Executive summary

The hope and trust invested in the transformative potential of formal education can hardly be overstated: it is not only considered the bedrock of economic progress, but also a catalyst of sustainable development, good governance, human rights, gender equity, and peace. Citing these and other merits, multilateral agencies, national governments, and non-governmental organisations have embarked on an unprecedented effort to make sure that all children across the globe complete formal primary schooling by 2030. This pursuit has been rather successful: 91 percent of the world’s primary school-aged children currently attend educational institutions compared to 50 percent in 1950. No efforts have been spared to ensure the remaining 9 percent – or 63 million children – will follow by 2030.

Against this backdrop, critical voices have cautioned against merely viewing formal education as a benign catalyst of progress and peace. To the contrary, scholars contend, formal schooling may also legitimise or fuel political division, social exclusion, and cultural repression. The risk of education thus sustaining or strengthening adverse socio-political conditions is particularly palpable in conflict-affected societies where it may be instrumentalised in violent quests for authority, legitimacy, and power.

The combination of vast amounts of resources being channelled towards universalising formal education on the one hand, and ongoing uncertainty as to how this interacts with political conflict on the other, presents scholars and practitioners with a field in urgent need of further scrutiny. While current scholarship is often policy-driven and anchored in an education-systems approach, this dissertation, instead, departs from everyday realities of education and political violence as experienced and constructed in Lebanese primary schools. Lebanon was selected for its subjection to multiple layers of protracted conflict and simultaneous high primary level enrolment rates, making it a highly relevant paradigm case. By putting the perspectives of learners and educators at the heart of methods and analysis, it highlights how schooling is interlinked with everyday manifestations of past conflicts, socio-
political and economic dynamics in local school communities, as well as intergenerational dynamics through which social division and political discord are produced and transformed. Converging insights from the fields of anthropology of children, education science, history and memory, transitional justice, as well as conflict and refugee studies, this dissertation also bridges some important disciplinary divides that frequently preclude the emergence of a holistic understanding of education in societies marked by violent political strife.

Data collection, which took place between 2007 and 2013, followed an inductive, ethnographic methodology designed to capture complex and dynamic processes from the bottom up, accommodate diverse data formats, record events over time, and pursue a rich and emic understanding of what constitutes and propels socio-political life. Methods included participant observation, semi-structured interviews, projective and enabling exercises, focus group discussions, map-making, as well as school and village tours – alongside a desk study. Although this methodology allows for a textured understanding of everyday teaching and learning in specific conflict-ridden communities in Lebanon, this study neither offers a comprehensive analysis of the Lebanese education system nor a representative picture of education in areas of conflict zones in general. Instead, it identifies, through grounded research, processes and factors that shape the practice and outcomes of formal schooling in conflict zones across the world, albeit in forms and intensities that depend on specific environments. Taking note of these factors is indispensable for researchers, policy makers and practitioners to rethink and refine their paradigms, methodologies, and design of interventions.

This dissertation consists of an introduction, seven chapters, and a concluding section. The introduction outlines the background of the study and guiding questions, offers a summary history of Lebanon, presents a methodology section that includes reflections on the collection and representation of data, and provides a summary of findings that serves as the study’s conceptual framework. The focus of the chapters that follow is, respectively, on child-oriented methodologies; children’s experiences of conflict and schooling; teaching work in conflict-affected communities; conflict memories and transitional justice; history education; educational responses to political strife; and good educational practice in the Syria crisis response. All chapters were peer-reviewed and published in academic journals or edited volumes. Finally, a concluding chapter sheds light on global education policy and practice through the lens of research findings and presents an outlook on further research and action.

Chapter One advocates for an epistemological and methodological lens that puts children’s perceptions and experiences at the heart of methods, ethics, and analysis.
Especially in studies of children in conflict-affected settings, young people continue to be viewed as passive victims of violence and hardship. This approach is neither productive nor truthful. Instead, the chapter argues in favour of depicting children as active interpreters of and contributors to culture and society, highlighting their domains of creativity, inventiveness, resilience, and negotiation.

In line with this methodological point of departure, Chapter Two presents how children aged between eight and fifteen engage with corollaries of violent conflict in their everyday lives – in school, at home, online, and on the go. The chapter demonstrates how violent conflict is rooted and reflected in everyday practice and interaction within children’s social, educational, and spatial surroundings. The data also reveal how young people, as they grow up, lose appetite for civic engagement, feel increasingly disempowered, and at times become overwhelmed by a sense of apathy towards potential societal and political change. This is exemplified by a discourse that normalises conflict, reflecting both the inescapability and legitimacy of future violence.

Chapter Three evaluates the expectations invested in teachers’ ability to act as agents of change against lived realities of teaching work in conflict-affected classrooms. It shows how political conflict translates into insecure employment conditions, a lack of collegiality and acknowledgement, political pressure from parents and students, limited opportunities to come to terms with past and present conflicts, and a lack of pre- and in-service professional development. Reform and transformation agendas are bound to fail as long as teachers are not equipped, motivated, appreciated, and supported in confronting the stress, pressure, and insecurity that reverberates through their personal and professional lives. Moreover, presenting and resourcing teaching work as merely an apolitical, technical activity rather than an everyday engagement with socio-political realities of strife leaves teachers empty-handed in any quest for change.

Chapters Four and Five demonstrate that formal education in conflict-affected societies cannot be understood without reference to questions of history, memory, and social justice. Chapter Four illustrates the memory landscape that young persons navigate from an early age on. It highlights one of Lebanon’s most pressing predicaments, namely, how to address the fate of persons who forcibly disappeared during its civil wars while faced with a state that favours general amnesia over justice and reconciliation. For young persons, however, amnesia offers nothing but an invitation to consult non-state, often sectarian sources which promote histories anchored in glorifications of sectarian leaders, martyrs, and militants - leaving questions of social justice on the back burner.
The absence of state-sponsored historiography is also reflected in the official history curriculum which abruptly stops at Lebanon’s 1943 Independence. Chapter Five discusses how students thus face silence and evasion on defining elements of their society’s history (and, thus, its present), which is further complicated by teachers’ reluctance to discuss contentious historical episodes as well as scholastic pedagogies that counter multiperspectivity. Similar to Chapter Four, it is shown that silencing conflict in the classroom offers no viable alternative to sectarian interpretations of past and current conflict; instead, it serves as encouragement for students to seek credible explanations elsewhere, effectively handing children over to narratives that contradict inclusive identities and pursuits of justice.

Chapter Six returns the discussion to scholarship on the interface between formal education and violent conflict, showing how the everyday lives of children and the practice of schooling were impacted by the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah. The chapter exposes the paradox of school communities seeking to immunise classrooms from day-to-day divisions and tensions, while simultaneously acknowledging that the only way to break cycles of conflict and instability is to address these head-on. The chapter also highlights the flexibility of young children in overcoming social divisions and establishing friendships across divides, but just as well the role parents play in denying the validity of such narratives of unity. As such, a cross-generational dynamic that encompasses young persons in political rhetoric and division is exposed.

Chapter Seven connects research with practice by zooming in on the education response to the Syria refugee crisis in Lebanon. It serves as a case in point for the arguments put forward in earlier chapters, showing the limited grounding of this response either in everyday realities or the priorities of students and teachers, the proneness of schools to replicate violence, and an overwhelming focus on enrolment figures rather than on the quality of education. The chapter offers guidance on how refugee education can render beneficial outcomes for learners by being responsive to the cognitive, social, and emotional needs of students, offering continuous teacher training and counselling, involving caregivers, as well as applying inclusive and accessible modalities of education delivery. It also highlights the importance of actively advocating to garner support for these approaches and ensure such support is reflected in appropriate legislation and regulations.

Overall, the chapters show how violent political conflict is manifested as a structural undercurrent of painful, unprocessed memories, a lack of political accountability and social justice in everyday life, exploitation and destruction of natural splendour, and the absence of
general socio-economic protection and support mechanisms. The associated insecurity is neither soothed nor transformed inside school environments; to the contrary, it meets a void in which young and old are left at the mercy of non-democratic, sectarian forces which entrap them in a web of continued dependency – not only in a material sense, but also with regard to the production and dissemination of credible and effective understandings of contemporary society. This is exactly what most of my interlocutors feared, despised, and identified as the tragic engine behind vicious cycles of conflict and a pervasive lack of accountability and positive transformation.

The concluding section of the dissertation assesses the logic and aspirations of global education agendas against the findings of the dissertation. It highlights the emergence of a unified discourse on education provision in crisis-affected societies that propagates technical education solutions as a way to advance political causes of democratisation, peace, and sustainability. The conclusion argues that a reliance on technical measures, and the associated disregard and denial of formal education’s political capacity, results in policies and paradigms that fail to address key drivers of inequality and instability. As a consequence, prominent global education agendas can hardly be expected to deliver their transformative political ambitions, regardless of the vast resources currently being directed towards achieving universal primary schooling. To the contrary, this dissertation suggests, a depoliticised school environment in which politics, conflict, history, and justice remain unaddressed risks contributing to sustained injustice and violence.

This dissertation foregrounds the necessity to anchor education research, policy and practice in the lived realities of political violence and schooling as experienced by learners and educators in conflict-ridden societies. This implies, first, a methodological shift in favour of bridging disciplinary divides and incorporating the perspectives of students and teachers. Second, it requires situating formal schooling within the broader realm of cross-generational production of social relations, political loyalty, and conflict memory. Third, it compels us to question education paradigms that embrace state-centred educational authority – especially in contexts where a conventional definition of state authority is out of tune with socio-political realities of plurality, violence, displacement, and injustice. Overall, there is a pressing need to acknowledge, mobilise, and channel the political nature of formal schooling – in terms of institutions, curricular objectives, learning content, pedagogy, and learning environments – in order to initiate transformations that enable young generations to build and enjoy more democratic, sustainable, and just societies.