

Empowering Teachers to be Agents of Change: Promoting Peacebuilding and Social Cohesion in Schools in Rwanda

Jolly Rubagiza, Jane Umutoni, Ali Kaleeba

About the authors

- Jolly Rubagiza** holds a PhD in Education, and currently she is the Deputy Director General at the Rwanda Management Institute. She is also an honorary Senior Lecturer at the College of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Rwanda.
- Jane Umutoni** holds a Master in Gender and Development Studies and a Bachelor in Business Studies. Presently she is a full-time academic and research staff at the University of Rwanda, College of Arts and Social Sciences at the Centre for Gender Studies.
- Ali Kaleeba** holds a Master in Social and Educational Research Methods. Currently, he is a PhD student at Aberdeen University in the UK. Ali is an academic staff member at the University of Rwanda, College of Education.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to the guidance and financial support provided by the Aegis Trust Research, Policy and Higher Education (RPHE) programme. We particularly appreciate the support received from Dr Sylvestre Nzahabwanayo, who advised us through the successful development of this policy brief.

Disclaimer

Although our article derives from a broader study funded by the ESRC/DfID, the article was written independently by the authors. Accordingly, the views, opinions and thoughts expressed in this policy brief are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of the study sponsors, or the official position of the Aegis Trust.

All rights reserved

Executive Summary

- Education is seen to play a crucial role in the reconstruction of post-conflict countries, particularly in transforming people's mind sets and rebuilding social relations. In this regard, teachers are often perceived as key agents to bring about this transformative change through their role as mediators of peace.
- This policy brief draws from a paper which sought to understand how teachers are positioned to promote peacebuilding and social cohesion in Rwandan schools in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi. The brief draws on data collected for a broader study – a research project funded by ESRC/DfID, to research the role of teachers in peacebuilding in post-conflict contexts, namely, Rwanda and South Africa. However, this brief specifically derives from data gathered from 14 case studies in schools, teacher training institutions and colleges, and from interviews with policy makers and other stakeholders in education in Rwanda. The methods used for data collection were semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, questionnaires, and classroom observations.
- Theoretically, the paper is informed by the broader research framework on sustainable peacebuilding in post-conflict situations, using the four dimensions of Recognition (respecting difference), Redistribution (addressing inequalities), Representation (encouraging participation) and

- Reconciliation (dealing with past, present and future injustices) (4Rs). Moreover, in exploring the relationship between teachers and peacebuilding, we take into account the wide range of factors relevant to teaching, i.e., the social, cultural, economic, and political context in which they operate.
- The study findings show that the current teacher policy environment is conducive to peacebuilding because it recognises the important role of teachers in the social, political and economic reconstruction of post-genocide Rwanda. However, there are a number of inter-related factors pertaining to teachers that pose challenges to sustainable peacebuilding and social cohesion in schools.
- Although most teachers show agency and have a sense of responsibility towards promoting peacebuilding and social cohesion, they still face major challenges in their everyday practice and social life. These challenges will not put them at peace, nor support them to nurture peace among others.
- The major challenges highlighted include teachers' minimal participation in education policy making, issues related to lack of continued teacher professional development, non-equitable teacher deployment (from both a rural/urban perspective, as well as a gender perspective), and recruitment coupled with remuneration. Other challenges observed relate to school environment, teachers' working conditions and a sense of low self-esteem, and perceived lack of recognition as well as value among teachers.
- The policy brief proposes that the government take required measures in order to enhance teacher management structures. It also suggests the adoption of education processes which support teachers in how to respond appropriately to the needs of their students and to develop caring and trusting relations.
- Furthermore, the study highlights the need for more recognition of teachers as a key component of the education system. Similarly, there is a need to enhance their involvement and representation in decision making, and a need to redistribute resources for the professional development of teachers and other areas of teacher wellbeing, for teachers to be fully immersed in the process of reconciliation and sustainable peacebuilding.

Summary of key findings

Teacher policy context

Education in Rwanda is considered to play a crucial role in the country's reconstruction. To this end, teachers are seen as the key drivers for bringing about the desired improvement in both in-school and out-of-school learning. The Rwanda teacher policy framework contains positive commitment to support teachers' professional development in order to enhance their performance. However, challenges remain in the implementation of these policies. More so, there was a general feeling that teachers' participation in educational policy making is minimal, especially in areas that have to do with their management and other key decisions of the education sector. We argue that for teachers to become agents of transformational change and to be able to address the injustices of the past, they need to become active citizens. Teachers' participation in decision making, especially in areas affecting their wellbeing, therefore needs to be fostered for there to be sustainable peacebuilding.

Lack of systematised teacher professional development in peace education

There is no formalised continuous professional development (CPD) organised by the Rwanda Development Board (REB) for teachers. As a result, where training is offered, it is not consistent, particularly in the area of

peacebuilding and social cohesion. As one of the teachers indicated:

We don't get any training here. When there is a problem, you manage it as an adult. There are no trainings here. No, it [training] doesn't reach all teachers, I don't know why. Sometimes they select a few of them or just one. Those who go for training are supposed to come back and train others, but this does not happen. [P. 213]

Although improvements might have been made with the implementation of the new Competency Based Curriculum, findings show that themes of peacebuilding and social cohesion are given little attention in the school curriculum and CPD of teachers. As a result, teachers cited limited skills in integrating peacebuilding and social cohesion issues, especially in subjects that are science based that they deemed “unrelated” to peacebuilding. More so, teachers observed that some areas pertaining to the history of Rwanda are sensitive to handle, and for that matter, teachers avoid such topics or teach them superficially (*babinyura hejuru*).

It is very important to note that teachers in Rwanda, like all other people in the country, have been affected by the genocide in one way or another, and are either seen to be on the side of the victims or the perpetrators. Teachers therefore need support to confront their personal emotions for them to be able to help their students, restore trust and promote reconciliation.

We therefore argue that teachers in post-conflict contexts like Rwanda should be empowered with peace education related skills such as negotiation, problem solving and critical thinking. These skills are critical for teachers to foster social cohesion in their classrooms, and to facilitate the development of peacebuilding and social cohesion in their communities.

Teacher deployment, recruitment and remuneration impact teachers' peace of mind

The government has invested heavily in improving access to basic education, and this has led to the increased demand for high-quality teachers to deliver quality education. However, due to severe budgetary constraints, the government remains pressured to seek effective and efficient approaches to recruiting and equitably deploying qualified primary and secondary school teachers across the country.

Although the education system is now decentralised in such a way that the placement of teachers in public schools is supply-based and done at the district level, it was observed that, due to budgetary constraints, many times the REB will impose certain quotas that districts will not go beyond, implying that new teachers are recruited depending on the available budget. As a result, some public schools recruit unqualified teachers who work on short-term contracts and with different working terms, often at substantially less remuneration. This not only compromises the quality of education but impinges on the peacebuilding and social cohesion process, since such teachers may feel that they are a temporary fix to fill a gap and will eventually be eliminated. Moreover, we may begin to see more unemployed qualified teachers, even when the government has spent substantially on training them.

Teacher recruitment is also not sensitive to gender inequalities and teaching staff discrepancies between rural and urban areas, and this could impact social cohesion. It was reported that most teachers prefer working in Kigali City and neighbouring towns, yet Kigali City does not have many schools to accommodate them. The rush for urban areas is motivated by the fact that teachers can easily access social services. Moreover, urban schools have better teaching and learning facilities and parents can afford to pay “top-up” to teachers in

Each and every teacher wants to be a teacher in Kigali City, yet Kigali is rated as one of the provinces with very few public schools, as well as other schools that operate in partnership with the government. You understand that not all can be in Kigali. So, the further you move away from Kigali, the poorer the quality of teachers you get. [P. 216]

Teachers also decried the poor remuneration received as salary, and reiterated that teachers may lack peace of mind due to their economic status, which, in the long run, impacts negatively on those under their care – the learners.

You cannot give what you do not have. We need to feel at peace so that we can help our students for social cohesion. I think you understand what I mean. With this meagre salary, do you think that we are at peace? [P. 217]

We therefore argue that to sustain peacebuilding and social cohesion among Rwandans, there is need for the redistribution of resources (both human and material) between urban and rural areas (including hard to reach places) for there to be equity in access and education outcomes for all Rwandan children. Moreover, there is a need to identify more innovative ways to reward teachers for their hard work and dedication. Furthermore, the existing gender inequalities that limit female students' access to higher institutions for teacher training like UR-CE require attention, in order to bring more women into the teaching workforce.

School environment, teacher working conditions and peacebuilding

The school environment and teacher working conditions can critically motivate or demotivate teachers. Heavy teaching workloads can be one of the disincentives that affect teacher motivation. It was noted that the workload norm for teachers in secondary schools is 30 periods a

week, whereas for primary school teachers it is 40 periods a week. However, rural schools tend to have higher teaching loads, while they have less incentive in the form of parents' contribution.

Apart from heavy teaching loads, poor physical environments, a lack of teaching and learning materials and poor student discipline were cited as disincentives to teacher morale in peacebuilding and social cohesion. Most teachers highlighted the lack of textbooks and teaching aids aligned with the new Competency Based Curriculum:

You see, the new curriculum is there but there are no textbooks, yet for it, we are still using old textbooks which actually do not correspond well with the CBC. This is a challenge – there is a new curriculum, but there are no books to go with it. We read the curriculum and we try to look for topics in old textbooks that may correspond with it. [P. 218]

We have been trained on the new curriculum but the problem is lack of textbooks. During training we were told that peace values and social cohesion are crosscutting in each and every subject. However, since textbooks are not available, some teachers say that what is not written is not their business. [P. 218]

Most teachers mentioned that they try to improvise and teach their classes through searching for whatever resources they may find. This reflects teacher agency and shows that such teachers take their responsibility of ensuring student learning seriously, and teachers therefore should be recognised for such efforts.

Another issue the teachers have to deal with is poor student discipline and the lack of parental support for this. They observed that it is very difficult to have some parents cooperate with the school about their children's behaviour.

Apparently, most parents are too busy to follow up on their children or even respond to summons from the school head teacher or the teachers.

There is a problem of parents who are not there for their children. It is like when they send their children to school, it is over. They do not follow up on the students to see if they have done their homework or if they have attended school – they leave all that to the teachers. [P. 220]

Teachers have devised several ways to address student indiscipline, and some even resort to corporal punishment in the form of beatings, even if this has been outlawed in schools. In one of the schools visited, severe caning was openly used on the students, since this was seen as “the only way to deal with students’ indiscipline.” Suffice to say that it would be contradictory to expect teachers, and schools, for that matter, to foster peacebuilding and social cohesion or teach non-violent ways to resolve conflicts among students when they themselves do not apply this.

On the other hand, teachers admitted that most learners come from poor families and this has an impact on children’s welfare and learning. It was observed that some students spend a full day at school with no lunch because parents are not able to pay for meals. As a result, such students are likely to miss classes or lack concentration in class and peace of mind because they are hungry.

Key policy recommendations

Given the situation described above, the present policy brief argues for a reconsideration of teachers’ participation in educational policy making, the development of a framework for CPD in Peace Values Education, the improvement of teachers’ conditions of service, and the reshaping of the school working environment for teachers and learners. In what follows, arguments for these actions and their associated benefits are briefly highlighted.

Increase teachers’ participation in educational policymaking

The research findings demonstrate that education policy context in Rwanda has been favourable and a lot has practically been achieved in the reconstruction of the country, especially in expanding access to education, building the infrastructure, developing pre-service training and the management of teachers. Moreover, despite the challenges that Rwandan teachers still face, most teachers show agency and a sense of responsibility towards promoting peacebuilding and social cohesion in education. However, for teachers to become agents of transformational change, there is the need to increase teachers’ representation and participation in decision making at all levels of the education system. This is because the contextual realities in which teachers find themselves severely inhibit their agency, and more so, policies are formulated with limited participation of teachers or that of their schools. The MINEDUC and REB therefore need to encourage and even facilitate the setting up of more inclusive forums where teachers across the country partake in decision making in areas affecting their professional and personal wellbeing.

Develop a framework for Continuous Professional Development (CPD) in Peace Values Education

As indicated earlier, reconciliation is a process that is crucial for post-conflict societies in order to address past injustice as a way to prevent a relapse into conflict. This, however, requires teacher management structures and education processes that support teachers on how to respond appropriately to the needs of their students and how to develop caring and trusting relations. CPD plays an important role worldwide; through CPD, teachers improve their knowledge and skills for fostering social cohesion among students in their classrooms and across the curriculum. There is a need, therefore,

for the REB to develop a framework for CPD for all teachers and at all levels of the education system. In particular, there is a need to systematically train teachers on how to mainstream Peace Values Education across the curriculum, especially in the natural sciences and mathematical subjects. Teachers in these subjects need to be able to incorporate peace values in their everyday teaching, as they would do in the arts and humanities subjects.

Improve teacher conditions of service

Teachers' effective role in sustainable peace and social cohesion largely depends on a number of interrelated factors, such as the economic, social, cultural and political contexts in which they operate.

The findings of the present research show that teachers still face major challenges in their everyday practice and social life that will not put them at peace. As most of them would observe during this study, one cannot give what they do not have. This indicates that a teacher who is poorly remunerated, with no continued professional development, who operates under harsh conditions, and who may also suffer from low self-esteem, would therefore not be in a position to nurture sustainable peace within and outside of school. The recent 10% salary increment for teachers serving in government and government aided schools may slightly boost the morale of teachers, although this is still considered minimal for the individual teacher. The Umwalimu SACCO (the saving and cooperative scheme for teachers) was considered as a positive step by teachers interviewed, and should be further supported. However, there is need for the MINEDUC to identify more innovative ways to incentivise and reward teachers for the work they do. On another note, it must be highlighted that fair redistribution of resources is associated with peacebuilding and social cohesion, and therefore the MINEDUC/REB need to address the problem of

non-equitable redistribution and deployment of teaching staff from both a rural/urban and gender perspective.

Improve the school working environment for teachers and learners

In general, the school working environment can be motivating or demotivating for both teachers and learners. In this case, heavy teacher workload, large class sizes, poor physical facilities, inadequate teaching and learning resources, and lack of parental support impact teacher motivation to foster peacebuilding and social cohesion and also negatively affect student learning. There is therefore a need for the MINEDU to pay particular attention to school infrastructure development, recruitment of more teachers and provision of sufficient teaching and learning materials to schools. Moreover, parents play a crucial role as the first educators of their children, and need to be brought on board. The active involvement of parents in the life of the school will therefore contribute to improvement in student learning, as well as promotion of values, social cohesion and peacebuilding. Sector education officers in collaboration with school management and School General Assembly Committees (SGACs) need to ensure that parents actively participate in school programmes.

Conclusion

We argue that in the absence of teachers' participation in educational policy making, the development of a framework for CPD in Peace Values Education, the improvement of teachers' conditions of service, and the reshaping of the school working environment for teachers and learners, teachers are ill-equipped to be efficient agents of change. As a result, peacebuilding and social cohesion become increasingly difficult to be achieved.