Raegan Loheide
ITSF 4580
Professor Steiner-Khamsi
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In “The Road to Sustainable Peace: Galtung’s Concept of Positive Peace as a Framework to Examine Post-war Reconstruction Initiatives in Syria,” Younes (2024) examines the politics of reconstruction in peacebuilding and education initiatives. After over a decade of armed conflict and seeing hundreds of thousands of civilian casualties, this article was published one month before Bashar Al Assad was overthrown and Syria entered a transitional government with a new president. Although this research operates under the assumption Al Assad will maintain power, the study’s implications carry on in the wake of the civil war interrupting formal schooling for millions of children amidst a persistent humanitarian crisis, internal displacement, and a distraught education system.

Younes explores whether the government’s education policies are part of a sustainable peacebuilding agenda aimed at transformative change. Information gathered from teachers, educational leaders, journalists, government officials, and textbook analyses portray the Syrian State’s response to the post-conflict landscape lacks a distinct curricular strategy within teacher trainings and public schools, and efforts are concentrated towards symbolically restoring the school system.

Drawing on scholarship from peace and post-conflict studies, Younes connects the government’s intentional evasion of updated and contextually appropriate materials to signaling a concerted repressive agenda towards engaging discourse about the civil war. Younes reveals the regime’s negative approach to peacebuilding by identifying a systematic “policy of silence” in educational reconstruction initiatives that promotes structural violence and risks reproducing conflict (p. 7).

Syria’s negative conception of peace, focused on the absence of violence and a desire to return to normalcy, influences educational priorities. Distinguishing ‘negative’ from ‘positive’ peace draws on Galtung’s (1969) seminal work on typologies of violence. Galtung defines negative peace as the temporary absence of direct violence like armed-conflict, and positive peace, also referred to as social justice, as the absence of structural violence and the presence of egalitarian distributions of power and resources. In operationalizing the definitions, Galtung makes a point to retain that understanding peace as the absence of intended and interpersonal violence is merely one element and that similarly concentrating efforts in the direction of only structural violence yields similar consequences—positive peace includes attention to the multiplicities of violence (p. 172). Younes employs this framework to examine whether post-war initiatives in the education sector emphasize solely the reconstruction of physical infrastructure or are situated within long-term peacebuilding strategies to transform Syria’s socioeconomic and political ecology. This framing aids in the study’s curricular analysis to demonstrate deliberate pedagogical choices, identify actors, and illuminate institutional mechanisms that evade direct manifestations yet promote prolonged structural and cultural aspects of violence.

While the absence of armed conflict presents a window to rebuild what was lost, the education sector’s priorities appear limited to restoring instruction and neglect ideological and psychological issues. Younes’ conversations with education stakeholders revealed that whether out of economic necessity or underlying agendas, post-conflict reconstruction initiatives included robust efforts to restore physical infrastructure for schooling. However, the government’s concerted approach to repairing centers for learning has not been matched with renewed curricula. Younes finds research participants voice a contradictory gap in the state’s budget allocations to education and a lack of strategic response.

Bentrovato's (2017) research helps Younes interpret whether rehabilitating destroyed facilities, fractured knowledge networks, and loss of personnel are pragmatic steps prioritized to reflect the country's reality or are part of an evasive strategy towards addressing the recently violent past. Bentrovato illuminates the intersection of complacency in understanding peace as the absence of direct interpersonal violence and surrendering to a facade of normalcy via education policies. Addressing a violent past is politically constrained by fears for safety and risks jeopardizing infant and fragile states of peace when prominent actors involved in the conflict still hold powerful positions in new governments, as in Syria's case where a despot maintains authoritarian rule (Bentrovato, 2017). This critical analysis supports Younes' understanding that the nature of peace currently promoted in Syria aims for a return to normalcy focused on rebuilding symbols rather than transforming structures through engaging with new pedagogy to address intergroup conflicts.

Syria's negative approach to peace as understood to be a return to normalcy is best represented by the "interruption-resumption" model applied to teacher education (Younes, 2024, p. 5). Teachers are burdened by the lack of systematic attention towards necessary pedagogical and curricular changes to reflect the changed circumstances and demographics of their classrooms. State policy continues to champion teacher-training that falls back on pre-conflict reforms focused on shifting pedagogical perspectives from instruction to facilitation. Large scale and heftily funded training programs are touted as means to "upskill teachers and build their capacity to deal with the conflict" (p. 5). Syria's Director of Teacher Training and Continuing Professional Development at the Ministry of Education alluded to the way training responded to the conflict was indeed by "maintaining pre-conflict strategies while adding some topics to deal with the conflict such as intensive learning programs and teaching over-crowded classes in addition to the issue of psychological support" (p. 6). Yet, the dated reforms do not recognize nor address learners' needs for updated methodologies to approach the impact of displacement on classroom size, function, and culture.

The 'interruption-resumption' model enforces normalcy to the extent that it suppresses lived experiences and reflects the unchanged institutional political ideologies that gave rise to the protracted civil war. The lack of professional development's contextual response leaves teachers feeling an individual responsibility to address the war's aftermath. Moreover, the curriculum actually taught has not been updated since 1983, when Bashar Al Assad's father was head of state (Younes, 2024). Younes engages research on fragility in conflict-affected states to thread together an analytical framework on how schools in Syria act as sites of "active reinforcement" and are a "reflection of normality" (Davies, 2011, p. 53). Davies analyzes specific interventions and conceives a spectrum of impacts education can have on political stability and social cohesion. Davies discusses how education is manipulated by different groups to enforce normalcy and interrogates calls for universal education as a precondition for peace, which expands on theory outlining the "two faces" of education's capacity to infuse positive social norms or act as a destructive force that exacerbates intergroup conflict (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000, p. 9).

Younes draws on Davies (2011) and Bentrovato's (2017) research to conceptualize Syria's systematic and structural 'policy of silence' in reconstruction initiatives carried out through the interruption-resumption model and overarching "self-denial" of the conflict's impact on education (2024, p. 6). Younes' participants elucidate a sense of 'self-denial' to recognizing the war within Syrian educational policies that go to lengths of manifesting through a uniform education agenda. Government documents identify challenges with curricular development posed by a "loss of national identity" and in the same breath implement a 'red line policy' that unequivocally bans discussing the civil war in classrooms (p. 7). The structural, systematic, and subversive mechanisms of silence in educational

reconstruction reverberate in teachers' fears of repercussions and are underscored by revisionist history textbooks whose timelines are curtailed, essentially deleting modern history from the start of the Arab Spring, onward. Bentrovato helps Younes distinguish between reasons for omitting recent historical events from curricula that may be based in legitimate concerns versus scapegoat the passage of time as a solution for healing and thereby create a "rhetoric of silence" (2017, p. 44).

Whether education initiatives are intended to transform societal conditions or are more likely to "pave way for emergence of biased or militarized curriculum" becomes clearer in the context of politicized apathy towards acknowledging the conflict (Younes, 2024, p. 3). Findings do not suggest institutionalized silence is an example of good faith "thwarted policy attempts" intended "to negotiate peace but ended up cementing ethnonationalist divides" (Davies, 2011, p. 44). Rather, these repressive tactics support Younes' conclusion that Syria's decrease in militarized violence is merely being replaced by indirect forms of violence aimed at social control, pacification, and ideological indoctrination.

Current educational reconstruction initiatives advance renewed structural violence through controlling the narrative about Syria's civil war and failing to address the conflict's root causes. Younes unpacks how the 'policy of silence' promotes structural violence through advancing hegemonic historical accounts, encouraging nationalism, and jeopardizing socio-cultural tolerance.

The 'policy of silence' favors the Syrian regime's one-sided account of political power and creates a hegemonic historical narrative that erases any contestation or dissatisfaction with the government's leadership. Ahonen (2014) analyzes historical narratives in post-conflict settings, concluding education initiatives that create singular accounts of conflict risk legitimizing repurposed state violence. Younes' suspicions of the government's surface level reconciliation efforts are supported by Ahonen's assertion that, "After a conflict, history is customarily used by the parties to justify their respective causes and to claim symbolic recognition of their sufferings" (2014, p. 77). Ahonen suggests that nation states promoting singular narratives in textbook production and educational administration about conflicts contribute to wider projects to impose a "uniform national grand narrative" about history (2014, p. 83).

Erasing modern historical accounts from textbook development and directives to avoid any reference of the civil war and political power struggles serve state interests in constructing nationalist ideologies. Bush and Saltarelli (2000) underscore the tension between education as a tool for peacebuilding and ideological control, referencing its role in *creating* rather than serving a public. They analyze education's negative impacts when it serves to manipulate history for political ends, showing how the distortion of historical events occurs through acts of commission like the militaristic nature of history curriculums and through omission, or erasure. While excluding violent historical events can serve to exacerbate political polarization, Bentrovato (2017) maintains that hegemonic historical narratives are not exclusively built through one-sided omission tactics. Textbook analyses highlight that narratives crafted through conciliatory processes and consensus may emerge as a new "official truth" with comparable damage (2017, p. 50). Younes consequently notes that a retrospective focus on bloodshed would not foster a climate of tolerance, but nor do current approaches to disarm history and indoctrinate students with a lack of understanding their own stories (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000).

Nationalist narratives are seldom invoked to deconstruct systemic oppression and structural inequalities. Abdullah et al. (2020) attempt to distinguish between curricula that advances nationalism and that which fosters a shared memory. Their research details archaeological sites and historical figures important to Syrian students from various ethnic and religious backgrounds. Finding that, "the students

did not have a preference in their conception of Syrian heritage between modern and ancient, Islamic or non-Islamic, but they had pride in a diversity of sites within Syria as a whole," the authors propound teaching narratives celebrating commonalities build awareness of shared cultural heritage, thus contribute to pluralistic tolerance (p. 64). Younes critically engages with claims that teaching shared heritage can contribute to forging a common national identity in service of reconciliation in post-war societies through advancing social cohesion (Abdullah et al., 2020). Situating teaching common cultural heritage's potential for peacebuilding within Syria's post-conflict reality of pernicious authoritarianism, there are more likely opportunities for cooptation that facilitate a biased curriculum (Younes, 2024).

Single-stories about heritage propelled by nationalism can instigate social divides and discourage tolerance. While Abdullah et al. (2020) interpret greater social cohesion results from students developing a shared identity and common national history through figures and sites not contingent on ethnic and religious backgrounds, other scholars caution against this pedagogy. Bush and Saltarelli illuminate the dangers of watering down diversity where education can be used as a "weapon in cultural repression" (2000, p. 10). National curricula that homogenizes diversity and difference presents heterogeneity as a threat to political coherence and unity. Such central tendencies disingenuously portray inter-group relations as static and unfractured, and when taught, foster animosity and correlate with xenophobia (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000, p. 13). In this sense, it is prudent to bring attention to demographic diversity in contexts aside from conflict to avoid underwriting the notion that differences are a reason for disagreement and justify escalation.

While uniform narratives are prone to supporting nationalist interests, multi-perspective curricula grounded in people's history can engender a sense of shared cultural heritage that uplifts diversity and aligns with a culture of positive peace. Affirming that, "social inclusiveness is necessary for history to prompt reconciliation," Ahonen does not wholly disagree on the import of schooling's role in building a social identity (2014, p. 77). Rather than endorsing *one uniform identity*, the goal of curricula should be exposure to an array of identity elements and group orientations. Ahonen not only discounts separating identity markers from cultural heritage but is also wary of multi-perspective accounts consolidated into a single narrative, as explicitly dialectic history lessons carry potential to uproot structural violence.

Hegemonic narratives that omit contested events from curricula and evade confronting sensitive and controversial recent histories fail to address the root causes of violent armed conflict. Younes postures Syrian educational reconstruction initiatives therefore condone a new wave of structural violence that absolves the regime of the responsibility to enact societal change—in the absence of direct danger, just rebuild the schools, teachers and students return, and the country resumes business-as-usual, because there was no real reason for dissatisfaction in the first place. Focusing on symbolic restoration while simultaneously denying the struggles people are still experiencing blatantly sidesteps systemic change and represents one of the "two faces" of education in its potential to contribute to a culture of violence, showing how Syria's government uses the education system to "advance the interests of one group at the expense of others" and "secure their privilege across generations" (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000, p. 9). Younes infers little fundamental transformation will occur from current curricular approaches, as they are directed by the same political and ideological forces that raised conflict, and are delivered in their intolerant foundations (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000). Addressing the root causes of civil dissonance requires a positive peacebuilding process where education is a tool for raising critical consciousness and the government is committed to intervention (Ahonen, 2014).

Official policies regard peace in Syria as a mere absence of violence and efforts to construct a return to pre-conflict normalcy through nationalist ideological indoctrination promote structural violence in ways that fail to reckon with underlying causes, and risk reproducing the conditions responsible for conflict which may lead to a relapse of armed violence.

Using Galtung's (1969) framework of positive peace, Younes (2024) suggests reconstruction approaches fail to address root causes of violence and consequently may lead to reproducing instability. This study's conclusions are predicated on understanding Galtung's constructions of negative and positive cultures of peace throughout decades of cumulative scholarship. Younes positions sustainable peacebuilding as a transformative and ongoing process that incorporates the goals of both negative and positive typologies, yet several paragraphs later claims:

> "The concept of peacebuilding itself is not situated in a clearly defined theoretical framework such as the one provided by Galtung where there is a clear distinction between negative and positive peace." (p. 2)

This contradiction complicates Younes' central argument demarcating Syria's national reconstruction path follows a negative culture of peace. How can a muddled pragmatic application be repurposed to put a wholesale label on a country's efforts to rebuild post-conflict while only examining one social sector's initiatives? This is not to say Younes' application of Galtung's framework is misguided, rather it could be better clarified and strengthened through including a wider range of terms used to distinguish typologies of violence as laid out in "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," instead of synthesizing Galtung's research papers throughout the late 20th century as if capitalizing interest. For example, Younes does not discuss the "manifest" and "latent" levels of structural violence (Galtung, 1969, p. 172). Latent violence is "something which is not there, yet might easily come about," and is particularly relevant for showing how a relative lack of personal violence can escalate "potential" to "actual realization" (p. 169). Such omissions limit the reader's understanding of how negative peacebuilding practices across education initiatives can accumulate to reproduce oppression and replicate conflict.

Younes prophetically argues that despite the de-escalation of militarized violence, Syria is far from a 'post-conflict' setting. Through semi-structured interviews and analyzing history textbooks and national curriculum, Younes uncovers negligible efforts to formally address the civil war. Furthermore, directions to avoid referring to the conflict during the teaching process and exclusions of modern history from textbooks serve to create a uniform educational understanding, influencing a prolonged revisionist history. This study provides evidence that post-war Syrian reconstruction initiatives in education follow a negative approach to peace through a deliberate 'policy of silence' that is systematically imposed. Supported by scholarship on peacebuilding and education in conflict-affected states, Younes asserts this purposeful effort ushers in a new phase where armed conflict is replaced by promoting structural violence that demands obedience and reproduces exacerbated conflict.

Younes' scholarship is an important contribution to Syria's reconstruction efforts, arguably even more so under new leadership as it offers guidance to avoid the pitfalls of Al Assad's regime and usher in a transformed era of sustained, positive peace.

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Do Syrian educational reconstruction efforts promote a culture of positive peace?

Younes (2024) The road to sustainable peace: Galtung's concept of positive peace as a framework to examine post-war reconstruction initiatives in Syria

- Symbolic initiatives
- Pedagogical priorities
- Interruption Resumption
- Self Denial & Uniform Schools

Negative Approach to Peacebuilding

Galtung (1969) Violence, Peace & Peace Research

- Absence of violence
- Return to Normalcy

Bentrovato (2017) History textbook writing in postconflict societies: From battlefield to site and means of conflict transformation

Conciliatory, multi-perspective narratives promote intergroup reconciliation; value of teaching contested history

Davies (2011) Can Education Interrupt Fragility? Toward the Resilient Citizen and the Adaptable State.

Education's subversive spectrum of impacts; government manipulation and potential for harm

Systematic Policy of Silence

Promotes Structural Violence

Bush & Saltarelli (2000) *The two faces of education in ethnic conflict*

Education's potential for peacebuilding and destructive ideological control

Ahonen (2014) Education in post-conflict societies

Singular historical narratives legitimize state violence

Abdullah et al (2020) Supporting peacebuilding in Syria through universities: The role of cultural heritage

Teaching shared heritage forges national identity, advances social cohesion

Unaddressed root causes

Uniform national narrative

Risks reproducing conflict

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The road to sustainable peace: Galtung's concept of positive peace as a framework to examine post-war reconstruction initiatives in Syria

Rami Younes [1]

Learning Skills Team, Canterbury Christ Church University, Kent, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

Premised on Galtung's theory of positive peace (1969), this study examines whether the Syrian government's post-war initiatives to reconstruct the education sector aim to promote a culture of positive peace. Data is obtained from semi-structured interviews with twelve participants consisting of senior government officials, teacher educators from a public university and the equivalent of pre-service and in-service teacher training centres within a government-held area. The validity of meaning developed from interview data was also assessed through cross-checking emerging patterns with document examination. Research findings reveal that the government's current approach to reconstruction is based on a negative concept of peace that aims to bring life back to 'normal' as it was before the conflict.

1. Introduction

After 12 years, the impact on human lives and demographic displacement remains the most dramatic consequence of the Syrian conflict as it is reported that 306,887 civilians were killed between March 2011–2021 (United Nations, 2022). The conflict has also caused the worst humanitarian crisis since the Second World War leading to the world's single largest refugee crisis for almost a quarter of a century (UNHCR: 2015). The conflict has also had a devastating impact on education leaving more than 2.4 million children out of school (Qaddour and Husain, 2022), and one in three schools can no longer be used as they were completely destroyed, damaged or being used for military purposes (UNICEF, 2021).

The conflict's impact on education is not only reflected through destroyed infrastructure and statistical data but also through the systematic and tireless efforts of all parties to direct education towards promoting violence, spreading fear and hatred against the other (Syrian Centre for Policy Research, 2016). This has created a subtle but equally devastating war in the classroom (Qatrib and Yahia, 2016), turning schooling into a platform to promote a kill-or-be killed culture, dehumanise the other, misrepresent history and promote political agendas (Bush and Saltarelli, 2000).

The application of education in the Syrian conflict is a reminder of the ongoing debate about education as an arena for political and ideological 'struggle', where it has long been described as either part of an 'ideological state apparatus' required to ensure the domination of ruling power structures (Althusser,1970), or as a tool for self and social empowerment that can play a role in enabling individuals to transform their social realities (Freire, 2005). In violent conflicts such as the Syrian one, this ambivalent role becomes more evident, where education is described as having the potential to be either an ideological weapon to legitimise violence or an essential tool for developing a sustainable peace culture (Bush and Saltarelli, 2000).

Although the Syrian conflict is still fluid and complex, the power scale seems to be tilting in favour of the government and its allies, as it is estimated that the government currently controls between 60 % and 70 % of Syria including main cities and strongholds of the opposition such as the capital city Damascus. These changes have led to a decline in large-scale military conflict with 2022 witnessing the lowest number of people killed since the conflict has started (Loft, 2023). In May 2023 Syria was re-admitted into the Arab League and the Syrian President Bashar Al Assad visited many Arab countries such as United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia for the first time since the conflict began, which is significant as it is a tacit acknowledgement of Al Assad as 'the victor in the civil war and that he will remain in power' (Loft, 2023:23).

The de-escalation of military operations has created an atmosphere of 'relative peace', which has also been paralleled with an increase in the rhetoric of 'post-conflict' reconstruction by the government as reflected by Al Assad who stated that 'reconstruction is the title of the economy for the coming period' (Al Assad, 2014), and as demonstrated through

E-mail address: rami.younes@canterbury.ac.uk.
[1] North Holmes Rd, Canterbury, Kent, CT1 1QU

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its efforts to rebuild destroyed infrastructure and re-open schools. For instance, the Ministry of Education (MoE) reported that 4400,000 students, referred to as 'the Generation of Hope', attended schools in 2018 (Ministry of Education, 2018), which is a positive development compared to the 2015/2016 where it was estimated that 45.2 % of school-age children did not attend school (Syrian Centre for Policy Research, 2016). The government's rhetoric of reconstruction refers to other aspects of this process that transcend rebuilding physical infrastructure to include 'real reconstruction' that aims to 'deal with the destroyed and destructive intellectual structure' (Al Assad, 2019).

Approaching this current state of 'relative peace' as a 'window of opportunity' to develop an initial understanding of the government's approach to peacebuilding, this study adopts Galtung's theory of positive peace (1969) as a framework to examine whether the Syrian government's post-war reconstruction initiatives of the education sector are linked to long-term peacebuilding strategies that aim to transform this state of negative peace to a more sustainable culture of positive peace. The study aims to illuminate whether these initiatives place more emphasis on reconstruction of physical infrastructure, or on the 'transformation' of political, economic and social structures that promote violence (Pherali: 2016:199).

2. Galtung's concepts of negative and positive peace

Galtung's (1969) provides typologies of violence that distinguish between direct, structural and cultural violence. In this framework, direct violence is characterised by being 'intended', 'quick' and can be 'discovered' as there is an 'actor' who commits violence against a 'person who was very much alive a second ago' and is 'now dead' (Galtung, 1985:146, Galtung,1969: 170–171). The second type of violence, structural or indirect, is less obvious and harder to identify as the subject-object relation is not evident. The 'actor' cannot be detected as violence is built into social structures and 'shows up as unequal power' and 'unequal life chances' (Galtung, 1969: 170–171). If the 'triangle' of violence 'stood on its 'direct' and 'structural violence' feet', cultural violence functions as their 'legitimiser' (Galtung, 1990: 294), since it refers to 'those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence' that can be used to legitimise direct or structural violence, making them 'look, even feel, right - or at least not wrong' (Galtung, 1990:291). Galtung does not only point out the complexity of the concept of violence but also exposes it as a deliberate human act that poses not only a 'physical or existential problem' but also 'a problem of meaning' as it needs to be 'justified or legitimated' (Galtung, 1969:171).

This perspective of violence also develops our understanding of peace, which Galtung describes based on an analogy derived from medical science where 'health can be seen as the absence of disease' or something more 'positive' as 'the building of a healthy body capable of resisting diseases, relying on its own health forces or health sources' (Galtung, 1985:145). Similarly, peace can be 'negative' when it is perceived as an 'absence of violence' in its direct from or 'positive' when it aims to address all three aspects of violence. In this way, we can either have 'dissociative approach' to peace, where 'parties are kept apart, relations are broken', or an 'associative approach' where 'parties are brought together' and 'peaceful relations are built' (Galtung, 1985:151).

Peace as building 'bridges' rather than 'barriers' between conflicting parties (Lambourne, 2004:4), needs to be approached as a 'transformation process' that continues after, rather than ends with, a ceasefire, as it seeks to address root causes and manifestations of violence by incorporating the goals of both negative and positive peace. Such a process cannot be achieved without identifying those 'structures' that 'remove causes of wars' and have the potential to offer 'alternatives to war in situations where wars might occur' (Galtung, 1976: 297). Sustainable peace, therefore, needs to be approached as an ongoing process rather than a 'one-time' intervention as it is a complex, dynamic process of 'becoming' and not just an 'end state' (Jarstad et al., 2019:2).

3. Implications for post-war reconstruction and peacebuilding in Syria

The importance of adopting Galtung's theory of positive peace when examining a post-war context such as the Syrian one comes from highlighting that reconstruction efforts will remain fragile if their ultimate goal remains restricted to abolishing aspects of direct violence without developing systemic efforts that aim to 'transform structures pregnant with violence into less violent ones' (Galtung, 1985:146). As a result, Syria can be referred to as developing a 'peace culture' when deliberate and diverse efforts to promote positive peace can be identified in aspects of its culture such as education (Galtung, 1985).

Post-war peacebuilding initiatives of the Syrian education sector, therefore, needs to be examined as part of a complex process that consists of 'coherent' strategies with 'carefully prioritised' and 'sequenced' sets of tailored activities that aim to not only bring life to normal but also to reduce the risk of relapsing into violent conflict (United Nations, 2010). These initiatives become part of a 'comprehensive concept' that encompasses 'the full array of processes, approaches, and stages needed to transform conflict toward more sustainable, peaceful relationships' (Lederach, 1997: 84–85), something which cannot be achieved by focusing solely on rebuilding 'material damage' without deliberate efforts to include 'restructuration' and 'reculturation' to address structural and cultural damage caused by the conflict (Galtung, 2004).

It becomes important to examine if post-war reconstruction of the Syrian education sector seeks to transcend a focus on rebuilding its physical infrastructure such a building schools and hiring teachers to include other aspects of this process such as the ideological (democratisation of education and re-training teachers) and psychological (addressing issues of psychological and mental health such as stress, trauma and depression) aspects of reconstruction (Smith and Vaux, 2003). Such an examination seeks to identify if there is an acknowledgment in the reconstruction process of the 'highly complex' relationship between education and violent conflicts (Novelli and Lopes Cardozo, 2008:478), and how the content of schooling itself can contribute to feeding grievances and undermines intergroup trust (Mundy and Dryden-Peterson, 2011).

From this perspective, the quality of education and teacher education in a post-war context can no longer be assessed in relation to learners' performance, but rather it needs to be linked to approaching the role of teachers as 'agents' of sustainable peace (Novelli and Sayed, 2016:15). This process requires teacher education that directly seeks to develop teachers as critical and transformative intellectuals (Giroux, 1988), who aim to enable their learners as well as themselves to question the status quo in order to reveal and transform structural and cultural aspects of violence. This theoretical framework has already been examined in relation to the Syrian conflict, where it has been proved to be an effective tool in capitalising on refugee teachers' local knowledge, professional experience, and creativity to create empowering learning spaces and to envision a better future (Pherali et al., 2020).

Adopting Galtung as a theoretical framework also has implications for this study and its contributions to existing literature about peacebuilding in Syria. Although previous studies have provided useful insights into reconstruction efforts in Syria by examining several aspects of this process such as the role of academics and universities in promoting sustainable peace (Abdullah et al., 2020, Shaban, 2020), these studies do not examine these initiatives as part of comprehensive and long-term peacebuilding strategies. The concept of peacebuilding itself is not situated in a clearly defined theoretical framework such as the one provided by Galtung where there is a clear distinction between negative and positive peace.

As a result, this study adopts a different approach as it aims to transcend a focus on analysing fragmented initiatives to examining the politics of education in Syria in order to locate our understanding of current reconstruction initiatives of the education sector within their unique political, ideological and cultural context. By adopting Galtung's

theory of positive peace, this study focuses on examining if there are systemic strategies in Syria that aim to employ education as a tool to 'rupture' the societal conditions that reproduce structural violence (Pherali, 2019:12), and pave the way for the emergence of 'biased or militarised' curriculum (Davies, 2011).

4. Research method

Data in this paper is obtained from semi-structured interviews with twelve participants, who were strategically selected based on their ability to shed light on the larger forces and processes under investigation, allowing the comparatively small group of selected participants to answer research questions (May, 2002). Research participants were also selected to reflect the structure of the education process in Syria and to represent the different stakeholders influencing the teaching and learning strategies. As a result, the study provides perspectives from three angles: the government, pre-university and university sectors.

In this regard, research participants belonged to two distinct categories. The first category included senior government officials who were involved in decision-making and policy development. These participants were all in positions which involved overseeing education, higher education and teacher education. The second category included teachers, counsellors and teacher educators from a public university and the equivalent of pre-service and in-service training centres within a government-held area as they were the ones at the forefront of teacher education, implementing the government's strategies and had first-hand experience of teachers' needs and their possible role in a post-conflict situation. The table below provides a summary of the research participants' backgrounds, levels of experience and involvement in education and teacher education:(Table 1).

As I adopted semi-structured interviews, I prepared two lists of guiding questions for each category of participants, which I used to encourage a type of focused discussion rather than a question-answer format (See appendices A and B for lists of interview questions). I conducted all interviews in Arabic as it is my first language. Some interviews could not be recorded due to the security situation or as requested by participants; in which case notes were taken during the interview.

Data generation and analysis were also informed by a number of documents that I collated during my field research. I used these documents to cross check themes I constructed from analysing interview data, and to provide examples of how these themes are reflected in the educational provision. In addition to examining all history textbooks in the national curriculum, the following table outlines some of the key documents that were examined in this study: (Table 2)

Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was adopted as a conceptual framework to analyse generated data. When interviews were recorded, I listened to them repeatedly using the bookmark feature on my phone which enabled me to highlight parts of each interview that were of interest to me and would require further examination. After that, I listened to the bookmarked sections of each interview before transcribing and translating the parts that I found relevant to the examined issues. I deliberately selected this method instead of verbatim transcription, as I sought to keep this process focused on the generation and interpretation of meaning from data rather than reducing it to a 'simple clerical task' (Halcomb and Davidson, 2006:40).

I structured data analysis in a way that reflected the three main sample sources for data generation: government perspective, pre-university and university learning, as this enabled me to examine data within and across different categories in order to compare and contrast patterns underpinning selected segments of data. I examined dataset searching for underlying concepts that are relevant to research questions identifying in this process important sections of data and attaching labels to index them as they relate to a pattern in the data (King, 2004).

By following this strategy, I developed a table of initial codes in which I included extracts from each interview, attached with relevant

Table 1
Summary of research participants' backgrounds.

Participant	Gender	Position	Professional experience	Role
Elia	Male	Director of Teacher Training and Continuing Professional Development	Over 30 years	Overseeing in-service training of school teachers and contributing to the MoE's training policies
Fa	Female	Senior Lecturer in a Faculty of Education and a Director of a centre that offers counselling services to locally displaced individuals	10 years	Teaching on teacher training and counselling modules, and manages the provision of counselling services provided to locally displaced individuals
Faheem	Male	Director of a pre-service teacher training centre	Over 25 years	Developing and delivering pre-service teacher training strategies. Contributing to the MoE's training policies
Hasan	Male	Senior government official	21 years	Overseeing and implementing government's strategies in one city including educational and humanitarian initiatives
Nora	Female	Subject specialist and educational supervisor	Over 10 years	Delivering in-service training to school teachers and conducting inspections of learning and teaching in public schools
Mariam	Female	Counsellor	8 years	Providing counselling to school students, and to women in a non-government centre
Mary	Female	Teacher Trainer/ psychology module	Over 30 years	Developing and delivering pre-service teacher training
Ab	Male	Teacher Trainer	Over 10 years	Developing and delivering pre-service teacher training
Mo	Male	Teacher and Curriculum Developer	Over 15 years	Teaching maths in a public school and contributing to the development of national curriculum
Nabil	Male	Senior government official	Over 35 years	Overseeing government policies in education, higher education and teacher training
Ya	Male	Journalist and media analyst	20 years	Writing about political and media issues in the Middle East

(continued on next page)

Table 1 (*continued*)

Participant	Gender	Position	Professional experience	Role
				especially the development and resolution of the Syrian conflict

Table 2
List of examined documents.

Document	Source	Outline
Teacher Training Package for Pre-university Developed Curricula 2018–19	MoE	It outlines aims, training topics, time frames and training activities for pre-university learning. This document is described by a number of participants such as Elia and Nora as the main source for outlining teacher training after the conflict
General Framework for National Curriculum (2016)	National Centre for Curriculum Development (NCCD)	It outlines the general aims, vision and development mechanisms of pre-university learning after the conflict.
Pre-university Developed Educational Curriculum in Syrian Arab Republic: Its Aims and Criteria, 2008	MoE	This is one of the main documents that outlines the rationale for developing educational curriculum and policies prior to the conflict. It outlines principles underpinning educational policies and proposed educational reforms

codes so that similar or contrasting labels could be retrieved and examined together. This method allowed me to review the whole set of data by identifying its most significant meaning, while at the same time making connections between different parts of data (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Initial codes, therefore, developed through applying a rigorous inductive analytical process that included both within and across data examination. When examining written documents, I followed the same strategy where I highlighted sentences of interest, separating those sentences from their main text for further examination and development of initial codes. I developed a separate table of initial codes that I re-developed on several occasions with the aim of assessing constructed themes.

In order to reflect my active role in data analysis, I have deliberately situated myself in this process and selected a personalised writing style to indicate my involvement in data generation and analysis. This deliberate choice of positionality and writing style was essential to conduct a 'quality reflexive' thematic analysis, which aimed to highlight 'the researcher's reflective and thoughtful engagement' with their data and its analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019: 594).

5. Findings

5.1. Lack of systematic strategies and domination of individual initiatives

At the beginning of my interview with Nabil, a senior government official, he reinstated the government's stance that 'war in Syria is heading to the end' and that the 'stakes to divide Syria and the collapse of its regime have failed'. After referring to the government's 'political and military victory', Nabil moved to talk about the concept of post-conflict reconstruction as he stressed that:

> The government and people have to prepare for the post-conflict phase as its implications might be more dangerous than the war itself. What is destroyed and what lies within individuals requires systematic, enormous and diverse efforts to overcome the implications and legacies of this unjust war on Syria.

Nabil's reference to the need for 'systematic, enormous and diverse efforts' to overcome the 'implications and legacies' of the conflict allowed me to raise the issue of reconstructing the education sector and what plans the government had in this regard, where Nabil stressed that:

> The government considers rebuilding the education sector to be of high importance as it allocates huge budgets to the Ministry of Education in this regard. The priority is to rebuild schools as an initial step and to provide purely pedagogical training to teachers. The government also has appointed thirty thousand teachers.

I referred back to one of Nabil's first statements where he talked about the need for systematic efforts to address what 'is destroyed and lies within individuals' to ask about the government's plans to transcend physical reconstruction of the education sector to rebuild the 'individual'. Nabil pointed out that although his discussions with senior officials at the Ministries of Education and Higher Education reflected their 'awareness of the need to transcend physical aspects of reconstruction, currently this is not one of the state's priorities due to the huge scale of destruction and costs of rebuilding the educational sector'. I focused here on exploring what type of training was provided to teachers as that would give an insight into educational priorities and potential teachers' roles in this process, to which Nabil emphatically indicated that 'there is currently no teacher training that goes beyond the pedagogical perspective'.

Although it was not surprising that such an emphasis was placed on physical reconstruction after years of violent conflict, there were elements in Nabil's views that raised questions about whether this focus was a matter of priority imposed by the country's reality, or related more to approaching peace as merely an absence of violence and bringing life back to normality (Galtung, 1969). This question became important especially as Nabil referred to the current lack of systematic strategies, pointing out that 'the current problem lies in the domination of individual work… problem lies in individual work as each ministry works independently of the other'. Due to this 'lack of systematic co-ordination', Nabil described current reconstruction efforts to be more like a 'bazaar than a strategy'. The same picture was depicted during my discussions with another senior government official, Hasan, who summarised his evaluation of the management of the crisis and current co-ordination between different ministries as 'there is no management of the crisis; there is a management crisis'.

When asked if current teacher education initiatives were part of a wider official reconstruction strategy, research participants echoed this lack of strategic response as they referred to the dominance of individual initiatives in the absence of official strategies. This became evident when Fa, a university lecturer, described current initiatives as the following:

> There is effective work and huge efforts but there is no government sponsorship. These efforts are all individual and fragmented; there is no organisation that oversees these efforts. There is no clear guide… there is no clear training guide.

This statement resonated with the stance presented by other teacher educators I met such as Faheem, director of a teacher training centre, who described how the conflict had 'imposed' a challenge 'without having many solutions', apart from 'the individual teacher and their skills as a person, so things were left for the teacher'. This dominance of individual initiatives and lack of strategic response was also clearly indicated by Mo, a maths teacher and a curriculum developer, who stressed that:

> There is no sponsored programme; it is all personal efforts [tap on the table], it is all personal effort [tap on the table] … it is all individual initiatives, there is nothing systematic or sponsored financially at all. They are personal initiatives like a kind of help.

The lack of official reconstruction strategies can also be noticed in the way research participants were more elaborate in describing their own 'personal vision' and 'personal opinion' as compared to describing an official or 'government' approach to reconstruction. For instance, when I asked Nabil if his description of an effective approach to reconstruction represented an official plan, he emphasised that the steps he outlined reflected his 'own personal vision' of 'what should be' implemented, confirming that it did not represent an official stance. Similarly, when I asked Faheem if his description of teachers' role in a post-conflict phase was based on an official strategy, he confirmed that 'what I said is a personal opinion'.

What remained unclear at this stage was the contradiction between this frequent reference to the absence of a clear training guidance and the information provided by Elia, Director of Teacher Training and Preparation in a Directorate for Education, who stated that the MoE was providing large-scale government-funded teacher training programmes to upskill teachers and build their capacity to deal with the conflict across all government-held areas. This contradiction raised an important question about why teachers felt they were left alone to deal with the conflict when the government was providing such large-scale teacher training programmes. In order to examine this contradiction, I realised at this stage the importance of developing an understanding of the 'pedagogical perspective' that Nabil referred to as dominating current teacher training initiatives and to focus on answering the question of how or whether teacher education has responded to the conflict.

6. The response of teacher education to the conflict: an interruption-resumption model

When asked to describe how teacher education responded to the conflict, Faheem provided a detailed description of the 'fundamental change' that education in Syria underwent in 2008 and 2009, where there was a shift from relying on 'instruction' and 'memorisation' to the 'new curriculum' which 'tried to make the teacher a guide and facilitator', and 'the student is the one that needs to do the work'. For Faheem, these initiatives shaped education and teacher education until the beginning of the conflict, which, as he described, had 'interrupted' the implementation of these educational reforms.

What was noticeable about our discussion was the considerable time Faheem spent discussing pre-conflict initiatives while talking about what happened after the conflict required a high level of prompting from me. During the interview, I first tried to shift Faheem's attention from pre-conflict initiatives by asking him to describe some of the challenges imposed on education as a result of the conflict, so that I could ask him later about how these challenges were addressed in teacher education. After giving Faheem time to describe such challenges, I asked him about how they were addressed in teacher education, where there was a pause and a change in Faheem's tone as he suddenly sounded hesitant and less sure, stating that:

> In general, there was not much addressing [pause] I mean [pause] as they say the situation was imposed and there were not many solutions apart from the individual teacher and their skills as a person… things were left for the teacher as it was difficult to find a solution…it was difficult to find collective solutions.

This pattern dominated our conversation as whenever I asked about changes after the conflict, I found Faheem focusing solely on pedagogical issues and taking us back to the 2008/09 initiatives. Thirteen minutes after we started the interview, I prompted Faheem again to shift from pre to post-conflict initiatives, asking him whether the 2008/09 initiatives were currently followed, or if there was a review after the conflict to reshape education and teacher education strategies. Faheem's answer remained focused on the 'physical curriculum' and the constant efforts to change school textbooks. Here, Faheem referred to the work of the National Centre for Curriculum Development, which was founded after the conflict, where he stated the following:

> The centre is constantly working, I mean they started asking teachers in all stages at the end of every school year, what observations do you have about the curriculum? As educational supervisors, we used to collect these observations and send them to the Centre for Curriculum Development. So many things were amended like typos, or an idea or if a piece of information that is higher than the student's level…there is constant assessment to develop curriculum and approximately since five or six years till now if you compare the textbook published in 2013–14-15 you will see there were amendments every year… from the curriculum side, there has been constant development.

I prompted Faheem to talk about changes beyond the curriculum itself to focus on how education and teacher education responded to the conflict and its legacies, where he stated that:

> Not much was different, when the conflict happened, its legacies, or its impact on the classroom, not much was different apart from adding the topic of psychological support.

I further examined this position with Mo who referred to the 'radical change' in teaching that took place from 2014 onwards, and when I asked Mo 'in what way it was radical' he stated the following:

> [The curriculum] does not rely on memorisation, it depends on discussions, it depends on more practical work, more exercises, debate … we have always been used to the book being closed and the teacher lecturing. Now the book is open, and the student is having discussions with the teacher.

Mo went on to provide a detailed description of the chronological development of the maths curriculum according to this 'new method'. However, when I asked him if there were any efforts to go beyond these pedagogical issues to use education to promote peace in a post-conflict phase, there was silence and a change in his tone, indicating a less positive attitude as he stated that '[silence] umm…[silence] there are currently no efforts…there are not'. I asked Mo if he thought there was an official recognition of the role of education in promoting peace in a post-conflict phase to which he replied 'no, no, they [the government] are continuing on the basis if gunshots stop then the conflict has finished', which in turn made post-conflict reconstruction a matter of 'we open the schools, and students are back'.

The influence of pre-conflict strategies on current educational initiatives became evident during my interview with Nora, a Teacher Trainer and Educational Supervisor, who indicated that the 2008/09 initiatives did not only shape pre-conflict educational provision but also 'continue' to shape this provision after the conflict. In this regard, Nora indicated that current teacher education strategies were a 'continuation' of the 2008/09 initiatives, as she stated the following:

> Teacher preparation started in 2009 when curricula was changed and the project to prepare teachers was started. In 2018, the process of curriculum development is continuing, which is accompanied with training teachers through a number of teacher training workshops, which is for five days, on ways and new strategies that go in line with the proposed criteria such as active learning…As for dealing with the conflict, teacher training is continuing in light of the 2009 plan. Some topics have been added but there has been no radical or comprehensive change to deal with the conflict.

In response to my question about how teacher education changed after the conflict, Nora referred to 'pedagogical changes' in order to integrate methods that encouraged 'research, debate, inquiry-based and collaborative learning' instead of 'brainstorming and problem-solving'. The aim of this change, according to Nora, was to encourage students to use 'higher thinking skills'. An example that Nora provided to illustrate how teacher training changed after the conflict was related to Bloom's taxonomy as the focus became on the 'modern version' of Bloom's taxonomy, which 'focused on creation rather than evaluation, as was the

case before the conflict'.

The question of whether change was needed to address the legacies of the conflict became more prominent when I asked Elia about how the department of teacher training and preparation addressed the current situation. He stated that 'training materials are in place before the conflict', so the way teacher education responded to the conflict was by 'maintaining' pre-conflict strategies while 'adding some topics to deal with the conflict such as intensive learning programmes and teaching over-crowded classes in addition to the issue of psychological support'. However, when I asked Elia about describing how psychological support was incorporated into teacher education, his response was he was not sure as it was not within 'the remit of his department'. I also asked about what training provided in regard to over-crowded classes where the number of students could reach one hundred, Elia replied that they just added one more teacher to such classes so there were two rather than one teacher.

I further examined the integration of psychological support in education and teacher education during my visit to a centre for pre-service teacher training. One of the trainers I met, Ab, informed me that 'current learning materials used in the psychology module were in place before the conflict', and that they remained the same after the conflict. When I asked about the objectives and the content of this module, Ab pointed out that current curriculum focused on 'training teachers on different learning styles among different age groups and the appropriate teaching methods for each age'. I asked Ab about the changes within this module to address learners and teachers' psychological needs, to which he stated:

> There will be a change in teacher training modules through adding some modifications to address the impact of the conflict such as considering trainees' individual differences to avoid rote learning and memorisation

I found the word 'will' problematic as it indicated that the change had not happened as of yet. Secondly, I stopped at the word 'modifications' as, by definition, it indicated 'the making of a limited change in something', which could be interpreted as maintaining an already existing structure while adding 'limited change'. In addition, the use of words such as 'rote learning' and 'memorisation' reminded me of Nabil's statement about the focus of current training on 'pedagogical perspective' and resonated with the concepts included in the 2008/09 initiatives. I realised there was more about this 'change' and 'what has changed' when the tutor of the psychology module, Mary, explicitly expressed her extreme frustration because the curriculum had not changed, not only after the conflict, but also since 1983. Mary stated that she had not received any training on how to deal with the conflict and its impact on learners and teachers. Mary described the current provision of teacher education and psychological support as a 'crisis within this crisis'.

The same picture was depicted during my interview with Mariam, a counsellor, who also stated that the curriculum in the faculty of education did not change after the conflict, giving the example of a counselling module in a public university which, she described as 'itself is a new programme. I mean it started a few years before the conflict, so it is new. From that time till now nothing has changed'.

I followed up the way the curriculum has changed in the faculty with Fa, as she is a lecturer in the same faculty, where she pointed out the curriculum is 'not that different from the one used before the conflict', stating that:

> The curriculum is not different from the one before 2011. The difference is reflected in teaching methodology as the number of students has doubled as a result of students' displacement from one city to another. Teaching practicum was also moved from schools to labs within the university. The difference was also by adding new topics which are related to the conflict to the Psychological Counselling module, such as social integration, psychological disorders among children, women, the injured and refugees which have been integrated into seminars, graduation projects and Master's dissertations.

In examining the response of education and teacher education to the conflict, the more I engaged with data analysis, the more I realised the importance of the way Faheem described the conflict to have 'interrupted' the implementation of 2008/09 strategies to reform education in Syria. Its importance comes from realising that interruption is correlated with resumption, which in a way reflects the response of education and teacher education to the conflict. This interruption-resumption model is evident in the way research participants, such as Nora, described the way teacher education had changed after the conflict, where 'teacher training is continuing in light of the 2009 plan' and 'there has been no radical or comprehensive change to deal with the conflict'. This stance is similar to the one described by Elia whose account clearly sums up this model of change as he indicated that the content of teacher education had not changed after the conflict since 'training materials have been in place before the conflict'.

This interruption-resumption model is also evident in examined documents such as the *Pre-university National Developed Curriculum in Syrian Arab Republic: Aims and Criteria*, (prepared by the Assistant to Minister of Education at that time). This document echoes what participants mentioned about the years of 2008 and 2009 as being cornerstones in the process of reforming education and teacher education in Syria before the conflict when the MoE started a large-scale project to reform the national curriculum and upskill school teachers (Alhosry, 2008). The overall framework for these proposed changes was based on the concept of 'standard-based education', where teacher education focused on developing teachers' skills to write content, value and skills standards (Alhosry, 2008:27).

On the other hand, the *General Framework of National Curriculum for the Syrian Arab Republic* (NCCD, 2016) outlines that 'the process of developing educational curricula in Syria after the conflict which continue to be based on standard-based education' (NCCD, 2016:34). The resumption of pre-conflict strategies is also evident in the *Training Package for Developed Curriculum for Pre-University Learning in Syria 2018–19* as reflected in training topics included in this package, which are still based on standard-based education (Barada'ee et al., 2018).

The interruption-resumption cannot be isolated from the wider political context of the country, where as Ya, a journalist and media analyst, pointed out that it was not only pre-conflict education strategies that continued to shape education and teacher education provision after the conflict but also the same political mindset that underpinned these strategies since, as he indicated:

> Till now, till this moment when we are sitting and talking to each other, there is no change of mentality and nothing seems like it is going to change [Mo agrees]. There is no consideration of anything… I feel there was a plan to develop learning in Syria, and they [the government] are still continuing it. The conflict happened or did not happen, there was a plan to develop curriculum and they are still following it. They have not changed anything as a result of the conflict.

For Ya, this reflects an official state of 'self-denial' and a lack of 'change of mentality' within official institutions and decision-making positions required to acknowledge and directly address the conflict's impact. For him, the situation in Syria was like conducting an experiment under the same conditions which made it unlikely to reach a different result since the same pre-conflict political institutions were still adopting the same ideologies and policies to govern the country.

The importance of this state of self-denial along with the interruption-resumption model also comes from highlighting the wide gap between the development of education strategies and the challenges teachers face in the education process as a direct result of the conflict. This disconnection between policy development and implementation helps us delve deeper into the reasons that made research participants

feel unsupported despite the large-scale teacher training programmes provided by the government. These programmes remain detached from teachers' daily experiences being based on pre-conflict strategies that do not take into account the impact of the conflict on education and the complex roles teachers need to play in this process.

7. From fragmentation to unification: the policy of silence

It was important to examine how the state of self-denial Ya referred to was manifested in the learning process, where it is inevitable to face the challenge of addressing the legacies of the conflict, the fragmentation of the country in the presence of conflicting ideologies about the conflict. In exploring how the government intends to address this legacy of the conflict in the education process, Nabil made it clear that 'who wins imposes their vision' and he was direct in stating that the 'government's vision and ideology will be imposed especially in comparison with extremist ideologies, destroying government's institutions and killing individuals'. In discussing how the government will impose its vision, Nabil went on to describe how the government is currently implementing a 'policy of red line' to lay the boundaries of how the conflict can be discussed.

I examined how this policy of 'red lines' was reflected in the educational process during my interview with Mo, who revealed a problematic issue that would have long-term impact upon the role of education in post-conflict reconstruction. He referred to an official letter from the Minister of Education that bans discussions of the conflict in the classroom, as he stated the following:

> In the area of critique, there is a decision from the Minister of Education banning discussions about anything in the class outside the topic of study. It is forbidden through a letter from the Ministry of Education, under the supervision of the headmaster, to ban discussions of any topic outside the specialised topic of study. There is a decision from the Minister of Education, signed, registered and disseminated to all schools.

Another problematic aspect became clear when Ya commented on Mo's statement by saying 'this is not the Minister's decision [laughter indicating cynicism] I mean it is not him. He is the one who signed it'. Although none of us directly commented, I felt that we all recognised the message behind Ya's noticeable cynicism, which was referring to the 'absolute power' and control security forces had on all aspects of life including education. This situation became clear when I asked Mo how he would react if a student asked him about his perspective of the conflict, to which Mo was clear that 'in class, I avoid talking about this. Sadly, this might have repercussions'.

The situation in Higher Education was not different from the one Mo described, as Fa also indicated that there were 'instructions not to refer to the conflict in the teaching process'. The policy of creating 'red lines' and its impact upon the educational process became clear when Fa referred to 'the phenomenon of educational violence' among lecturers, in which 'political and sectarian interpretations can be attributed to their teaching practices and that might lead to catastrophic consequences on their professional future'.

Participants were aware of the deliberate and systematic nature of these attempts that seek to, as Ya put it, to create a type of 'uniform education' where 'everyone needs to understand in the same way, at the same level and at the same time'. The aim of this type of education, according to Ya, was to develop 'uniform' understanding not only of school subjects but beyond that to include the conflict in terms of how it developed and would be remembered in the future.

Examples of this process of constructing a policy of silence can also be found in the *Training Package for Developed Curriculum for Pre-university Learning in Syria 2018–19,* in which the conflict does not feature as a main element in developing its training framework and vision of education. According to this document, the 'biggest challenge' for education in Syria at present is avoiding teaching methods that 'pump' 'pre-identified' knowledge into learners' minds (Barada'ee et al., 2018:45). There is an indirect reference to the conflict where the document describes the 'loss of national identity' and a 'weak sense of national belonging among a large proportion of the Syrian society' as the main challenge affecting the process of curriculum development (Barada'ee et al., ee et al., 2018).

The same pattern can be noticed in *The General Framework of National Curriculum Document* (2016), where the conflict does not feature as a main element in developing this framework. The main reference to the conflict in this document is included in the introduction where the Minister of Education at the time points out that:

There is near-consensus among Syrians today that the main reason that made some get involved in destroying the country is ignorance. The most dangerous foundation on which the conflict is built on is 'the lack of morality' (NCCD, 2016:4). After this introduction, the conflict does not feature in educational strategies, whose focus is described as 'supporting learning for life, employment and citizenship' (NCCD, 2016:7).

This structural effort to impose a policy of silence is further illustrated through 'deleting' this phase from history textbooks such as the one used in the 12th grade. In a unit discussing the modern history of Syria, the book refers to the period when Bashar Al Assad took power after a national referendum following the death of his father, President Hafez Al Assad, in 2000. This section focuses on highlighting the modernisation process initiated by the current president such as his effort to develop 'the mechanisms of political and administrative process', use 'the language of dialogue with national forces' and provide requirements of 'national defence' to face 'the domination of occupation' (Ministry of Education, 2020, 12th grade:146). This unit ends without any reference to the conflict or discussing any aspect of Syria's modern history after the conflict began in 2011.

8. Conclusion

Galtung's typologies of violence (1969) helped this study transcend the visible manifestations of violence in order to demonstrate its development as a 'deliberate human act' (Galtung, 1969:171) by identifying both the 'actor' and structures that are used to promote structural and cultural aspects of violence. In this regard, research findings indicate clear evidence of how the policy of silence is developing as a deliberate and purposeful project, which is systematically imposed by the 'silencing' party (Russell, 2018:1), as part of a wider project to impose 'a uniform national grand narrative' of the conflict and develop an 'ideologically uniform nation-state' (Ahonen, 2014:84).

Despite the de-escalation of military operations, violent measures continue to be employed by approaching issues of competing ideologies as 'existential threats' that require the application of 'emergency measures' (Buzan et al., 1998:34); similar to the phenomenon of 'educational violence' and 'serious repercussions', indicated by Mo and Fa. In this context, the risk comes from continuing to treat societal and political issues the same as a military risk legitimising the application of a militarised logic of threat and defence to deal with them (Waever, 1995). This situation does not only provide a 'fertile ground' to continue the polarisation of the country (Bentrovato, 2017:44–45) but also turns the omission of violence into an 'absent presence' that is fully implicated in the political and educational strategies (Apple, 1999:12).

These systematic efforts to promote structural violence call us to be mindful that the current de-escalation of direct violence in Syria might not necessarily lead to a 'post conflict' setting since data analysis demonstrates that the conflict is transforming into a new phase in which direct, militarised forms of violence are replaced by indirect, less visible forms that aim to control individuals and transmit new knowledge, values and ideologies (Davies, 2016). Such a situation will also have implications for education as there is a risk that the emerging power structures can continue to employ education as the 'legitimiser' of structural violence (Galtung, 1990: 294), and as a tool to create 'unifying hegemonic narratives' of the conflict (Ahonen, 2014:77). Education can

become part of a wider project to develop a monolithic version of history that reinforces the 'us' and 'other' dichotomy, and pave the way for the dominance of a singular national identity that suppresses all other alternatives (Bush and Saltarelli, 2000).

Adopting Galtung's theory of positive peace (1985) also helped this study develop an understanding of the nature of peace currently promoted in Syria as data analysis reveals how current post-war reconstruction initiatives of the education sector are based on a negative approach to peace as merely an absence of direct violence and going back to 'normal'. This poses a risk for promoting sustainable peace as reconstruction initiatives could remain focused on rebuilding symbols of recovery such as opening schools rather than on transforming 'structures pregnant with violence into less violent ones' (Galtung, 1985:146), or on reinforcing social structures that are capable of addressing root and secondary causes of violence (International Peace Institute, 2017).

This approach to peace demonstrates that there is a missed opportunity to utilise the current state of relative peace in order to develop long-term, holistic and multi-disciplinary strategies to promote positive peace. Therefore, Galtung's theory of positive peace helped assess the 'quality' and the 'vulnerability' of the current approach to peace in Syria to 'conflict relapse' (Caplan, 2020: 313), and it helped identify a very early warning of the fragility of this peace since failure to address root causes of violence is more likely going to lead to its reproduction (Galtung, 2004).

To avoid this scenario, this study emphaises the need to substantially review education strategies and the national curriculum in Syria with the aim of removing those 'invisible' mechanisms that have helped fuel the conflict and hinder the development of a positive peace culture (Lopes Cardozo and Shah, 2016:518). For instance, rather than seeking to impose a policy of silence, the study proposes that education in Syria needs to explicitly aim to introduce 'turbulence' into current narratives of the conflict to encourage questioning rather than 'obedience' to these narratives (Davies, 2019:78).

Peacebuilding in Syria requires reconstructing an education system that encourages using dialogue as a tool to discuss causes of and solutions to the conflict (Pherali and Lewis, 2019). Rather than seeking to impose a policy of 'red line' and 'educational violence', teachers need to feel empowered to transform classrooms into spaces where the conflict can be understood from multiple voices and where a peaceful future can be envisioned. To conclude, this study demonstrates that a constructive role of education in promoting peace in Syria is still possible, provided that emerging power structures are willing to 'bear their peacebuilding responsibilities' and have a 'strong political commitment' to develop 'transformative' policies aimed at promoting a positive peace culture (Pherali, 2019:13).

Research limitations

Despite all the efforts to ensure this research is conducted rigorously, I acknowledge that there are limitations that future researchers can avoid. For instance, including students' voices in interviews can help capture the full spectrum of the impact of educational changes.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Appendix A

Interview questions for teacher educators

1. Can you describe some of the challenges teachers face as a result of the conflict and how teachers are directly or indirectly affected by the conflict?
2. What challenges in turn has this situation created for you as a teacher educator?
3. In your opinion, do you think teacher education has responded to this conflict? Can you give an example of this response or of the changes you have made to teacher education as a result of this?
   a. If not, do you think there is a need to respond differently and how do you envision this response?
   b. As a teacher educator, how would you describe the way teacher education changed after 2011 to respond to the conflict to respond to its impact on learners and teachers?
4. From your perspective, do you consider the work you do as a teacher educator to have any direct or indirect impact on the efforts to rebuild the country and promote peace?
   a. If yes, how is it contributing to this process? Or as a teacher educator, do you think teacher education could or should attribute to this process?
   b. If no, what role do you think education and teacher education should play in post-conflict Syria?
5. There are reports that refer to the way education is used by extreme Islamic groups to promote their ideologies and justify violence. What plans, or are you adopting any plans to reverse this role of the education so that it could be applied to promote peace and reconciliation? Is this something addressed by current initiatives in education and teacher education?
6. Do you see current efforts to develop teacher education as part of a comprehensive national plan to reconstruct the education sector and promote peace in post-conflict Syria? If yes, could you please describe the priorities of this plan, how does teacher education contribute to this plan and which departments or ministries are involved in this plan? If no, do you think there is a need to make these efforts part of a holistic plan to rebuild the country and promote peace? Why?

Appendix B

Interview questions for senior officials

1. The education sector is one of the areas that is largely affected by the conflict. What is the government's plan to rebuild this sector?
2. In one of his speeches, the President referred to 'real construction' that goes beyond rebuilding physical infrastructure to rebuilding individuals' ideologies and concepts. How is this reflected in the government initiatives to reconstruct the education sector?
3. Do you consider rebuilding the education sector as an important step in promoting peace in post-conflict Syria? If yes, are current plans to rebuild the education sector linked to an overall process of promoting peace? If no, what role do you think education should play in post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding?
4. Do you consider teachers and their education to have a crucial role in promoting peace in post-conflict Syria? If yes, how is this reflected in government's strategies and policies? If no, what role do you think teachers need to play in post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding?
5. In many areas, like the ones controlled by extreme Islamic groups, children and adults were subjected to a type of education that helps promote the ideologies and practices of these groups. What is the government's plan to address this role of education?
6. A large number of children and adults have experienced different types of trauma and stress because of the conflict. What is the government plan to support these children and adults through education? Or do you think they could be supported through education? Or what is your vision for the role of teachers and their education in post-conflict Syria?
7. Some of these adults are teachers, who in general are required to play a complex role in the classroom and face different challenges as a result of the conflict. What support is provided to teachers to be able to face these challenges? Do you think these teachers require a

different type of teacher education as compared to the one provided before the conflict?

8. There are several and conflicting accounts regarding how the conflict developed into a violent one. What is the government plan to address this situation as we are moving into post-conflict reconstruction?

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