

Learning for Peace or War

Dilemmas in Shaping Children's Attitudes towards Non-Violence and Coexistence in Lebanon

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Executive summary

This thesis is the outcome of field research conducted in the light of the Master's programme in Social and Cultural Anthropology at VU University, Amsterdam. This course encompassed the preparation, execution, and evaluation of an individual academic research related to the concept of 'human security'. The present study outlines the performance of elementary education in Lebanon, a country characterised by recurring war, violence and insecurity. More specifically, it highlights how educators deal with issues of non-violence and coexistence towards their students, and how children subsequently incorporate these values in their perceptions of the world they live in. Accordingly, the thesis scrutinises the assumption that education is a means of promoting peace, human rights, and development in conflict areas, by assessing how approaches to violence and tolerance are transferred across generations.

Three months of field study were conducted at schools in Beirut and South Lebanon, a region that borders Israel and has suffered from decades of violence. Private, public, and religious schools were analysed by participatory research methods, projective exercises like drawing, and interviews with educators and students (aged 8-14). Their accounts on the 2006 summer war between Hezbollah and Israel, the succeeding internal political crisis, life amidst the danger of cluster bombs and mounting fears for civil war, and prospects for the future constitute the basis of this thesis.

The main findings stress that, given mounting sectarian tensions and the destructive legacy left by the summer war, educators find it nearly impossible to advance non-violence and coexistence – if they attempt to do so at all. Schools offer a space for the sharing of traumatic experiences and community support, but neither poorly equipped public schools nor high-quality private schools succeed in effectively advancing values and skills that facilitate the spread of nonviolence and tolerance, as long as hostility and confrontation determine social reality outside the school. In addition, the absence of government follow-up and professional support, poverty, widespread corporal violence, and a culture of martyrdom that is promoted by movements such as Hezbollah, impede the spread of notions of peace and coexistence.

Nevertheless, education must still be considered a crucial instrument in promoting nonviolence and coexistence, since embodying these values requires learning. This can only be achieved, however, when tendencies in different realms of society move towards similar goals and sufficient institutional and professional support is provided.

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