

Education, change and peacebuilding

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1. Introduction

In this essay change relates to two types: the changes that a population may experience in conflict contexts; and the changes that policy interventions want to achieve in order to promote a more peaceful society through education. It is immediately clear that these two sorts of change may in themselves conflict.

The paper uses the framework of complexity science to cast a critical eye on assumptions about how change occurs. It first briefly outlines the features of complex adaptive systems before moving to education and conflict. It examines hindrances to change before contrasting these with the benefits of complexity mind-sets in programming. This raises dilemmas for policy makers, but the final conclusions try to outline some parameters which can inject realism into our struggles at peacebuilding.

2. Complexity and Adaptation as a starting point

Complex adaptive systems (CASs) such as in the social sphere or socio-economic systems, share characteristics that enable evolutionary change and survival.

- The complexity of interactions in a system means that change is non-linear, in the sense that there is no simple cause and effect which takes the same shape in different contexts. This is why so many school effectiveness studies are doomed to failure, in trying to import ‘best practice’ across wildly differing contexts.
- A key feature is that a CAS is self-organising, with no apparent leader.
- It learns from ‘mistakes’, but recognizes and capitalises on them without the need for a director.
- In complex systems seemingly random events can create huge change and spark unpredictable evolutionary shifts. In conflict terms, we know how rumours can become amplified, so that others who have lived together peacefully become fatally constructed as enemies and objects of hate. There can also be bifurcation and polarisation, as we know well in education terms – that successful schools become more

Content

1.	Introduction	1
2.	Complexity and Adaptation as a starting point	1
3.	Is the best that we can do to ‘do no harm’?	2
4.	Hindrances to change	2
5.	Using complexity mind-sets	4
6.	Dilemmas of (un) certainty	4
7.	Conditions and contexts, not grand goals!	5
8.	Monitoring and evaluation	6

successful, that failing students slide down into more failure, as agents interpret and position themselves and others in the system.

- There is structure – ‘rules’ – in a CAS, but there is also organisation in the sense of having ‘agents’ with flexibility and creativity.

All this has profound implications for how we consider change as well as how we consider conflict. ‘Chaos’ has been conceptualised as extremely complex information, rather than as an absence of order.

3. Is the best that we can do to ‘do no harm’?

There is now substantive recognition of the highly complex role that education plays in conflict (see a previous FriEnt Essay by Alan Smith 2011). Schools can contribute to conflict by ethnic or religious segregation, through the normalisation of violence, through unequal outcomes which lead to frustration and tension, through extreme nationalism, and through teaching passive acceptance of (malevolent) authority. On the positive side, we think that education can promote stability through providing livelihoods and resilience, by enhancing communication and language skills, by teaching conflict resolution, and by giving predispositions to challenge injustice.

One problem is that schools can do all these things simultaneously – and a ‘positive’ initiative, say in multicultural education, can backfire to become a negative one, as stereotypes are amplified.

The second problem relates to how far education is powerful or powerless in the wider society or economy. Learning about landmine safety does not stop people laying landmines. Drug education does not stop the massive international drug cartels on which whole economies rely.

The third problem is that because societies have designed ‘schooling’ to occur mainly at the initial stages of people’s lives, the intricate webs of interactions that occur afterwards mean that long term effects are almost impossible to predict, let alone control.

A key question is therefore of ambition. Is the best that we can do in education to ‘do no harm’? How realistic is it for education to try to be involved in conflict transformation? Is all we can hope for to make schools oases in otherwise conflictual societies? The view of this paper is that the chain of causation in conflict and its transformation is far too long and complicated to hope to make ‘recommendations’ about peacebuilding. It will be the stance of this paper that perhaps the most we can do is create the conditions where conflict in the future may be marginally less likely. Yet this is a not insignificant aim.

Workshop: Education building peace?!

This essay is based on a presentation by Professor Lynn Davies at a workshop in December 2012, jointly organised by FriEnt and on behalf of BMZ/Division Education by the GIZ/Sector Programme Education. The participants addressed the need to deepen the understanding and analysis of theories of change on which interventions in the field of development and peacebuilding are based on.

4. Hindrances to change

The failures of attempts to create change in and through education can usefully be understood with a complexity analysis. The first error is the assumption that change is linear, that there are simple solutions. We all have theories of change, that an input at one point will create positive outcomes at the next, and that a chain of events will occur. These theories often relate to our analysis of the cause of conflict. For example, if we think that conflict re-

lates to prejudice, then learning about 'the other' will mean greater acceptance which will mean better community cohesion which will mean less likelihood of manipulation by religious/tribal/ethnic leaders which will mean resistance to supporting conflict. If we think that conflict is caused by unemployed youth, then vocational education will lead to better jobs which will ease frustration which will mean less likelihood of being enticed into armed militias which will mean these have difficulty recruiting and will be less forceful. If we think that conflict is caused by grievance about minority status, then mother tongue teaching and cultural inclusion into curriculum will promote esteem and security of marginalised groups and less likelihood of opposition.

The list of such linear pathways is extensive. The problem is that they do not always intersect in policy strategies, even within one organisation. Input-output models do not work in social terms, as too many messy contextual factors and power interests intervene. The 'attribution gap' is too huge. Even if conflict were to decrease, it is almost impossible to trace this back to something that happened in education. This is not to say that we should not make attempts to improve the way people live together, but that much has to be done on hope rather than evidence in terms of sustainable impact.

A second hindrance to change is what is termed 'lock-in' or path dependence. Systems can exhibit features which prevent them evolving to better forms. In social systems, these include everything from fundamentalist religious ideology to gendered inequality to acceptance that beating children is the best way to create disciplined peaceful people. Any society exhibits myriad examples of 'the way we do things', where culture becomes entombed or concretized and where histories appear to dictate particular trajectories. Such brakes on adaptability have resonance in our attempts at change. Our task in thinking about points of intervention is how we deal with such frozen, locked-in features of our social world, narratives and historical memories.

A third hindrance can be the assumption that leadership is the key target. What we now know, not just from neuroscience, but from studies of criminal and terrorist networks, is that successful networks do not necessarily have leaders as such. We can learn much both from criminal as well as progressive social movements in terms of how networks form and take on power. While we do want to look at how school principals can be instrumental in school change, the question is whether their school producing more 'successful' students simply means other schools producing fewer, given the rationed nature of educational success.

A final hindrance is the current securitization agenda applied to schools and universities. This creates climates of fear and suspicion, rather than transparency and trust. A weaker version of securitisation is the 'stability' agenda, the idea that just by constructing schools and training teachers, a country will become more stable. This is indeed a change process, but whether this actually leads to peace is not evidenced. The hindrance comes again from linear assumptions and therefore the complacency that progress has been made towards peace. It is usually good to build schools and train teachers, but this is not conflict transformation, especially if the elements within schools that actually contribute to conflict remain unchanged.

Links & Literature

[Education and Peacebuilding: from 'conflict-analysis' to 'conflict transformation'?](#)

Essay Series - Part IV
Alan Smith | FriEnt | 2011

[The role of education in peacebuilding. A synthesis report of findings from Lebanon, Nepal and Sierra Leone](#)

Mario Novell; Alan Smith | United Nations Children's Fund | 2011

[Complexity Theory and the Social Sciences: An Introduction](#)

David S. Byrne | 1998

5. Using complexity mind-sets

In contrast to linear, hierarchical assumptions about change, using a complexity mind-set permits a different way of contemplating intervention. Six interlinked features can be identified here.

1. First, there is being comfortable with experimentation, seeing 'mistakes' or apparent failures simply as information, not as disasters, and being content with divergence from the original plan. There needs to be turbulence for creativity to emerge. This means being relaxed about having only short-term goals, about using constant revisions, and about the means to achieve these goals established in partnership with the participants, not pre-decided.
2. Second is the need for multiple connectivity and multiple-way consultation vertically and horizontally, so that the maximum information channels are opened and responses gauged through a variety of feedback loops. Do we know enough about local multipliers and their networks? What are the co-systems surrounding education? Can we understand patron-client relations rather than deploring them?
3. Third is a stress on horizontalism rather than top-down leadership, learning from how social movements and protests work, and especially from how social media work. Students and teachers have to be recognised as 'activists' or agents within these types of social change, creating and recreating the links, not as recipients. Democracy these days is about retweeting, not referendums.
4. Fourth is the need for political organisation, networking and creating alliances. Sometimes these need to be with uncomfortable partners, even such as the Taliban. A 'principled pragmatism' is called for. Networking also provides greater understanding of 'the enemy' and their motivations – a Taliban example again is their view of 'control of violence' rather than 'non-violence' Can one work with this?
5. Fifth is the search for combinations and pivotal points for change that can be amplified. If this seems opportunistic, it is because it is. A constructivist approach – as in starting where the child is – entails starting where the opposition is. In Afghanistan, one does not even begin discussing human rights with the Taliban. One does not even start with education. Instead one starts with how they want to qualify their doctors or their engineers or their midwives.
6. Finally, there is the need to unfreeze compartmentalised ice-trays such as segregated schools, or to identify and release locked in mentalities surrounding the use of violence or revenge.

6. Dilemmas of (un) certainty

It has to be admitted that not all such mind-sets would be attractive to funders or policy makers. Any intervention needs an aim or rationale, yet this should not result in absolutism. A CAS does not have an end-goal, a Utopian vision of where experiments lead. It simply creates or builds on turbulence in the system, getting to the 'edge of chaos' to 'emerge' into a better order. A CAS is also not moral as such – it simply learns from what works. But in social terms we do need to impose certain of our values on activity. Funders may not be happy with unpredictability, with risk, with indefinite outcomes, nor with seeing faith as uncertainty, or peace as a process. Therefore we cannot be completely relativistic nor completely open-ended about where change will go. In the social world, complexity insights remain pointers, particularly useful in explaining failure of policy and enabling caution about em-

barking on expensive pathways which become solidified like lava flows. We need far more 'bad practice' case studies, admitting where interventions, training or workshops had no impact or were even counter-productive. We have to go right back to why we think education is important, and whether we were justified. This is not popular.

7. Conditions and contexts, not grand goals!

Yet we can arrive at some basic principles in a change process in conflict-affected states. Initially comes a reiteration that every conflict context is different, with the interactions taking unique forms and trajectories. There is no recipe for peacebuilding, nor any agreement on what 'peace' might mean in a particular setting. Much is made of the difference between negative and positive peace; but in some contexts negative peace, the absence of war or violence, may be the best we can hope for. Education single-handedly cannot engage in conflict transformation. However, it is not without power and potential.

What can be done is providing the conditions for change and for evolution into something better. This means rather than starting with an end-goal – 'peace' – you start with establishing an educational context which has 'rules' which match your values and where experience tells us can lead to the shifts that we desire. An example of such rules would be human rights – traditionally better seen as a process than as a goal – whereby students, teachers, parents, the community, and administrators all learn and apply the basic tenets of mutuality, respect and dignity. Such values may have been eroded during conflict. The nice thing about rights is that (unlike sacred texts) they are not a blueprint, they are themselves revisable and discussable, with constant tensions between, say, minority rights to cultural expression and rights relating to gender equality, or between rights of freedom of expression and rights to dignity and freedom from abuse. Such tensions between absolute rights and contingent rights make them very suitable for a complexity approach, as well as the fact that they apply to absolutely everyone, and not just to those who are part of the 'rules' of a particular religion or culture.

Education can also release 'lock-in' and frozen accidents. This is risky, as we see with girls' education in Pakistan and Afghanistan, but providing girls' education can shift community attitudes as well as providing avenues for girls themselves. Galvanising the community around the provision of schooling is a classic example of amplification, as parents themselves gain political and resistance skills. Work on education and extremism will point up the importance of enabling students to live with ambiguity, to have reasonable doubt, not to see the world and others in polarised terms. There is experimentation with various methods to bring this debate safely into the classroom.

Creating enabling conditions means directing the beam on multiple sites. Syntheses of programmes of work in different conflict-affected countries have pointed up the need for engagement with combined targets, in that ignoring one could seriously undermine the rest and indeed the whole programme. These focal points were community involvement, provision of resources, people's understandings of the vision or principles, addressing motivations and incentives in fragile contexts, enabling constant participation in decisions, and establishing legal frameworks to underpin change. Greater success came when there was joint working and multiple communication, experimentation then scaling up, progress in small steps, whole school or network development rather than extracting teachers or principals for training, rights-based approaches, an emphasis on non-violence rather than peace education and ongoing monitoring and evaluation to provide feedback.

There is often debate about whether to start with institutions and hope these will change people, or start with people and hope they will shift the institutions. A complexity approach would resolve this by focussing more on the creation of opportunities and spaces, physical and mental, in which people can try things out, whether different methods or being different themselves. A current example is the project on 'shared schools' In Northern Ireland. Segregated schools, it is admitted, have contributed to sectarian tension. Fully integrated schools have never really taken off, as they also haven't in Sri Lanka, for a variety of reasons. The shared schools project brings students and teachers together across Protestant and Catholic schools for certain classes – and there are now 3000 of such classes.

Central aspects of the project fit nicely with a complexity approach. They are to leave borders where they are but make them less important – as in Europe. (This is the opposite to multiculturalism which privileges difference.) Teachers are experimenting with new arrangements, whether practical logistics around transport or ways to share teaching. The idea is to move from 'best practice' to 'next practice', building up new solutions. Teachers have been trained in network analysis and in being part of a network. There is a philosophy of being tolerant of failure, trying things, saying it doesn't matter if they don't work. The view is that the future is there to be made – maybe this will be towards more integration, maybe it will just stay with this degree of sharing. Bureaucracies thrive on predictability, so the project more or less ignores the officials. The idea of change recognises the Pareto principle of the 80:20 rule: for many events, 80% of the effects come from 20% of the people, or, put another way, 20% of the people can effect big change. Another principle is a different version of the contact hypothesis, known as the 'strength of weak ties': that we learn more from acquaintances than friends. Common identities sound nice but they can create stagnation: one needs to link up with people who think differently, so that boundaries become porous or weak.

As well as values and encounters, education provides skills. As said, employment skills may provide an avenue to stability, but of course this depends on job availability. For a society to emerge, the key skills for students are to learn to be change agents themselves. These skills may indeed be the personal ones for self-promotion, for getting and holding jobs, but such skills can be linked to a political articulateness which can be harnessed for wider ends. These are the proficiencies in negotiation, debate and lobbying as well as the skills and habits of political organisation. With social media, this is less boring now than in the days of mass leafleting, stuffing envelopes and knocking on doors, but has the same principles of engaging in the basic work to reach people. Students are increasingly using media such as Facebook and Twitter, but their creation of change currently would mostly be to their self-profile or circle of friends, not necessarily to wider social change. Using media for social transformation requires additional skills – learning from jihadi networks if necessary.

8. Monitoring and evaluation

Finally, how does monitoring and evaluation work in such a fluid and experimental approach? It not only works, but is essential. The efficiency of a CAS is built on feedback loops.

Author

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As soon as one deliberately creates a turbulence in the system – introducing a rights-based approach, new encounters between students, or parental/community involvement – then this needs monitoring to learn from what is happening. There might well be conventional ‘base-lines’ for what is hoped/predicted to occur and there would be the establishment of indicators. Yet one key feature would be the participation of students, teachers, parents and communities in the generation of indicators and in the research processes, so that everyone learns. Openness to different types of information is crucial – a simple narrative from a student about how he/she applied their learning in the community, or how they themselves changed as a result of taking part in a debate, is equally useful information to extensive attitude surveys. Monitoring and evaluation of change in a CAS does not really lend itself to positivist approaches, and qualitative, fluid, innovative ways are more appropriate.

Indicators too can remain fluid. As in deradicalisation programmes, does ‘success’ have to be a change in attitudes and goals, or is it enough that the goals stay the same but the means to achieve them become non-violent? If people can provoke each other without being violent, is that not OK? Another key is the openness to unexpected things happening, and not being restricted to the scrutiny of those ‘results chains’ which were part of the programme proposal. A final, fundamental point is seeing everything as information. If something does not ‘work’ then this is equally good information to if it does – sometimes better. If teachers do not understand the deeper reasons for abolishing corporal punishment in spite of workshops or exhortations, and simply use different methods to humiliate students, then one does not give up, but tries a different route to minimising school-based violence.

The whole approach can perhaps be summarized by Byrne’s insight:

‘Complexity/chaos offers the possibility of an engaged science not founded in pride, in the assertion of an absolute knowledge as the basis for social programmes, but rather in a humility about the complexity of the world coupled with a hopeful belief in the potential of human beings for doing something about it’

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