcolonial and decolonial thinking to education for peacebuilding specifically (Hajir and Kester 2020; Kester et al. 2019; Shirazi 2011; Williams 2016; Williams and Bermeo 2020; Wintersteiner 2019; Zakharia 2017; Zembylas 2018). These scholars argue that this thinking is critical for peacebuilding education to avoid imposing external models on local realities, thus reproducing (either intentionally or unintentionally) inequitable and paternalistic power relations. Zembylas (2018), for example, explains:

Postcolonial and decolonial thinking ... highlight that modernity and coloniality are largely responsible for structural inequalities, therefore, it is important to acknowledge how larger structural, material and political realities influence understandings and pedagogies of peace ... postcolonial and decolonial projects ... share common goals in calling attention to local context amidst larger cultural and political realities. (2)

Shirazi (2011) too claims educators ‘must be vigilant to avoid ascribing a universal emancipatory promise to educational interventions that disembodify the subject from his/her social and political settings’ (280); and Kester et al. (2019) contend:

... a postcolonial framework in peace education theory and practice implies the interrogation of educational curricula, pedagogy, and policy to both unveil the lingering colonialities that shape and constrain peace education in universities around the world, and to highlight the transformative agencies of non-Western faculty and students to re-envision and re-construct the field of peace education beyond the English-speaking world. (148)

I take up this postcolonial perspective here to examine the experiences and practices of university educators working in conflict-affected contexts, as this is a lacuna in the current literature (Kurian and Kester 2019). I contend that scholars working in diverse settings internationally have much to learn from the strategies and approaches of those working with students in conflict-affected contexts, specifically toward challenging supposed universal practices and norms in peace education (Cremin et al. 2021; Gur

Ze'ev 2001; Zembylas, Charalambous, and Charalambous 2016), and putting local practices in conversation with the global to offer alternative possibilities for a more just, conflict-sensitive and context-specific praxis (Davies 2004; Novelli, Lopes Cardozo, and Smith 2017). I turn next to overview the post-abysal theoretical framework of this study.<sup>4</sup>

## Post-abysal thinking

Santos (2007) critiques Western modernity and Global North epistemologies as largely encompassing a dualistic conception of the world, where the world is split into either a Northern civilized modern new world on this side of the abyss, or a Southern uncivilized unregulated old world on the other side. This modernist thinking sets up differentiation between a regulated, emancipated world on this side, and an unregulated, Hobbesian violent, uncivilized world on the other side. Santos is clear to indicate that it is entirely possible – perhaps even probable – that there are, or have been, other non-Western forms of abyssal thinking. Hence, ‘a’ Global North and ‘a’ Global South epistemology have been written rather than ‘the’ Global North or ‘the’ Global South epistemology. Yet, regardless if there are other non-Western forms of abyssal thinking or not, post-abysal thought contends that Western modernity continues to treat other forms of non-Western knowledge with abyssal subjugation. Educators cannot, then, continue to ignore the knowledges and practices from the Global South and conflict-affected contexts by claiming that such practices are so far removed from the needs and challenges of the Global North. Indeed, the Global North is often implicated in the very problems and challenges of the Global South, particularly in conflict-affected contexts (Hajir and Kester 2020). It is crucial then that educators make the connections ‘to *think with* these experiences of coloniality and dehumanization’ as they construct curriculum, pedagogy and policy (Zembylas 2020, 20, italics in original).

To further elaborate, Santos (2014) states, ‘post-abysal thinking starts from the recognition that social exclusion in its broadest sense takes very different forms according to whether it is determined by an abyssal or non-abysal line’ (65). In education research specifically, Paraskeva (2016) has applied post-abysal thinking to curricula. In his book, *Curriculum Epistemicide*, he explains that Western modernity did not just replace God with man ‘but also specifically a particular God and a particular man, that is, the Western construction of God and man’ (235) (see also Wynter 2003). Hence, Paraskeva argues in regard to curricula that abyssal thinking in education teaches the superiority of the Northern side of the abyssal line. This may include, for example, theorizing the world through the lenses of Descartes, Newton, Hobbes, and Marx while excluding theories from the South (Santos 2014). Consequently, the treatment of the histories and cultures of the Global North takes on very different forms than the treatment of the histories and cultures of the Global South; this difference may be even more amplified for conflict-affected contexts.

Raewyn Connell (2007), in her book *Southern Theory*, further details the systematic epistemic violence enacted through schools and universities that omit the knowledges of the South. Connell exposes how assumptions of Northern knowledge systems serve to erase the knowledges and theory of the South through education that offers ‘claims of universality’ (e.g. Western thought as objective, apolitical, and universal), ‘reading

from the centre' (e.g. referencing Northern but not Southern work), 'gestures of exclusion' (e.g. excluding Southern theorists from reading lists), and 'grand erasure' (e.g. ignoring the wrongs of Western/Northern society) (Connell 2007, 44–47). Hence, students from the other side of the abyssal line experience education differently.

Post-abyssal thinking, then, is particularly useful to help illuminate the differential treatment of difference, and the epistemological (and ontological) violence that is enacted especially upon those who come from the Global South and from conflict-affected regions. This happens too in and through the academy. Santos (2007) states, 'As a product of abyssal thinking, scientific knowledge is not socially distributed in an equitable manner, nor could it be, as it was originally designed to convert this side of the line into the subject of knowledge and the other side into an object of knowledge' (13). Utilizing this post-abyssal framework opens space for the Global North to learn from the Global South, and for epistemic divisions to be disrupted (Hajir, Clarke-Habibi, and Kurian 2021; Kim 2014). Hence, I will shortly turn to analyze findings from the data through this post-abyssal lens. But first I introduce the methods and research contexts.

## Methods

To explore conflict-sensitive education further and address the challenges of conflict and peacebuilding in higher education, I designed a qualitative comparative case study to investigate and categorize the varied responses that university educators in conflict-affected contexts are making toward promoting peace and conflict-sensitivity in the classroom (Yin 2003). Data collection methods included semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and digital artefacts. The interviews were semi-structured to allow flexibility for discussions to go into depth or surface on particular topics as needed. Interviews were 60–75 minutes each and were audio-recorded.<sup>5</sup>

Document analysis and digital artefacts were also examined to support (or challenge) the primary interview data. This involved a review of internal documents provided by participants during interviews (e.g. student satisfaction surveys and planning documents) and a review of materials on the university websites (e.g. brochures, faculty webpages, and university reports). Documents and artefacts were checked for institutional details, programmatic objectives, and future directions. These materials are referenced throughout the findings to triangulate data. Participants for the study were chosen first through purposive sampling to identify key informants in the universities. Then, snowball sampling was used to identify additional participants. I interviewed a total of 12 faculty at the universities. Participants qualified if they were faculty working in the university for more than one year (at the time of the study) to support deep reflection on sustained conflict-sensitive practices. Notably, many of the faculty had worked in multiple conflict-affected contexts beyond Afghanistan and Somaliland, including Cambodia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Yemen.

Participants' ages were between 25 and 70. There were seven female participants and five male participants (see Table 1 for details). Three of the participants teach within the discipline of political science and international relations, while two teach business, two teach English language, one teaches economics, another teaches anthropology, one teaches geography/general education, one teaches counselling/general education, and

**Table 1.** Study participants.

Interviewee	Gender	Age	Ethnicity/Region	Level of Education	Discipline	Domestic or International Faculty	Roles within the University
Participant 1 (Afghanistan)	Female	40–49	White European	PhD	Political Science and International Relations	International	Teaching, Research, and Administration
Participant 2 (Afghanistan)	Female	30–39	White North American	MA	English Language and Literature	International	Teaching and Administration
Participant 3 (Afghanistan)	Female	60–69	White North American	MA	Business Studies	International	Teaching, Research, and Administration
Participant 4 (Afghanistan)	Female	60–69	White European	PhD candidate	Geography and General Education	International	Teaching, Research and Administration
Participant 5 (Afghanistan)	Female	50–59	Black North American	MA	Counselling and General Education	International	Teaching and Administration
Participant 6 (Afghanistan)	Male	50–59	White European	PhD candidate	English Language and Literature	International	Teaching and Administration
Participant 7 (Somaliland)	Male	30–39	Black African	PhD	Political Science and International Relations	Domestic	Teaching, Research, and Administration
Participant 8 (Somaliland)	Female	20–29	Black African	MA	Economics	Domestic	Teaching and Research
Participant 9 (Somaliland)	Male	40–49	Black African	PhD	Business Studies	Domestic	Teaching, Research, and Administration
Participant 10 (Somaliland)	Female	30–39	White North American	PhD	Anthropology	International	Teaching
Participant 11 (Somaliland)	Male	20–29	Black African	PhD candidate	Education	Domestic	Teaching, Research, and Administration
Participant 12 (Somaliland)	Male	40–49	White European	PhD candidate	Political Science and International Relations	International	Teaching



finally one teaches education. Nine of the participants hold senior administrative positions within their institution. Many of the participants are international faculty, particularly in the Afghanistan case as this is representative of the faculty composition in the institution at large. It should be noted, then, that these faculty may have different perspectives than local faculty. More importantly, their participation as Western White transnational academics in Afghanistan and Somaliland may be reflective of the overrepresentation of the Western White scholar in higher education and international development today (Andreotti et al. 2015; Heron 2007; Kester et al. 2019). This theme will be returned to in the findings.

Following interviews, audio-recordings were transcribed and read multiple times – along with documents and digital artefacts – using inductive thematic analysis to generate themes (Cresswell and Poth 2017). The themes were further categorized and conceptualized to identify substantive concepts and practices that the university educators use to work sensitively with students in and from conflict zones. Six iterative phases of thematic analysis were employed: (i) familiarization with the data, (ii) generating initial codes, (iii) searching for themes, (iv) reviewing themes, (v) naming themes, and (vi) writing the report (Nowell et al. 2017). This involved prolonged engagement with the data, triangulating different sources, field notes, peer debriefing, and member-checking prior to publication. Findings brought to light common professional capacities, challenges faced by the educators and their students across the regions, and pragmatic strategies for conflict-sensitive teaching.

Finally, as the trustworthiness and transferability of data are of crucial importance in qualitative research (Krefting 1991; Lincoln and Guba 1985), this study employed four forms of triangulation to confirm results: (i) methodological triangulation through interviews, document analysis, and digital artefacts; (ii) member-checking with participants to confirm the accuracy and credibility of transcriptions and data interpretations; (iii) scholarly audits by other researchers to provide feedback on the theoretical analysis (Merriam 2009); and (iv) theoretical triangulation by reading data through varied analytical lenses (St. Pierre 2011). Lastly, I followed the ethical guidelines of my home institution.<sup>6</sup> Prior to interviews, informed consent was obtained from participants (both written and oral) and issues of confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study.

### **Research contexts**

This paper draws on insights from faculty in Afghanistan and Somaliland, and on literature from educators elsewhere concerning the practice of conflict-sensitive teaching. Afghanistan and Somaliland have been chosen as the study sites because both countries are currently tackling issues of conflict and peace in and through higher education (Fund for Peace 2020; Samsor and Idrees 2019). Both Afghanistan and Somaliland are conflict-affected contexts experiencing internal divisions (Barfield 2011; Prunier 2021). Afghanistan remains in a state of crisis at the time of writing with US forces withdrawing after two decades of armed conflict, and many analysts fear current peace talks will fail and war between the Afghan government and Taliban will reignite (Miller 2021). Participants in this study shared the same concerns. Somaliland, too, is a fragile post-war state (Ingiriis 2021). Although today the country is a functioning democracy, Somaliland is not internationally recognized (Ali 2017); and there are ongoing threats from Al Shabaab,

Al Qaeda, ISIS, and the Haqqani Network, in addition to the Taliban, that undermine state and human security in both contexts (Debiel et al. 2009; Majidi 2018).

Additionally, both Afghanistan and Somaliland have active higher education institutions explicitly addressing conflict and peacebuilding through their curricula and teaching, which aim to support peace and avoid a return to armed violence through nurturing the political, economic and social foundations of a robust society. Among these institutions is Case University A in Afghanistan and Case University B in Somaliland. It is with faculty in these institutions that I collected data.

Case University A was established in Kabul in the aftermath of the US War on Terrorism to contribute to the social and economic development of post-war Afghanistan. Today, the university employs faculty across a range of areas in the Sciences, Social Sciences, and Humanities, with nearly 1700 students enrolled – of which approximately 35% are women. Case University B in Somaliland similarly builds the capacity of local professionals to contribute to state-building and peacebuilding efforts throughout Somalia and the Horn of Africa region. The university has more than 7000 students, and its Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies has trained many leading public officials in the country. In recent years, Case University A has experienced direct attacks on faculty and students, while Case University B is additionally walled-in and guarded with armed men. One notable attack at Case University A happened in late 2016, when the Taliban executed more than a dozen members of the university in a 10-hour siege of the campus with an additional 50-plus people injured in the attack. Attacks on the university and surrounding higher education institutions are ongoing, with the most recent attack occurring in November 2020.

Moreover, in addition to the direct violence highlighted here, faculty in the institutions also discussed the forms of cultural and structural violence they encounter and respond to in their work. Hence, there is much that could be learned from the conflict-sensitive practices of educators in Afghanistan and Somaliland toward furthering multicultural, inclusive, just, and culturally-sensitive education. I turn now to the findings.

## Findings

From the data, I identified four primary strategies that the university academics employ to practice conflict-sensitivity in the higher education classroom. These four strategies include: (i) onto-epistemic shifts, (ii) curricular changes, (iii) sensitive pedagogic relationships, and (iv) institutional policies. I will now share these four areas along with quotations from the participants (*‘in italics’*) to illustrate conflict-sensitive education in practice.

### ***Onto-epistemic shifts***

The first strategy that participants raised was an onto-epistemic shift. An onto-epistemic shift to curriculum and pedagogy is necessary as a departure point toward conflict-sensitive teaching. This shift involves Santos’s (2007) reframing of the world, challenging the divisive lines of the supposed civilized world and the uncivilized, the places where conflict and war rage, and those places supposedly safe from this disruption. As

Participant 4 emphasized, this means faculty learning about the contexts from which their students come, including the conflict dynamics of those locales. She stated that *'faculty must know the personal histories of their students.'* For example, Participant 1 shared a surprising case. A European colleague arrived to Afghanistan unaware that it was a country in the midst of conflict and war. It was not until the colleague actually arrived to Afghanistan that she realized how woefully unprepared she was to live and work in the Afghan context. Participant 1 went on to explain:

I was recruited with a Physics professor from Geneva who had no idea Afghanistan was a war zone. She came in one week later ... and she said: "No one told me this is a conflict zone." And then two weeks after she was gone.

Here, it is crucial that educators familiarize themselves with the local context, and that institutions support educators in transitioning sensitively into the new work environment. Participant 1 additionally raised the related concern of *'White-saviorism'* in the institution amongst some lecturers and the need to challenge this *'liberal'* standpoint. In response, Case University A has implemented an orientation program for new faculty arriving from abroad to prepare them to work successfully with students and colleagues in Afghanistan (more on this will be explained in the section on institutional policies).

Additionally, Omeje (2015) contends that there is a need in higher education to push conflict-sensitivity beyond the typical social sciences and humanities disciplines, where it may be perceived that conflict is more of a topical issue, to encourage lecturers of all subjects and age groups to engage with conflict and peace. As Participant 7 indicates peace and conflict (as development) is an interdisciplinary topic to be addressed across the curriculum and institution, and across all grade levels, not as a specific subject but as a set of knowledge, values and skills for developing society. He states:

All the universities in Somaliland, mostly they want social sciences, not engineering, health, and all those other related disciplines. So we have to change this mentality if we want to develop the country and also to materialize the potential of the market. So we have to change our mindset.

He goes on to emphasize *'peace and stability as development'* and *'the need for people to know their indigenous knowledge.'* Hence, the objective of this onto-epistemic shift across disciplines is to re-frame conflict-sensitivity as multidimensional, transdisciplinary and learner-centred education that broadly supports learners for who they are, respecting cultural differences and local knowledges, and appreciating diversity as difference rather than as deficit of mind and spirit (Gorski 2008; Hajir, Clarke-Habibi, and Kurian 2021; Santos 2007).

In the end, rather than assuming students should naturally assimilate into the dominant local/global culture without regard for the conflicts and histories from which they originate, it must be assumed that conflict and difficult histories travel in the memories and bodies of students. To this end, Participant 12 cautioned that pedagogues must be aware that *'trauma might be in the classroom.'* Traumatic conflict may continue to affect students and educators in their new locales (Bekerman and Zembylas 2011; Walters and Anderson 2021; Zembylas 2015). To disrupt this lack of contextual understanding educators must seek to become familiar with the contexts in which they teach and the contexts from which their students arrive.

### Curricular changes

Next, curricular changes that participants spoke of include ensuring the curriculum is culturally, socially and linguistically relevant, and appropriate to the particular context and needs of learners (Nelson and Appleby 2014; Renders and Knezevic 2017). Participants 7 and 8 from Somaliland emphasized this in their interviews. For example, Participant 7 stated that ‘*universities contribute positively by producing ethical graduates*’ for the local context. Here, he indicated his preference for socially-engaged student-citizens. To achieve such personally ethical and socially engaged standards, he extolled the need to ‘*incorporate Somaliland indigenous knowledge with global knowledge*’ in the curriculum.<sup>7</sup> This would include infusing topics into the learning related to local histories, geographies, peace, conflict, and cultures in dialogue with global histories and cultures (McCowan and Unterhalter 2015; Milton 2018). This could also involve promoting critical engagement with learning texts by examining who, what, when, where, why and how knowledge is constructed (Paraskeva 2016).

Participant 12 then suggested that educators must challenge any violent imagery of conflict-affected contexts embedded within traditional textbooks, especially where such imagery serves to reinforce the abyssal line and a sense of local inferiority/superiority (Burde 2014; King 2013). INEE (2013) and the United States Institute for Peace (n.d.), too, emphasize that curricula should include values commitments to conflict transformation, active citizenship, gender equality, and human rights that work against sowing misunderstanding and intolerance through curricula. Hence, it is crucial to disrupt the abyssal deficit-orientation that renders students from conflict-affected contexts as behind or in need of being saved (Kurian and Kester 2019; Novelli and Lopes Cardozo 2008).

Further, diverse indigenous perspectives could be integrated into the curriculum by having students read local books. Participant 2 discussed this when she explained that ethnic conflicts within Afghanistan could be explored sensitively, for example, by using Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner* to ‘*make the learning context familiar and address deep social issues*.’ Similarly, Participant 10, an international faculty member in Somaliland, added that in conflict-affected contexts it is important to ‘*value students’ personal experiences*’ by bringing the experiences into the curriculum of what is taught. She stated:

If I think of my own classroom, I think it was really trying to value what people’s experiences were and the things they brought with them into the classroom and helping them to translate those into the language of the curriculum that we were teaching.

In other words, the students’ experiences become part of the taught curriculum (Freire 1970/2005). Here, educators could also bring in guest speakers from the Global South and conflict-affected contexts into the classroom and curriculum to offer diverse perspectives on peace and conflict, and to share positive images of local communities that transcend deficit-orientations (Kester 2018; Kester et al. 2020). From a post-abyssal standpoint, this would help challenge taken-for-granted worldviews that ‘other’ particular groups, and it could importantly break the cycle of local actors internalizing deficiencies manufactured by and reproduced through abyssal curricula.

### **Pedagogic possibilities**

The participants expressed that pedagogies sensitive to the conflict context inquire into why what is taught is taught and how it is transmitted. Participant 6, for example, emphasized that he is ‘*self-conscious of combatting imperialism*’ in his teaching by being intentional and careful with his word choice. Here, Santos’s post-abyssal thinking brings to the forefront the importance of integrating teaching by/for those affected by conflict, through local methods and with local theory, as integral to fostering a just conflict-sensitive education (see Woolner 2016, for an example from Somaliland). Further strategies that could be employed to teach conflict-sensitivity include promoting multi-perspectivity, open dialogue, storytelling, interactive participation, democratic deliberation, active listening, intentional seating arrangements, and horizontal power relations between teachers and students (Burde et al. 2017; Seitz 2006). Participant 9, for example, suggested lecturers should use ‘*more group work to help students to work together [horizontally] on analysis, problem-solving, and critical thinking.*’ Participant 3 similarly argued for intentional seating arrangements with mixed groups (i.e. mixing students of different genders, ethnic backgrounds, political persuasions, and linguistic capabilities):

Don’t let students always sit in the same place. Otherwise, they spend four years sitting next to their friends ... If forming groups I’ll arrange the group so it has a mix of people in it ... So, I really make a conscious effort to mix people up ... so that one person doesn’t dominate and people have a safe space to express their opinions.

Participant 2 also indicated this in her suggestion of using *The Kite Runner* as content that having students ‘*talk in small groups*’ offers an inclusive and safe space for exploration before opening up the discussion to the larger class. This technique would allow the students to first test their ideas. Similar pedagogical arguments have been made in other contexts. In a recent Korean study, for instance, more than 100 Korean university lecturers additionally argued for dialogic and problem-posing methods ‘as helpful for fostering critical [and inclusive] classroom discussions’ (Kester et al. 2020, 41); and a study with 121 faculty participants at a Midwestern university in the United States found that the use of ‘inclusive communication skills’ supported greater ‘cultural inclusivity’ in the classroom (Prieto 2020, 3).

Next, Participant 4 spoke about the need for compassionate education (in addition to critical education) to focus on nurturing positive ‘*human relationships.*’ She elaborated that educators should be ‘*welcoming*’, ‘*encouraging*’, and ‘*patient.*’ Pertaining to nurturing compassionate relationships in the classroom, Participant 5 also explained how she uses reflexive dialogue on her own issues in order to relate to students. For example, she discussed her ‘*fears of police brutality in the US as a Black woman*’ emphasizing the connectivity this gives her with her Afghan female students who fear ethnic or gender-based violence. She acknowledged that although these issues manifest somewhat differently in different contexts, issues of racism and gender-based violence transcend geopolitical boundaries (Bhambra 2014; Santos 2014). This brings me to institutional policies.

### **Institutional policies**

The participants described the actions of their universities to ensure faculty are prepared to work sensitively in conflict-affected contexts. Participant 1 explained the institutional measures of Case University A pertaining to conflict-sensitive education:

... apart from the security training and some cultural training about our student body, and what kind of problems they may encounter, then we have a session on the history of Afghanistan. This session ... is to show the faculty that the Taliban are not Afghanistan. [The Taliban] is a very recent phenomenon.

Participant 2 further detailed that the university takes the stance of drawing upon Islamic traditions while remaining a secular institution. For example, she explained that the university has invited controversial speakers from the Taliban to the university as a way to engage in dialogue and critical thinking with diverse social actors.<sup>8</sup> For this participant, she explained that these approaches are important acts of challenging students to think critically across diverse religious and ethnic divisions and to address conflict rather than avoid it. Davies (2017) writes, 'Without critical appraisal and exposure to alternative truths, simply learning about past injustices could consolidate hatreds and desire for revenge. Instead, competences should include managing dissent about the past without resorting to real or symbolic violence' (339).

Moreover, beyond engaging sensitively with diverse ethnic and political communities, the participants indicated that universities must also ensure that faculty and students from marginalized groups have equitable access to higher education. Participant 8 from Somaliland, for example, indicated the negative effect conflict has on migrants' and women's lack of access to higher education, for both faculty and students. Here, universities could provide scholarship schemes or safe havens on campuses for vulnerable migrants/refugees. These schemes could include the provision of 'structured, meaningful, and creative activities' for the protection and wellbeing of students and faculty in and from conflict areas (Burde et al. 2017, 645). Participant 3 further noted it is important the university has a policy on diversity. She stated:

We have a policy about respect, respecting differences. It's part of our academic policy, so I think hiring people who actually feel that way is important. You have to have your educators and your institution who actually believe in diversity. Not everybody does.

In conclusion, the conflict-sensitive strategies presented herein offer only a few modest and pragmatic approaches for attending to conflict-sensitivity in and with conflict-affected communities in higher education. The forms presented are not intended to be exhaustive. I will now turn to the discussion.

## Discussion

The findings and conflict-sensitive strategies here have been conceptualized particularly for teaching in the context of conflict, yet it is expected that aspects of these strategies may be potentially relevant across diverse settings. In this penultimate section I will reflect on the implications of these findings for educators generally.

Drawing on Santos's post-abysal thinking, an initial implication for educators more broadly is the need to challenge dualities of identity and essentialist thought. Participant 1 spoke of this when she emphatically stated, '*the Taliban are not Afghanistan*'; and Participant 3 indicated how she facilitates sensitive classroom relations '*so that one person doesn't dominate*'. Contesting essentialism and challenging dualities of identity means recognizing complexities in who I am/who they are and thinking beyond an 'us' and 'them' paradigm (Zembylas, Charalambous, and Charalambous 2016). For instance,

this perspective invites critical reflection on the linkages between the North/South and the complicity of various actors within systems of violence around the world. In stating that *'the Taliban are not Afghanistan'*, Participant 1 is embracing the diversity of the country and refusing to essentialize a complex collection of peoples within a single violent category. Moreover, Participant 3 indicates how she subtly facilitates such diverse perspectives by opening space for heterogenous thought. Here, Zakharia (2017) states pedagogy is a site of 'contestation, in which the interrogation of peace occurs in multiple spaces, forging possibilities for the enactment of transformative agency' (59); and Davies (2004) argues:

to avoid essentialism ... we need transversal politics rather than identity politics ... based on the recognition that each positioning (say, of an ethnicity, or gender) produces specific situated "knowledges"; but that these knowledges *cannot but be unfinished* – and therefore dialogue should take place in order to reach a common perspective. (214, italics in original)

The second implication for educators is the need to recognize and disrupt the differential treatment of difference, and to learn not just about/from the Global South but from conflict-affected regions of the Global South. Eliding these two and painting the Global South in its entirety as a site of violence has done much harm (Kurian and Kester 2019). For example, this could mean educators being more deeply aware of nuanced differences in the treatment of 'the other' depending on where 'the other' comes from (Santos 2014). That is, students from the Global South are frequently treated differently than those students and faculty who come from the Global North. Moreover, those from conflict-affected regions of the Global South are treated with even more suspicion than others from the Global North and more stable contexts of the Global South. Such a situation presents a challenge for higher education that neither takes account of the local culture in which that education takes place nor the broader global systems of violence that impact upon it (Bush and Saltarelli 2000). Too often local education ignores globalization and the war system (Reardon and Snauwaert 2015), and global education overlooks local realities (Shirazi 2011). Participant 7 indicated this when he declared the need for Somaliland-based educators to *'incorporate Somaliland indigenous knowledge with global knowledge'*. Zembylas, Charalambous, and Charalambous (2016), too, write, 'the context of a conflict-affected society' involves 'constantly changing conditions' that necessitate 'attempts to explore the impact of larger processes (such as globalization, or ... superdiversity) on conflict' (239–240); and Gur Ze'ev (2001) argues, 'It is wrong to decontextualize peace education and detach it from globalization and the new world order ... allow[ing] the invisibility of the violence that manipulates, reconstructs, or destroys rival narratives and the establishments that they serve and represent' (330–331). Thus, connecting the local and global and recognizing the interrelations between conflict-affected contexts and elsewhere is a desideratum. This brings me to the third point.

A third implication that was raised by participants is the importance of practitioner reflexivity, especially in classrooms within conflict-affected societies. Participant 6 suggested this when he indicated he is *'self-conscious of combatting imperialism'* through his word choice. Additionally, Participant 12 urged educators to continually reflect on the *'trauma [that] might be in the classroom'* to let this guide their conflict-sensitive pedagogy; and Participant 1 reflexively critiqued the *'White-saviorism'* amongst

faculty in the institution. Here, these educators are detailing concern for their students and a critique of Western-centricity and Whiteness in the education (Heron 2007; Kester 2019). Together, Participants 5, 12 and 1 illustrate the utility of reflexive practices to enhance conflict-sensitive teaching. Santos (2007) similarly writes of post-abysal thinking that it requires ‘copresence’ and ‘ecologies of knowledge’, that is, equal respect and equality between the ‘practices and agents on both sides of the line’ to contest the epistemological dominance of Western abysal thinking (12). Santos further clarifies that such copresence requires ‘simultaneity’ and ‘contemporaneity’ – meaning that educators and students must occupy the same space and time, and that students should not be regarded as non-modern, uncivilized barbarians. Practitioner reflexivity, then, is an integral part of a conflict-sensitive praxis that supports the copresence of educators and students (Cremin et al. 2021).

## Conclusion

Finally, in conclusion, this paper has detailed a set of findings and pragmatic strategies from university educators working in Afghanistan and Somaliland. For some readers it may seem that many of these methods and techniques are already familiar for educators who draw on pedagogies from social justice, global citizenship, human rights, and peace education. Yet what is especially important here is to understand that if such methods are currently in use in diverse locales then there is the possibility to amplify these techniques for conflict-sensitive education, as they are already raised by participants in conflict-affected regions as important tools for teaching students in and from conflict zones. Thus, further employment of these techniques across contexts could have immediate and significant benefits for those educators working with students in and from conflict-affected settings. Moreover, educators have the opportunity to integrate the newer techniques presented here into their repertoire to cultivate a more holistic and dynamic conflict-sensitive praxis. All in all, it is my hope that the findings herein will assist in the development of a more just and transformative conflict-sensitive higher education around the world. In the words of Participant 7, education can provide positive social transformation ‘*from the ruins and rubble of [society]*’ toward peacebuilding. Yet such practices must be intentional and systematically planned.

## Notes

1. This study is focused on university educators in general and not necessarily those who specifically teach history, political science, or peace studies. The working assumption is all educators in universities everywhere have a role to play in mitigating or reproducing social conflict through the taught and hidden curricula of norms that are established and practiced in classrooms across the institution.
2. It is noted here that there are no universal ‘best practices’, but it is assumed that there are context-specific ‘good practices’ that could potentially be relevant to educators practicing in other related settings.
3. This number rises to 258 million children and youth out of school when secondary school enrollment is included (UNESCO UIS 2020). Moreover, as higher education is path-dependent on completion of primary and secondary education, lack of access to quality education in the earlier years has cascading negative effects (Dryden-Peterson and Giles 2010; UN 2015).



4. I use this framework as it supports the criss-crossing of practices from the local to global, and its postcolonial orientation interrupts the violences of Western/Northern modernity and coloniality. Cremin et al. (2021) claim, ‘the post-abysal philosophy of de Sousa Santos’ supports ‘new ways of thinking’ about research in ‘settings affected by armed conflict and crisis’ and ‘put[ting] them into practice ... across diverse international settings’ (1).
5. It should be noted that interviews were conducted in early 2021 prior to the Taliban takeover of the Afghan government.
6. This study received ethical approval from Seoul National University IRB No. 2101/001-004.
7. The university website too reflects this statement. The website is omitted here to maintain anonymity.
8. The university frequently releases press statements reaffirming its policy commitment to diversity. Such statements can be found on the university’s homepage. A link is omitted here to maintain anonymity of the institution.

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