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Research article

## Hope amid violence: youths' agency and learning experiences to transform social conflicts in non-democratic settings

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## Abstract

Understanding and addressing conflicts underlying direct and indirect violence is necessary to build a just and sustainable peace. This study foregrounds youths' voices and lived experiences of social conflicts in Iran, an understudied (semi-)authoritarian context in the Middle East. It examines selected youths' socially constructed understandings of the conflicts and violence affecting their lives, their perceptions of their roles and agency in non-violently addressing those conflicts, and the learning experiences and social pedagogies (inside and outside school) available to them that might have contributed to forming their understandings and agency. The study's intersectional gender- and social-class-sensitive design enables an understanding of how social-structural, cultural and political dynamics interacted with participating youths' experiences of social conflicts and their peacebuilding citizenship agency. Findings show that social conflicts that

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the participating youths were concerned about varied in their differing gender and social class locations. In addition, despite the disconnections between the participating students' lived experiences of conflicts and their learning opportunities at school, the findings point to spaces of feasibility for schools to enhance students' opportunities to develop key aspects of peacebuilding agency, even in (semi-)authoritarian settings where citizenship and peace education are absent from the explicit curriculum. Moreover, the research expands the international conceptualisation of peacebuilding agency by showing that young people's frequent responses to the social conflicts in their lives in (semi-)authoritarian contexts (avoidance, conformity, withdrawal and despair) cannot be simply interpreted as apathy or lack of awareness of the larger structural issues.

**Keywords** youth agency; (semi-)authoritarian; peacebuilding education

## Introduction

Citizens require a sense of hope, commitment and capacity to understand social conflicts, envision alternatives to transform them, and embody their own role regarding the spaces of possibility to build sustainable peace (Bickmore et al., 2017). Young people's exposure to various social development opportunities, inside and outside school, form their understandings of the social conflicts affecting their lives and possible individual and collective actions to foster or hinder social change (Novelli et al., 2017). Schooling plays a significant role in creating learning experiences to transform, rather than reproduce, cultural exclusion, inequitable resource distribution and oppressive political institutions underpinning social conflicts (Bickmore and Kishani, 2022). This study delves into the interplay of youth agency, educational experiences and peacebuilding in Iran, characterised as a theocracy with strong authoritarian elements.

This research centres on youths' voices and lived experiences of social conflicts and their agency in response to those conflicts in a context where conventional collective citizenship actions, such as popular movements, have been violently oppressed. Iran has witnessed significant political upheavals in recent years, with its citizens, notably youth and women, fervently advocating and protesting for their human rights and freedom. These movements have been a direct challenge to the oppressive measures of the Islamic Republic regime, which has sought to control the bodies and actions of its citizens, particularly women. This research is timely in understanding the complex process of thought and compromises that Iranian youth go through before making any decision on action or inaction.

Middle Eastern youths' material concerns and situated knowledge have not yet been fully reflected in dominant discourses of peacebuilding or citizenship education (Faour and Muasher, 2011; Hahn, 2015). Even among Middle Eastern countries, such studies in the Iranian context are scarce due to language barriers and national and international political restrictions. By bringing theories of conflict, violence, justice and peace developed by political science, philosophy and public policy scholars into the field of education, this research offers a hybrid conceptual and analytical framework to investigate the potential socially constructed pedagogies and learning opportunities contributing to transformative peacebuilding, accounting for cultural and societal norms and political and economic structures in a semi-authoritarian context.

This study is based on qualitative data collected in four schools in Tehran, Iran's capital city, between October 2017 and February 2018. The schools consisted of one girls' and one boys' high school in lower socio-economic neighbourhoods and one girls' and one boys' high school in higher socio-economic neighbourhoods. The approach was gender-sensitive and intersectional, as it accounts for gendered and classed experiences. The methodological and analytical framework employed in this research provided a sound basis to understand and explore the contextualised nuances of the selected Iranian youths' lived experiences of various dimensions of social conflicts and violence and their responses to those conflicts. Specifically, the following research questions guided this study.

1. What social conflicts and violence concern the participating Iranian youths across gender and socio-economic class identities?

2. How do these youths understand social conflicts and envision their citizenship role in response to those conflicts?
3. How do participating youths' lived experiences (inside and outside school) contribute to shaping their understanding of social conflicts and their responses to those conflicts?

## Review of the literature

Disagreement and conflicting interests between different nations, ethnic and religious groups and individuals are naturally inevitable. However, depending on how they are dealt with, these conflicts can either become a motor of change and be transformed into sustainable peace, or they can lead to escalated forms of violence (Galtung, 1969). Each conflict can contain three interacting dimensions, each feeding into the others. These dimensions are: (1) direct disputes that can escalate to direct physical violence; (2) the cultural dimension, including cultural norms, beliefs and identity relations; and (3) the social-structural dimension, including tangible incentives, interests and resource needs (Galtung, 1969; Ross, 2007). Young people's lived experiences of oppression, inequality and exclusion involve one or more of these dimensions simultaneously. The high levels of direct violence in the Middle East, including Iran, suggest that the social-structural and cultural conflicts underlying existing tensions have not been identified and effectively addressed.

Peacebuilding processes aim to transform relationships and social structures that fuel conflicts and to engage in enduring changes that address conflicts non-violently (Lederach and Maiese, 2015). Young people's understandings of conflicts and their envisioning of peacebuilding processes are constructed through their lived experiences within their contexts' economic and political structures and cultural norms (Bickmore and Kishani, 2022; Higgins and Novelli, 2020). They develop their understandings by selectively drawing from a variety of sources within their families, schools, communities and diverse media sources. Youths' intersecting multiple social identities, such as gender, age, ability, class, ethnicity or religion, further differentiate and diversify their experiences of social hierarchies, power relations and cultural norms in complex ways (Crenshaw, 1990).

Various learning experiences, inside and outside school, can foster young citizens' agency for non-violently transforming the underlying factors that escalate conflicts into violence (Lederach, 2006; Lederach and Maiese, 2015). There is no universal definition of what citizens' agency entails to respond to social conflicts effectively. I draw from Lederach's (2003) articulation of the human body as a metaphor for comprehensive conflict transformation for peacebuilding. Based on Lederach's conceptualisation of conflict transformation, peacebuilding agency requires:

- *head*: understanding social conflicts and developing hope and willingness to engage in transforming them into just peace
- *heart*: (re)building relationships and trust with actors involved in a conflict
- *hands*: being able to analyse, discuss, negotiate and handle conflicts through peacemaking dialogue towards resolution, with inclusive and equitable representation of the diverse voices involved
- *legs and feet*: envisioning and engaging in concrete collective actions for social (institutional and cultural) change to transform hierarchal and socially divided power relations.

Education could build on youths' awareness and knowledge of injustices underlying conflicts that affect their lives. It can also expand their choices of various citizenship actions in response to those conflicts. This role of education can be highly important in (semi-)authoritarian and conflict-affected settings, where young people's choices for citizenship actions (or inaction) might vary from the predominant conception of political participation in stable democracies (Bellino, 2015; Lopes Cardozo et al., 2015).

The body of scholarly literature on the intersection of peacebuilding, education and youth agency in the Global South countries has been growing (see Bajaj and Hantzopoulos, 2016; Bellino et al., 2017; Davies, 2017; Higgins and Novelli, 2020; Lopes Cardozo et al., 2016). More recently studies have also tried to redress the absence of youths' voices and life experiences regarding their understanding and expression of various social conflicts and their agency in response to them (for example, Bellino, 2018; Nieto and Bickmore, 2017; Pruitt, 2013). However, as mentioned earlier, such studies are scarce in Middle Eastern countries, particularly in Iran. Therefore, there is a call for more research in non-democratic contexts to expand the Western formulation of peacebuilding education and citizens' agency. Youths' agency in the semi-authoritarian theocratic Iran is impeded by the divine impunity of non-elected

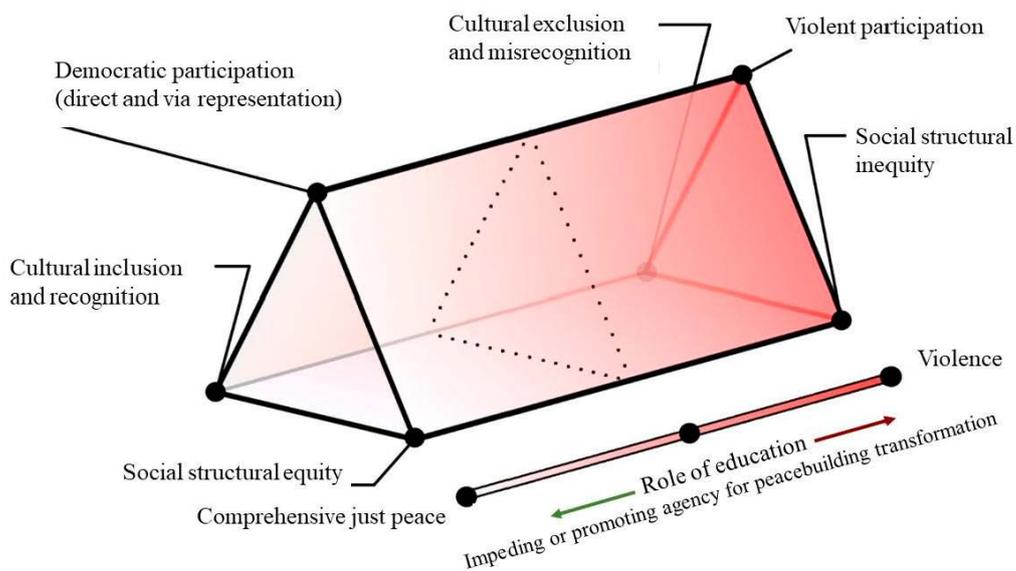
institutions and leadership figures promoted via explicit state-controlled schools and media curricula. This research examines if and how contextual social-structural, political and cultural dynamics and power relations are associated with Iranian youths' understandings of the social conflicts that surround them, their agency to address them and the learning experiences available to them to develop that agency.

## Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework in this research is derived from Bickmore and Kishani's (2022) and Novelli et al.'s (2017) models of peacebuilding learning, both of which are inspired by Galtung's (1990) theories of violence, Ross's (2010) theories of conflict, Fraser's (2005) theories of justice and Crenshaw's (1990) intersectional theory. Lederach's (2003) theories of conflict transformation also strengthen this framework by connecting the interacting components of young people's individual agency with their collective social actions and understandings.

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework adjusted and applied in this research in a three-dimensional prism format. It shows a conflict's three direct dimensions – direct, social structural and cultural.

**Figure 1. Conceptual framework**



The three-dimensional format of it also highlights that building a just and sustainable peace is a process which requires understanding and addressing every dimension underpinning a conflict. Each dimension, depending on how it is dealt with, can escalate and become violent (moving towards the red side of the prism on the right side) or be transformed into comprehensive peace (moving towards the white side on the left): from cultural exclusion and misrecognition to cultural recognition and inclusion, from inequitable to equitable redistribution of resources and opportunities, via abandoning violent and exclusive modes of participation and, instead, creating inclusive and equitable dialogic governance structures and decision-making procedures.

The dimensions on the comprehensive peace side match the principles that Nancy Fraser considers necessary for social justice: recognition, equitable redistribution of resources and representation. Representation refers to processes for inclusive representation of contrasting voices in macro (transnational and national) political decision-making and policymaking (Fraser, 2005). In applying Fraser's theory to my research, I expanded this conception to include processes and capabilities for participation in confronting and transforming social conflicts on both macro (government) and micro (school, peer and home) levels. On the interpersonal level in schools, youths' participation includes

face-to-face confrontation with direct interpersonal conflicts or with direct promotion of violence in a patriarchal environment. Thus, while the term 'representation' works well for the macro government level, the term 'participation' better suits how youths handle smaller-scale conflicts within their schools, via the existence (or lack) of social pedagogical processes connected to their lived experiences. As Fraser (2005) argues, the representation dimension of just peacebuilding is about 'how' diverse and unequally positioned people are enabled to participate in making decisions in political, economic and cultural domains. This dimension in my research includes various forms and means of collective problem-solving, such as inclusive and equitable dialogue, restorative and transitional justice, and negotiation to transform a conflict.

The three-dimensional demonstration of the conflict, violence and peace spectrum clearly shows the two-sided role of education. Education can develop young people's head, heart, hands, and legs and feet conflict transformation capabilities and redirect the situation towards comprehensive peace. This is the aim of social pedagogy: to connect young people's learning to their context and empower them for social change. Such learning is compatible with Freire's (1970) conscientisation theory, referring to developing a critical awareness of the systemic and structural forces that shape one's life and taking action to transform those oppressive conditions. Education can also impede youths' agency by avoiding discussing conflicts and promoting status quo injustices and inequalities.

Infusing and synthesising theories from various fields into the conceptual framework provides an interdisciplinary and intersectoral approach. It considers the factors that affect education and peacebuilding from inside and outside the sector, which is crucial in perceiving a potential transformative peacebuilding role for education (Novelli et al., 2017). Such an interdisciplinary framework helps find a comprehensive and well-rounded understanding of Iranian youths' lived experiences of social conflicts, their envisioned alternatives in response to those conflicts and the learning experiences they view as having contributed (or not) to shaping their peacebuilding agency.

## Methodology

I used multimodal qualitative methods to examine the selected Iranian youths' understanding of the social conflicts and violence surrounding them, their perception of their roles and agency in response to those conflicts, and their lived experiences (inside and outside school) that could have contributed to forming their understanding and agency. This has been an in-depth, interpretive and contextually grounded inquiry into youths' multifaceted lived experiences as learning opportunities.

The data collection and analysis approaches assumed that youths' peacebuilding agency is socially constructed (versus being fixed and predefined categories of normative and prescriptive capacities). This study centres on qualitative data collected in four schools in Tehran, Iran's capital city, between October 2017 and February 2018. The schools consisted of one public girls' and one public boys' high school in lower socio-economic status (SES) neighbourhoods, and one private girls' and one private boys' high school in higher SES neighbourhoods. I worked with one group of six to twelve grade 9 students in each school. I had six focus group sessions with each group. In total, there were 37 students (21 girls and 16 boys) and 24 focus groups. I selected girls and boys from contrasting settings to maximise the benefits of comparison between and within different educational aspects and the participants' lived experiences of social conflicts based on gender and socio-economic status. Schools informed the students' parents or guardians of their children's participation in the research. They could ask any questions or request further information about the project, including participants' withdrawal. The Research Ethics Board of the University of Toronto, the Iranian Ministry of Education and the regional offices of education granted research ethics approvals, guaranteeing the secure protection of the participants' information and anonymity and the researcher's and the participants' safety.

Social pedagogy principles suit the collaborative and exploratory nature of the research questions. These principles include encouraging participants' collaboration and voice, acknowledging and respecting their various values and beliefs, and providing them with space to reflect on their lived experiences and break the cycle of oppressive conditions (Eichsteller and Holthoff, 2011; Úcar, 2013). The focus group sessions included participatory visual techniques (photovoice and photo-elicitation), collaborative teamwork, dialogic activities, individual confidential writing activities, and in-group dialogue and deliberation. In the first session, we focused on community building, clarifying the importance of the study and acknowledging participants' crucial role in the research process. In the

second session, students shared their understandings of various social conflicts prompted via culturally relevant photo-elicitation. In each group, students collectively selected a social conflict that mattered the most to them. In the third session, through a mapping exercise, students reflected on how they had been experiencing their selected conflicts at home, school, social media and other spaces they regularly visited. In the fourth session, each student brought in two to four images that captured their lived experiences of the conflict they had chosen in their group. They could draw, take pictures or research images on the web or in a newspaper. They also provided a caption for each of their images, explaining their own perspectives of the social context and the meaning of the image. The images remained anonymous. Then, students collectively decided to put each image in the right place on the conflict tree I had hung on the wall. Branches represented the symptoms, trunk the actors involved, roots the root causes of the conflict and the ground (soil) the learning experiences, where participants had learned about the conflict. This photovoice technique enhanced the participants' input into the research by representing their perception of their selected social conflict through visual stories and demonstrating how they made meaning of and located themselves within that conflict. In the fifth session, students focused on identifying the actions that different actors (their teachers, their school principal, government authorities, their parents, ordinary citizens and themselves as individuals) could/should do to improve the situation. Then, by reflecting back on their conflict trees, they discussed how each suggested action could address the symptoms or root causes of the conflict. Finally, in the sixth session, they envisioned their own roles in the alternatives they had identified in the previous session for handling the particular conflicts that concerned them.

The variety of participatory techniques to engage the students ensured that every participant had airtime and space to voice their viewpoints. The empirical evidence provided from these multimodal activities, through which the participants narrated their lived experiences of social conflicts and actively engaged in critical dialogue, shaped the foreground data in this research.

I also conducted semi-structured interviews and informal, unstructured conversations with two and six teachers and other school staff in each school (16 in total) and eight non-formal community educators. These adult educators joined the study voluntarily. These interviews enquired into their practices that might have impeded or promoted youths' commitment, capacity and motivation to respond to social conflicts. I spent 20 hours driving and walking in the neighbourhoods where the schools were located. Observation in each school and the surrounding neighbourhoods provided a contextual background for the study.

I grounded my work in a critical analytical framework, assuming that social meanings are fluid and context-bound, subject to various cultural and historical (contextual) contingencies (Cherryholmes, 1988). This framework suspends the dominant assumptions about youth agency (mainly based on stable democracies) and allows knowledge production by the local participants in a theocratic (semi-)authoritarian context where I conducted the research. My analytical approaches were informed by some principles of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006): analysis was ongoing, and each round of interpretation was shared (in anonymised form) with research participants to refine future analysis and data collection. I systematically worked with multimodal types of data emerging from contrasting settings, organised and broke these into manageable units, coded, synthesised and searched for meanings and patterns to highlight and compare the ways that the students made meaning of their lived experiences of social conflicts and perceived their peacebuilding agency.

## Findings

### Participating youths' selected conflicts

The social conflicts about which the participating youths expressed concern varied in type and degree across gender and socio-economic status. The higher SES boys selected brain drain as their group conflict. In discussing their topic, they focused on domestic and transnational political-economic inequities. They identified the country's unjust and non-democratic economic and political structures as the main factors blocking their academic and professional aspirations. They planned or dreamed of migration to a Global North country. For instance, Figure 2 shows a drawing that one of the participants in the privileged boys' school drew and brought to the group. The drawing shows a young man who has many degrees and certificates from the best universities in the world, yet he can only find unskilled

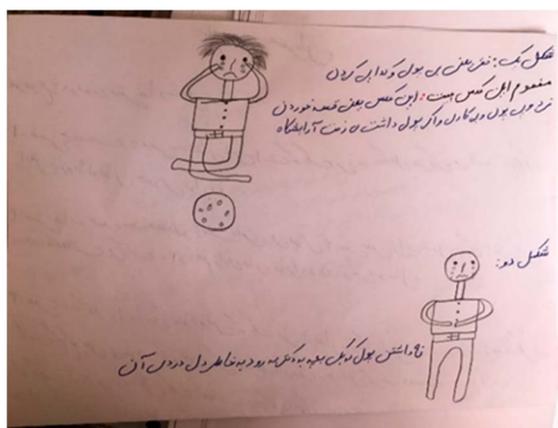
labour work vacancies. The caption reads 'no matter how hard we try to get the best education and skills in Iran, the opportunities, resources, and positions will go to the incompetent children of authorities'.

**Figure 2. An image drawn by one of the participants from the privileged boys' school for the Photovoice activity**



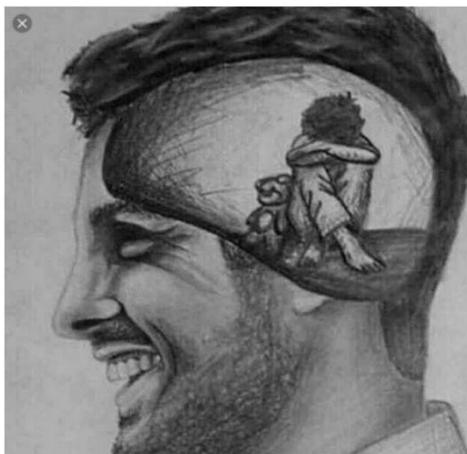
The lower SES boys' priority concern was also a resource conflict. These boys focused on their lived experiences of poverty and their possible future economic opportunities to escape it. Figure 3 shows an image that one of the boys in the disadvantaged school drew for the photovoice activity. The caption reads, on the top, 'poverty means begging for money, grieving for not affording to go even to a hairdresser', and on the bottom, 'Poverty means that a child cannot visit a doctor when he has stomach ache'. These boys gave numerous vivid examples of the experiences of children living in poverty in connection with drug addiction, access to quality health care and education, unemployment, underemployment and child labour.

**Figure 3. An image drawn by one of the participants from the disadvantaged boys' school for the Photovoice activity**



The higher SES girls selected freedom of expression as their group conflict. They expressed concern, questioning and frustration about ongoing gender discrimination in their experiences. They pointed at patriarchy as the main cultural factor restricting their freedom (to clothe themselves and to act in a way they desired) within family, school and Iranian society. Figure 4 depicts one of the photovoice images that one of the participants in the privileged girls' school drew. The caption reads, 'We cannot be and act as we want. We must wear different masks, one at home, one at school, one in streets ... and still we are always judged and restricted.'

**Figure 4. An image drawn by one of the participants from the privileged girls' school for the Photovoice activity**



The lower SES girls' major concern was also a gender conflict, rooted in cultural stereotypes. They selected pervasive sexual assault and threats targeting young women and limiting their mobility and safety within their homes and society. Figure 5 is an example of a photovoice image demonstrating sexual harassment of young women in public. The caption reads, 'It is unsafe for us to go outside alone. We can protect ourselves by wearing modest clothes, but even with that, we get harassed daily.' These girls' anonymous individual writings also reflected their deep concerns about ongoing domestic violence and their parents (mainly fathers) preventing them from continuing their education.

**Figure 5. Photovoice image sent by a lower SES girl**



### **School-based learning opportunities: moving towards violence or peace**

The four schools shared many similarities and had some considerable differences regarding available mechanisms for students to practise collective participation to discuss and address the root causes of social conflicts affecting their lives. Lack of representation and participation systems at schools, through which students could practise dialogue, negotiation, sharing and hearing multiple (contrasting) perspectives, challenge students' understandings of the structural and cultural roots of social conflicts, their hope and motivation for change, and their agency to transform conflicts into peace.

The participating students unanimously, and most of the interviewed educators in all four schools, acknowledged the absence of processes and spaces to encourage dialogue and sharing concerns about the social conflicts that mattered to students. Students said the focus group sessions we had together were their first experience reflecting on and collectively responding to social conflicts. For example, one lower SES boy said: 'I have never been asked about my opinion about anything ... during these sessions,

I could freely share my ideas, and everyone was listening; it felt so good to be part of the decision-making process about a real problem.' One lower SES girl also stated: 'These sessions made me conscious of the fact that none of our classes requires us thinking ... we just memorise useless stuff ... in these sessions, we learned how to think and solve complex issues together.'

Regardless of their different lived curriculum in the contrasting schools, the participating youths expressed disappointment and disaffection about student–teacher/staff relationship dynamics in almost every focus group discussion in all four schools, including belittling, humiliation, ignorance, corporal punishment (only lower SES boys and girls) and restrictions on physical mobility and clothing (only girls, particularly those in the lower SES location). They perceived authoritarian school environments as ineffective educational approaches. In interviews, one teacher and the superintendent at the disadvantaged boys' school supported corporal punishment and viewed students' submission to coercion as necessary to run the school and classrooms.

The lower SES students unanimously agreed that there was no system supporting them in the face of direct violence from authorities in their schools. In the absence of a support system to protect them from verbal and physical violence and in the normalised presence of direct violence, these teenagers applied the predominant alternative they knew through their lived experiences. Some had used violence against their peers when in a position of relative authority, or even against their teachers. I observed student peacekeepers' use of violence against other students who did not follow the school's rules. Instead of intentional action for change, they expressed a feeling of being cornered: 'What else can we do when our accumulated anger bursts?' (a lower SES boy). Such power hierarchy constrained students' peacebuilding agency capabilities to get involved in peacemaking dialogue for resolving the conflicts they faced.

There were mechanisms in place in each school that, if functioning effectively, could provide students with spaces to represent their voices and participate in school decision-making processes. For instance, I observed 'Suggestions and criticisms' boxes in all four schools. However, none of the participants believed that their school staff would have attended to students' comments, which discouraged them from participating in this potentially democratic space: 'Downstairs, there is a "suggestions and criticisms" box, right above a garbage bin [everyone laughed], where students' opinions end up' (a higher SES boy).

Student council was another institutional mechanism that could potentially provide students with a participatory space to represent their voices in decision-making processes in their schools. However, none of the four schools implemented student councils fully (if at all). The students in all groups expressed little faith in the effectiveness of student councils. For example, one of the lower SES girls who had been a council member described her role as 'A formality, I was responsible for taking naughty students to the superintendent's office'. The higher SES boys, despite their concerns and doubts about the effectiveness of student councils, uniquely expressed hope of reviving their school's student council by applying the techniques they practised in the focus group sessions to address school-related conflicts.

The pedagogical examples shared by the participating students and adults revealed that each school provided students with different degrees of inclusive and participatory spaces. The privileged schools, particularly the boys' school, had more respectful and less violent student–teacher relationships, with relatively more interactive pedagogical approaches, compared with the disadvantaged schools. In addition, there was a school-based and student-led magazine in this school whose editorial group included four (out of six) of the participants. This magazine was a space to address contemporary topics and conflicts at the school from student writers' perspectives. These higher SES boys also reported participation in other extracurricular groups in their school, such as cultural circles, maths or literature groups and football clubs. Such school-wide student-based groups had allowed the higher SES boys to practise dialogue and collective decision-making.

Despite enjoying more participation spaces, the higher SES girls and boys expressed more complaints about, and higher expectations of their teachers and teaching methods compared with their lower SES counterparts. They demanded more horizontal student–teacher relationships where their opinions and interests would be heard and valued. In comparison, the lower SES boys and girls mainly wished for the cessation of direct (not only physical, but also verbal) violence by their teachers and other school staff. The youths in the four contrasting settings strongly voiced their critical opinions about the irrelevancy of the memorisation-based learning opportunities and educational content to their everyday life experiences and the required skills to handle the conflicts affecting them.

The interviewed teachers and staff in all four schools expressed awareness of the predominance of lecture-based, non-participatory and memorisation-based pedagogical approaches in their schools. Many of them demonstrated a constrained sense of agency. They deflected the responsibility for providing peacebuilding learning opportunities to students away from themselves by blaming parents or the education system. Almost all the teachers (particularly in the disadvantaged schools) expressed fear and insecurity about directly addressing the conflicts about which their students were concerned. As one of the interviewed teachers in the disadvantaged girls' school stated, 'Every topic you discuss is political, with life and death consequences'.

In addition, all 14 (out of 16) school staff and eight non-formal community educators who were interviewed expressed hopelessness about teenagers' capability to respond to a conflict effectively. For instance, the religion teacher at the disadvantaged girls' school stated: 'These students are totally off the rails. They have no idea how to approach a problem.' The students showed awareness of and disagreed with such a disempowering perception. One of the higher SES girls said: 'We cannot trust our teachers when they don't believe in us and think we are spoiled, incapable children'. The predominant disempowering perception of teenagers' capacity to handle conflicts affecting their lives positions them as passive recipients of a version of truth that the authorities offer them. It justifies and normalises the authoritarian culture in the schools, where those in power (and who are 'wiser') made decisions for and expected conformity from 'incapable' students.

### **Students' conflict transformation agency for peacebuilding**

Many of the participating youths, across gender and socio-economic status, articulated all three structural (particularly boys), cultural (particularly girls) and political participation (particularly higher SES youths) dimensions when discussing the symptoms and causes of their selected conflicts. Most demonstrated their understanding of the need to redistribute power, wealth and opportunities to move towards equity and inclusion. However, the students did not articulate political mechanisms of how such reallocation could happen, what entities and institutions would be involved in the process, and what their roles could have been in the social change process. The youths' repertoires of actors and actions were very limited when discussing alternatives for responding to those conflicts. Below I discuss students' agency based on Lederach's conceptualisation of conflict transformation capabilities.

Students' knowledge, understanding and concerns about conflicts' symptoms, causes, actors and actions form what Lederach (2003) calls the head capabilities in conflict transformation for peacebuilding. The participating youths were not simply the passive recipients of national ideologies promoted (inside and outside school) by the explicit curriculum. For instance, despite the explicit narratives in the state-controlled school curriculum and media emphasising positive perspectives on religion, when students mentioned Islam, they mostly portrayed it as a negative contributor that exacerbated social conflicts, or as impractical and irrelevant curricular content, particularly in the privileged schools. For example, four (out of 10) lower SES boys questioned the religious leaders' disproportionate access to resources and power. Two (out of 12) of the lower SES girls explicitly blamed clerics for exacerbating sexual harassment, although without being more specific about how this occurred.

The participating youths' lived experiences of injustice eroded their trust in the state, school authorities, families and peers. This distrust endangered healthy and equitable relationships – what Lederach calls the heart capabilities essential to conflict transformation agency for peacebuilding. The explicit state-controlled schools and media curricula promoted (divine) impunity for non-elected institutions and figures, and citizens were not allowed to question their actions. The higher SES youths openly articulated their distrust of the theocratic elements of the Iranian governing system. Even some of the girls and many of the boys in the disadvantaged public schools, who were more often exposed to violent threats and control mechanisms within their schools and had limited access to non-state-controlled sources of information, expressed doubt as to the adequacy, appropriateness and effectiveness of the state-supported political agenda and the ruling clerics' position of power.

The youths' expressed capabilities and willingness to participate in peacemaking processes in their school or to have political representation at the national level were consistent with the differing participatory spaces available to them. These are the hands capabilities in Lederach's theory of conflict transformation. The higher SES boys' wider access to participatory structures to voice their opinions and to practise negotiating and discussing conflicting perspectives within their school had expanded their expectations for, sense of entitlement to, and fluency in talking about participating in smaller-

and larger-scale collective decision-making and problem-solving processes. In comparison, the lower SES youths' (particularly girls') considerably narrower access to multiple sources of information and spaces to represent their voice without fear of punishment had limited their repertoires of possible conflict-handling options to what they had already experienced.

Finally, the learning experiences available to the participating Iranian youths, both lived and in school, had not offered them broad repertoires to build what Lederach (2003) calls 'legs and feet', the capabilities for social-structural and cultural transformation of power relations to promote equitable redistribution of resources, opportunities, recognition and representation. In most instances, their lived curriculum at school had not addressed the political, cultural and economic structures underlying the conflicts the youths discussed. For instance, the disadvantaged schools predominantly responded to students' economic difficulties by providing affirmative remedies (for example, individual charity-based activities), without providing a space for students to understand and challenge (and transform) the political and economic structures underlying the unequal distribution of resources. The lower SES youths (particularly boys who discussed poverty) mostly suggested alternatives similar to those they had experienced in their everyday lives or had been told about at school. These youths' lived experiences of poverty and dependence on state social protection programmes and public services had given them feet-first insight into the deficiencies of such programmes and services in addressing economic inequalities in the country. They were living with the failure of the national political and economic structures. These lived experiences had enabled them to see and speak about the politics of economic inequalities and the participation of government in implementing policies to improve the redistribution of resources.

The youths in the privileged schools had not had the opportunity to attend to the social-structural and political structures underlying the transnational economic inequalities they discussed. Students from higher socio-economic backgrounds, like those from lower SES, discussed the shortcomings of national political, economic and cultural systems. However, they had the advantage of accessing diverse and transnational information sources, which their lower SES peers lacked. While these higher SES students mentioned fewer specific domestic inequalities than those in disadvantaged schools, they were more aware of global disparities. They were particularly attuned to resource and political differences on an international scale, often comparing their situation with that of citizens in wealthier, more democratic societies in the Global North.

The young participants readily identified individual actors involved in the conflicts they discussed. However, their discussions in the initial focus groups lacked depth in analysing the cultural and structural roots of these issues. This tendency to blame individuals can overshadow the broader political, economic, social and cultural structures that fuel these conflicts. For example, in the early sessions, many girls and some boys in the disadvantaged schools either remained silent or echoed state ideologies on gender conflicts (such as sexual harassment and enforcing the compulsory hijab policy via moral police patrols). They initially blamed women who faced sexual harassment for not dressing modestly. However, as the sessions progressed, they began to understand and address the deeper structural and cultural causes of gender discrimination. While higher SES girls, along with some higher SES boys and a few lower SES girls, opposed the compulsory hijab, they did not fully articulate how this policy discriminates against women's active participation in various societal domains, including decision-making processes. They advanced their articulations in the later focus group sessions as well.

Even though the lower SES youths voiced the government lines, for example, when talking about gender-based violence or economic hardships, in many instances they showed capabilities to negotiate, disagree and represent their voice more subtly, particularly in the later focus group sessions. In the absence of opportunities to exercise their civic voice, and in the normalised presence of direct violence, many of the lower SES youths seemed at first to have fallen into conformity with the power structure. However, they (particularly boys) could articulate government policies and practices concerning inequitable resource redistribution based on their lived experiences of economic injustice and state-supported mechanisms. They wanted the government policies to be implemented such that there would be a fair redistribution of resources and power. Even though the lower SES youths predominantly did not discuss (or question) the authoritarian governing structure of the country, they criticised officials and clerics for their lack of commitment to actualising their resource-based election promises and available resources in favour of the marginalised populations.

In addition, the participating girls and boys in the disadvantaged schools often expressed disagreement with their parents or school staff in their focus group discussions or confidential writing

activities. Therefore, the conformity that many of them showed regarding the values and mores promoted in the explicit curriculum inside and outside their schools could not always be interpreted as constrained agency. For instance, four (out of 12) of the lower SES girls, in the confidential survey, wrote about their choices to express conformity with the imposed restrictions within their homes and school so their parents would allow them to continue their education and spend some time outside home (and school). These girls' conformity with the imposed hijab or the stricture to not go out alone could reflect a negotiation between the possibility of coming to school and going out, or staying home and expecting an early marriage.

## Discussion

### Intersections of gender and class in youths' social conflict experiences

The conflicts that the participating youths were concerned about varied in their differing gender and social class locations. The boys' groups prioritised resource conflicts, in particular economic inequalities affecting their current and envisioned future well-being and academic and professional achievements. Meanwhile, despite experiencing resource conflicts similar to those of their male counterparts of comparable socio-economic status, the participating girls expressed more concern about gender-based and familial (thus, cultural) relationship conflicts. However, prosperity had helped reduce the intensity of the resource and gender inequalities that the higher SES youths had experienced.

These Iranian youths expressed concerns about a wide variety of social conflicts affecting the un-peace in their lives, from personal to global, suggesting that confronting conflicts is inevitable for building peace. This is consistent with the findings of scholars such as Bickmore (2017), Davies (2012) and Levy (2014), who argue that education for peacebuilding needs to engage with conflicts and differences.

### Possibility and feasibility of peace education amid authoritarianism

The interviews with the students, teachers, other school staff and non-formal community educators showed a considerable mismatch between the participating students' lived experiences of social conflicts and the learning opportunities available to them inside and outside school. The participating students expressed awareness of such a misfit. There were mechanisms to control and instil fear in students in all four schools, particularly in the disadvantaged public schools, to narrow students' non-conformity and dissent with school values. This authoritarian culture did not provide students with the learning experiences to practise representing their voices, participating in decision-making processes and having a dialogue about the conflicts that concerned them. Moreover, the cultural and political sensitivities around discussing multiple viewpoints about most political and cultural conflict issues in classrooms have encouraged educators to largely comply with (and limit themselves to) the core academic curriculum. Such compliance, as Halai and Durrani (2018) argue, based on a study of teachers' agency in the decentralised education system in Pakistan, isolates educational processes from the social, cultural and political structures in the context that could contribute to shaping education agendas.

However, despite the predominant sensitive and authoritarian school culture, the participating youths and teachers in each school, even the disadvantaged girls' school, reported rare positive deviations from the common teacher-centred, exam-oriented and banking education approaches that treat students as passive objectives (Freire, 2011). For instance, the English as a Second Language teacher at the disadvantaged girls' school explained that she had been employing participatory learning approaches in her classes, where 'students work in small groups, and each student is responsible for the learning of her teammates'. These teaching examples, even though rare, suggest the possibility of peacebuilding-related education in this semi-authoritarian context. Findings also showed that the availability of spaces to practise peacemaking processes and participation, even though narrow, was associated with the (political) participation dimension of peacebuilding agency.

Moreover, my experience and observation of youths' behaviour during the series of focus group sessions in each school suggest that these dialogic sessions themselves contributed to developing the young people's capability for empathy and group communication skills, including disagreement dialogue and consciousness about power imbalance and multiple perspectives. In the initial sessions, the dialogue within each set of participating youths showed subordination to a dominant single viewpoint in their group, bullying, blaming others, and exclusionary and aggressive comments and behaviours. These

youths, even the higher SES boys who had fluently asked for institutional spaces to voice their opinions, did not demonstrate much capacity in the early sessions to create inclusive multi-perspective spaces within their small groups. However, that changed in the later focus group sessions, when they were more exposed to social pedagogical approaches. Over time, I increasingly observed that every single participating youth was able to participate in the discussions, voice and listen to contrasting perspectives, and participate in collective decision-making or problem-solving.

These findings resonate with Bar-Tal et al.'s (2010) discussion of the importance and feasibility of building young people's peacemaking skills, such as disagreement dialogue and conflict resolution, in indirect (not explicitly political) ways, even when a society's political conditions do not allow direct reference to certain conflict themes. The focus group sessions in this study showed that, when given the opportunity to practise openness, dialogue and empathy towards others and to be exposed to alternative viewpoints, the participating students were able to apply those skills to the specific (larger- and smaller-scale) conflicts that mattered to them.

### **Different forms of agency in (semi-)authoritarian theocracies**

The participating youths, through their experiences of discrimination, inequality and exclusion (cultural and structural violence) in their families, schools and political national structures, had been constantly reminded of the narrow space for dissent in relation to the authorities around them (such as parents, teachers and school staff). In the absence of such a supporting system (and even physical security for the lower SES girls), the participating youths had devised more subtle expressions of (limited) agency to handle the conflicts affecting their lives.

Most students demonstrated active and critical engagement with the curriculum, rather than passively absorbing it. Even with a prevailing sense of insecurity around discussing political matters, students from all four groups voiced doubts about the nation-state government and its intertwined theocracy. As another piece of evidence, higher SES youths, especially boys, opted out of collective social movements. Their decisions were rooted in assessing the risks of participation and scepticism about the efficacy of such movements. In addition, many lower SES girls initially echoed prevailing views on gender conflicts. Yet some recognised they were playing the role of 'a good girl' to secure parental approval for continuing their education or working outside the home, rather than genuinely subscribing to those views. This aligns with critical feminist theories that view women's silence in various contexts as a strategic choice for survival, protection, resistance and care, especially in non-democratic, conflict-affected and post-war societies (Blomqvist et al., 2021; Selimovic, 2020). This silence is a manifestation of agency. Another subtle display of agency was seen in higher SES girls resisting the compulsory hijab policy. They continuously negotiated with parents and school staff for the freedom to dress as they wished, often wearing outfits in public that defied the state's modesty guidelines for women.

### **Conclusion**

This research shows that the lived experiences of social conflicts that girls and boys with lower and higher socio-economic status faced, and the agency they developed in response to those conflicts, could not be fully captured by looking separately at the gender and class elements or cultural, political and social-structural dimensions of those experiences. The findings demonstrate that each set of students was differently situated in their contexts' political, economic, social and cultural structures; therefore, their educational needs and priority demands were different.

The participating youths voiced frustration with the status quo situation and yearned for change; however, they mostly either had very limited knowledge of possible repertoires for addressing the conflicts about which they were concerned or had fallen into hopeless stances that little or no positive change could happen through their collective actions. Most of the participating youths set their targets on individual goals without cultivating a sense of political engagement: to feel safer at home and in public spaces for the lower SES girls, to enjoy a more supportive and empathetic environment at home and school for the higher SES girls, to migrate to a wealthy country with the hope of a brighter individual future for the higher SES boys, and to get out of poverty and have a stable economic situation for the lower SES boys. Therefore, their frequent responses to the social conflicts in their lives (avoidance, conformity, withdrawal and despair) cannot be simply interpreted as apathy, indifference or lack of

awareness of larger structural issues. These youths, instead, voiced their concerns and chose particular conflict-handling alternatives based on the available repertoires they knew about and their sense of the possible, probably after calculating the risks and potential outcomes of (in)action.

Findings showed a considerable mismatch between the participating students' lived experiences and learning needs regarding certain conflicts they were concerned about and the learning opportunities available to them inside and outside school. I found little evidence of teaching plans and pedagogical approaches aimed at providing students with voices to represent their points of view in the classroom and school. However, the research participants (youths and teachers) did illuminate rare examples of pedagogical approaches that could improve students' peacemaking and peacebuilding capacities. In addition, the experience of the focus group sessions showed that, when given the opportunity to practise openness, dialogue and empathy towards others and to be exposed to alternative viewpoints, the participating students were able to apply those skills to the specific (larger- and smaller-scale) conflicts that were important to them. The focus group sessions constituted a social pedagogical example of a democratic space, where students were (and, thus, showed that they could be) active learners and producers of knowledge that represented their voices and could participate in collective decision-making and problem-solving. Therefore, schools can still expand the horizons of possibility for young people, even when the socio-political conditions do not allow a direct address to vast areas of social, political and cultural conflicts (such as gender inequality or the violation of human rights) and where education related to peace, citizenship or human rights is absent from the explicit curriculum. Such analysis of findings calls for conflict-sensitive and contextually relevant social pedagogical approaches to promote the potential of education in enhancing students' peacebuilding agency.

## Declarations and conflicts of interest

### Research ethics statement

The author declares that research ethics approval for this article was provided by the University of Toronto Research Ethics Board.

### Consent for publication statement

The author declares that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

### Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflict of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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