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Research article

Libyan teachers as transitionalist pragmatists: conceptualising a path out of the peacebuilding narrative in conflict-affected contexts

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Abstract

The dominant analytical and programmatic frameworks used when writing about conflict-affected contexts such as Libya in Global Northern academia belong to the interdisciplinary field of peace and conflict studies (PACS). Within this, education is increasingly gaining attention as a tool for building peace and developing social justice. This article is a cautious conceptual exploration of how pragmatism might be a timely intervention in the fields of PACS and peacebuilding education. In particular, the article takes a deeper look at the American philosopher John Dewey's pragmatist approach to politics and education, and his conceptualisations of a context-specific 'public', teachers and enquiry for peaceful and democratic living. Throughout, I argue that a pragmatist philosophy is a worthwhile pedagogical project in a challenging context such as Libya, as it is an internal and ground-up discourse, compared to the often externally initiated

and top-down discourses of peacebuilding. I speak as an adjacent and connected critic, because I am both a Libyan and a German researching a problem in my country to which I hope to find possible solutions by engaging with discourses and practices in an academic institution in the Global North.

Keywords pragmatism; peacebuilding; peace and conflict studies; conflict-affected; transitionalism; public; teachers; aims; education

The context

In what world do Libyan teachers live, and in what world would they like to live? Libya has been in flux since the fall of the 42-year-long dictatorial Gaddafi regime in 2011. The initial post-revolution euphoria that flooded the streets of Tripoli and Benghazi has been replaced by confusion, disappointment and then disgust at the repeatedly failing Libyan and international efforts to build a stable and functioning state after a violent revolution. The country has two governments – the Government of National Unity in the West, supported by the United Nations (UN, 2021), and the Government of National Stability in the East, appointed by the Libyan Parliament – held together by fragmented state institutions and crumbling infrastructure. In this context today many of the 7 million Libyans in the North African country ask themselves what they need to change the situation. Some point to the role of the media to educate the people on how to make informed decisions about the various political actors vying for power in a vacuum of stable governance. Others are wondering whether schooling can initiate the necessary political, economic and socio-cultural transformations. However, schooling is, at best, neglected and ignored as ineffective and old-fashioned, and, at worst, mistrusted as the context in which generations of Libyans were forced to recite sections from Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's *Green Book* manifesto (al-Qadhafi, 2018). (The *Green Book*, published in 1975, contains Gaddafi's political and social philosophy. He rejected communism, capitalism and representative democracy in favour of Islamic socialism. School teachers had to teach sections of the book across the curriculum, which children had to memorise and recite.)

The central claim of this conceptual article is that there is a link between school and society – as philosophers of education, from Aristotle to Freire, have argued for centuries (Cahn, 1997). However, what kind of schooling takes place, what aims, and what kind of epistemological and policy frameworks are applied to envision it, will make a difference to the accuracy of this claim. Because Libya is a conflict-affected country, the frameworks usually adopted by international and local initiatives to analyse and reform any education institutions are taken from the peacebuilding and/or development fields. Currently, international governmental and non-governmental agencies active in Libyan affairs, such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and the International Network of Education in Emergencies (INEE), are predominantly on the security, economic development and peacebuilding track – or, as the UN (2021: 42) calls it, the multidimensional 'humanitarian-development-peace nexus'. Reformist programmes are imported from outside the country, or developed only in association with international governmental and non-governmental agencies. For example, in 2006, aspects of the Singaporean Curriculum were implemented in the Libyan education system and, more recently, a Jordanian programme has been used for the newly introduced Early Years Education, in response to the recommendation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for providing structured education to pre-primary age children (Elabbar, 2017; Ghait, 2018; Libyan Ministry of Education, 2019). Indeed, this article questions such interventions from the outside, even if they are invited by Libyans themselves, and questions whether developing ideas from within might not be a more fruitful proposition in the long run, and might help teachers rise to the challenge of teaching in today's world.

Before looking more deeply into Libyan schooling, teaching and research, we must address the epistemic lens through which interested parties look at Libya, if only to create an opening for another perspective to be included in conversations on/in Libya. Pragmatist philosophy is an old yet new voice in this conversation – a voice that allows for meaning making and explorations based on experiences on the ground. In the following sections, the term 'education' refers to formal education and schooling

(as distinct from informal education in the form of home schooling, Quranic madrasas or extra-curricular workshops or training provided by international non-governmental organisations, consulting think tanks, Teachers TV and so on). Various actors in the education sector in Libya are ultimately restricted by the barriers imposed by the Libyan Ministry of Education, in that schools or their departments cannot enter into such workshops/training opportunities without the ministry's permission (UNESCO PEER, 2021).

Conversations in peace and conflict spaces

Peace and conflict studies (PACS), peacebuilding education, and education and conflict are having a reflective moment. Scholars are questioning their own positionality, and the position of their fields towards coloniality, context-blind universalism or structural and systemic violence. Some negotiate their position in the language of local–global dialectics (Arnové, 2012), which holds that the local cannot be separated from the global, and vice versa, while some call for their fields' relegation to the background, as they involve local stakeholders in developing their own educational systems towards peace (Gross and Davies, 2015; Novelli and Higgins, 2017; Richmond, 2014; Zembylas and Bekerman, 2013). Others attempt to include Bourdieu's sociological dimension in their field to address 'a void in the conceptual toolkit', and their potential complicity with Galtungian structural violence (Kester and Cremin, 2017: 1415). This conceptual article participates in the conversations between peace scholars, conflict scholars, education and conflict, peace education and peacebuilding education scholars on the one hand, and the education sociologists and philosophers on the other hand, as King (2013) wished for in her influential consideration of the role of education in post-conflict Rwanda. It contributes a philosophical perspective that explores 'social-structural and psychocultural' (King, 2013: 9) dimensions, and one that names education for peace by its processual name: education for transition. This would be an education that focuses on a pragmatist-framed process of education, exploring the *why*, *by whom* and *how* education is done, as much as the content – the *what* – and one that is built to readjust and evolve in response to whatever social situations are at hand.

This article presents PACS as an overarching interdisciplinary site that includes and launches scholars and practitioners in peace studies, research and peace education (originating after the First World War in an attempt to engage in international diplomacy, political science and philosophy towards peaceful solutions to, and the prevention of, future conflict). PACS also includes a more nuanced version of peace education – CPE (Bajaj, 2019; Galtung, 1974; Reardon, 2001) – evoking Freire's (2017) critical pedagogy to end oppression and social injustice, and to expose power structures. Furthermore, PACS draws into its fold conflict scholars, with their focus on war, security and development, in response to the criticism that one cannot comprehensively study peace without the study of conflict, its roots and processes, and its manifestations in current systems and cultures (Galtung, 1969). Here, we also find Galtung's (1969) seminal concepts of 'positive peace' and 'negative peace', defining the latter as the absence of direct violence and conflict, but with the presence of structural and cultural violence. As Galtung (1969: 172) points out, in unjust sociopolitical and economic institutions, and in exclusionary or prejudicing cultural structures, conflict is always 'latent'. Therefore, to achieve positive peace, the latent violence in these structures must be addressed.

These violent structures can include education systems (schooling), which can have positive and negative consequences (Bush and Saltarelli, 2000): schooling can be not only a cultivator of peace, but also a victim of conflict, when students, staff or buildings suffer from violent conflict, and it can be the 'perpetrator' of conflict (Pherali, 2016) in the form of violent structures, behaviours and oppressive knowledge perpetuated through teaching and learning. This leads to a more nuanced and cautious bifurcation between peace education and peacebuilding education, where the former is evolving towards a CPE, more aware of its 'two faces' (Bush and Saltarelli, 2000), but still interested in social justice and whole-system transformation, with the latter taking a more state-way stance. Here, non-governmental organisations, international non-governmental organisations and mainly country-external humanitarian and development agencies work outside (even if in association with) the state system to alleviate the suffering and/or loss of learning due to human-made or natural emergencies and crises (INEE, n.d.). Currently, peacebuilding education and CPE are appreciating the need to engage local stakeholders (from state institutions to local charities) in addressing both short-term and long-term solutions to, and prevention of, conflict (Dryden-Peterson, 2020; Education Cannot Wait, 2022; Shah et al., 2020). We find ourselves in an interesting discussion between CPE and peacebuilding

education on their position and role in this process, and how they conceptualise transformation towards this hybrid peace (Richmond, 2014), which incorporates both local conceptualisations and what are defined as Western/Global Northern ideas about peace, justice and democracy.

On a theoretical level, peacebuilding education, education and conflict, and the CPE fields are exploring the notions of agency and change. Scholars ask whether agency and change are situated within the individual's attitude and behaviour towards peace, or within systems and structures, be they coherent, or intangible and interrelated (Bajaj, 2018; Higgins and Novelli, 2020; Kester and Cremin, 2017; Zembylas and Bekerman, 2013). This conversation extends, therefore, to what and how we teach our children – to put the point of control within them as individuals, or within systems and structures that we need to address in order to bring about change. It is worth noting that the epistemological framework in which these fields operate is mainly a dualistic one, and, therefore, decidedly non-pragmatist: on the one side, there is a focus on the individual who may learn to transform society and structures; and, on the other, there is a concern with changes to structures, instigated perhaps by curricular and policy reforms, which could bring positive transformation to individuals and society. Furthermore, there are those who are wary of including potentially violent state and government institutions (Galtung, 1969), and others who feel that nothing can be achieved if these local stakeholders are excluded. What follows is disciplinary confusion, or even struggle (Hajir, 2023; Kester, 2019; Kester and Cremin, 2017; Richmond, 2015).

It is here where pragmatist philosophy could light a way out. John Dewey's *Democracy and Education* (2018) and *The Public and Its Problems* (2016) propose a pragmatist political and educational philosophy – one that is committed to the ideas of experience, amelioration, continuous readjustment and transition, and their inextricable relationship with education. A pragmatism as 'transitionalism', to use Colin Koopman's (2009) helpful concept, may loosen the paradoxical knots (Hajir, 2023) within which PACS, peacebuilding, critical peace education (CPE), and the education and conflict fields find themselves. This 'transitionalist' pragmatism is a processual project which highlights the *interactionality* of Dewey's theory of nature and reality (ontology), and his theory of knowledge (epistemology) – his onto-epistemology. What we think, believe and value as desirable (peace, democracy, power and so on) are always in dialogue with, and modified by, our environment and the specific experiences we have (Dewey, 1929; Hildebrand, 2021; Waks, 2017).

Pragmatism's onto-epistemology is such that it inherently brings the two entities (individual and structures, human and environment, state and non-state actors) together in the pursuit of something better – the focus is always on the *interaction* between entities, rather than on the entities themselves, in the hope of defining and rationally knowing them (Bentley, 1949; Dewey, 2016; Koopman, 2009; Waks, 2017). Furthermore, in pragmatist thinking, this *better* is not defined as *peace*, or even *democracy*, as an end to be reached. The *better* is defined as a situation or condition which allows for 'cultural coordination and readjustment' (Biesta and Burbules, 2003: 32) between entities – an unsticking of current sticky situations. A pragmatist approach could not define a utopian state – a destination – because that would simply replace one foundationalist programme with another, the validity of which can only be guaranteed through power. It is a theory of transformation (or transition), a meliorism, a hope, which entails a slow and long-term process, initiated from *within* the context. The process is, therefore, complicated in a context that has just undergone what some call a revolution (the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime in 2011), with the expectation that political and cultural structures will automatically revolutionise too. Furthermore, it may just be too laborious to measure and report on for the peacebuilding, security and economic development tracks, which are often restricted by organisational procedures, such as funding deadlines and impact reports (Bush and Saltarelli, 2000). Nevertheless, a transitionalist pragmatist framework may be particularly useful for Libya's political and 'cultural coordination and readjustment' (Biesta and Burbules, 2003: 32), because it *already* incorporates education as part of its project (as in Dewey's [2018] *Democracy and Education*), rather than something that is considered as an attachment, or even an afterthought.

Pragmatism as transitionalism in Libya

Why not tether the education for peacebuilding field to a philosophical discussion of pragmatist thinking, especially Dewey's notion of the Public, as outlined in *The Public and Its Problems* (Dewey, 2016), and instigated in *Democracy and Education* (Dewey, 2018)? The Public, in Dewey's eyes, is the prerequisite for a democratic society: one that is versed in civic deliberation, participation and free interaction, and,

importantly, one that is always in transition, always progressing, aspiring for better connections and more responsive fluidity. A Public (upper case P) is comparable to the state, which is itself made of numerous publics (lower case p). Dewey (2018: lxiii) describes democracy as a way of 'associated living', paying close attention to the verb, rather than to the noun of democracy. Democracy, conceptualised in this way, is therefore not about a set of rules, institutions or events (that is, the elusive elections that many Libyans are so keen on, even while other elements of democratic living are missing). Koopman's (2009) explication of *Pragmatism as Transitionalism*, especially in relation to epistemological and ethical considerations, is particularly interesting here. Koopman (2009) describes pragmatism as cultural criticism, conscious of (its) *temporality and historicity*, tying the whole pragmatist project to hopeful transition towards fruitful continuity in the specific context in which it is explored. Taken in this way, there is no upper case D Democracy, born and predefined in the Global North, and exportable to the Global South. Pragmatist transitionalist democracy would look like whatever mode of associated living in which Libyans are engaged.

It is this conception of pragmatism that I find so useful in Libya's evidently fluid political, economic and cultural situation. To use this form of pragmatism would be to discover and make sense of what Libya is, and who Libyans are over time and space, slowly emerging from centuries of non-democratic existence – Libya was part of the Ottoman empire from the early sixteenth century, and under Italian and then Allied occupation until 1951, followed by an 18-year-long Libyan Kingdom until 1969, and then by a 42-year dictatorship ruled by Colonel Gaddafi until 2011. Furthermore, it may be a way to sketch the contours of *association* in Libya, to materialise a democracy in Libya from below, within *inter-action*, as that is how democracies have developed elsewhere, rather than from a prepared script or foundation that could simply be copied or imposed. Dewey (2016) defines peaceful and socially just democratic states as observed and regulated indirect *consequences of human association*. Human interactions have indirect consequences on the interests of other people, which are mitigated and directed in the *public* sphere; direct consequences are cared for in the *private* sphere as, in that sphere, one can address issues directly. While there is very little available research to indicate the kinds of associated living that Libyans do (through anthropological, sociological or cultural studies), lived experience and oral accounts would suggest that it leans towards what the social psychologist Geert Hofstede (2001) would call the 'collectivist' side, where one's place (and value) is determined socially, through familial or tribal affiliation (Ahmida, 2012; Al-Shadeedi and Ezzeddine, 2019; Benstead, 2018; Furness and Trautner, 2020; Loewe et al., 2020; Najem, 2004).

Transitionalist pragmatism is *specific* to the context in which it develops – it is not *defined*; it is processual and undetermined until it is used somewhere, as an instrument or tool to achieve current and contextual aims. This is its defence against the argument that it is yet another 'Western' or 'Global Northern' idea imposed from without. It allows for the *interdependence* of individual, community and structure to emerge – an integration that is often unhelpfully separated in the development, security, peacebuilding and even formal education fields, even when they call for context-specific work. By philosophically reintegrating the individual and the community, and the structures in which they exist, we avoid putting the burden of transformation squarely on the shoulders of individuals – be they presidents, teachers or students. Likewise, the action cannot only focus on institutions and structures. Instead, the emphasis must be on the *interaction* between individual and structures, the actions undertaken and undergone, and the consequences of such interactions. Here, I will propose that to conceptualise Libyan teachers as a politicised community, a Deweyan *public*, with its interests, properties, activities, consequences and directive regulation, which would eventually constitute part of *the Public*, might be one tool to help bring Libyan society into focus.

Schooling and teaching in Libya

Education is a thoroughly human practice in which questions about the how are inseparable from questions about why and what for (Biesta and Burbules, 2003). If one link between school and society is to be explored through teachers and teaching, is it not worth asking what teachers think and feel about teaching their subject, and about schooling in general? There is a striking dearth of independent and accessible literature on schools and education in Libya (UN, 2021), especially from a philosophical or sociological perspective, due to a lack of research in any cultural or social field in general. This, perhaps, was understandable under an authoritarian regime that limited freedom of expression, and

that could interpret reform recommendations as sedition or treason. After 2011, social science research is still rare. For example, in the academic year 2018/19, only 748 master's and 306 doctoral studies in the social sciences (including political science, social work, social science, education and psychology, and philosophy) were recorded in the country (Libyan Ministry of Education, 2019). Moreover, qualitative research in the social sciences is even more unusual, due either to the restricted freedoms that participants may feel when expressing views about society and culture in Arab countries (Clark, 2006), or to a broader suspicion or lack of regard for qualitative research as 'unscientific' because it studies the 'everyday', rather than the 'official' (Al Haj Sleiman, 2021; Elabbar, 2017; Milton, 2022; Suleiman and Anderson, 2008). It therefore becomes a question of epistemic justice (Fricker, 2013; McConkey, 2004) to include the oral accounts and lived experiences of ordinary Libyans, even if there is not yet a Global North-acknowledged or established scholarship on topics within the realms of cultural studies, sociology and education. The following insights into schooling in Libya are therefore a mix of such Indigenous knowledge and difficult-to-access literature.

Brief history of schooling in Libya

Compulsory education was introduced in Libya in 1952 by King Idris Al-Sanusi, a year after Libya was granted independence from the Allied Administration (Great Britain and France), who had taken over the Italian colony in 1943. At the time, 90 per cent of Libyans were non-literate. Cultural agreements between Libya and Egypt, and Libya and Great Britain, saw the provision of Egyptian and British teachers in schools. The first university opened in Benghazi in 1955, and expanded to Tripoli in 1956. Oil was discovered in Libya in 1959, and exported for the first time in 1961, turning Libya from a poor country dependent on aid, and rent from the British and US military presence, to a rich oil-exporting country in a very short time.

In 1964, Libya's Ministry of Education ceased cooperation with Egypt because President Nasser of Egypt, developing a postcolonial movement of Pan-Arabism, insisted that all Western military bases and organisations be expelled from Libya. The Ministry of Education turned to British and American aid and, in 1964, Americans provided 22 new English teachers at secondary schools, while the British managed intermediate schools and placed 90 teachers in the Libyan school system (Baldinetti, 2018). Pan-Arabism, however, had already taken hold in Libya, especially among young school and university graduates, disappointed with King Idris Al-Sanusi's cooperation with the West. In 1969, a young army officer who believed in Arab nationalism, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, staged a *coup d'état*.

In 1974, the educational system was reformed to achieve a cultural revolution in line with a revised constitution. Arabism and Islam were emphasised in the curriculum, in line with Gaddafi's Third Universal Theory – his solution to the so-called hijacking of democracy by capitalist or communist agendas. Schools began to teach many subjects in the arts and humanities through excerpts from Gaddafi's *Green Book* (al-Qadhafi, 2018), and students were asked to memorise and chant key principles from his ideology. At university, students could not graduate without having taken four core modules related to political culture and political awareness, and to Jamahiriyan society – Gaddafi's term for a society governed by its people (Elsherif, 2017). Teachers and professors were compelled to become members of Revolutionary Committees, so as to be licensed and to advance professionally (Milton, 2022), and to ensure a 'revolutionary presence' at every level. From the age of 14, students would receive preliminary military training at schools, and they would be enlisted in compulsory military service for three or four years between the ages of 18 and 34.

By 2004, literacy among Libyan youth was 86.1 per cent (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, n.d.), yet unemployment was high, and it remains so, at 19.4 per cent (World Bank, 2022). An economy built on state oil revenue and not much else created a situation where people appeared to be loyal to the regime in order to access employment and income (Badi, 2021). Furthermore, an ironic culture developed, where most, if not all, performed the semblance of loyalty, and even held others to account by publicly pledging allegiance to Gaddafi's 'revolutionary' cause (Elsherif, 2017; Milton, 2022). There were some curricular reforms in the 1990s, with a view to modernising science and mathematics education, with not much indication of the operation or efficacy of such reforms. In 2005/6 (six years before the 2011 uprising), the Singaporean Curriculum was implemented in some subjects, carrying with it a promise of critical thinking and pedagogical skills. However, teachers complained of a lack of training to help them with these reforms, which ultimately took the form of revised textbooks and nothing else (personal communication

with Dr Masouda Al-Aswad, the then Head of the Centre for Education Staff Training and Development, 31 December 2018). Immediately after 2011, all reference to the *Green Book* in the curriculum was redacted, along with the whole subject of social studies (until recently), and military training and service were removed. Over the years, most attempts at reforms have included the rewriting (modernising) of textbooks, but teaching and learning continue to be by rote memorisation in preparation for the high-stakes end-of-year examinations.

Currently, schooling for 2.25 million students in Libya consists of nine years of compulsory Basic Primary and Basic Intermediary Education from the age of 6 to 14/15. For the next three years, secondary students choose between Scientific or Arts/Humanities Streams, culminating in a General Certificate of Secondary Education. Final grades are calculated through end-of-semester and end-of-year examinations. The more popular stream is the Scientific Stream, where students study Islamic studies, Arabic, English, and subjects in mathematics and sciences. According to the Minister of Education, Dr Mousa Al-Magriief, in a press conference broadcast by Libya Al-Ahrar television, in 2021/2, 79 per cent of final secondary year students sat examinations for the Scientific Stream (Libya Al-Ahrar TV, 2022). Notable for this article is that those in the Scientific Stream do not take any of the social studies and/or philosophy subjects available in the Arts/Humanities Stream. This year, there is a general pass rate of 60 per cent across both learning streams, with the possibility of resitting failed examinations to graduate and continue to higher education. There are 24 universities across Libya (public and private), and a number of technical colleges (including teacher training colleges) and technical higher institutes. The stratification between the mathematics/sciences and arts/humanities continues to be entrenched, with students with cumulative grades of 85 per cent being allowed to study medical sciences, and those with 65 per cent able to study other disciplines at university level (Ghait, 2018).

There are now 200,000 teachers on the payroll for 2.25 million students, which would indicate a student to teacher ratio of 11:1. However, this does not match anecdotal evidence of cramped classrooms (up to 40 students in a class), and the Minister of Education's promise to build 150,000 schools in the coming three years, due to a severe shortage of schools. In 2018/19, there were 3,663 schools (public and private) for over 2 million students, in a population of 6.8 million (Libyan Ministry of Education, 2019) – of these schools, only 9 per cent were deemed fit for purpose. Of the 20 per cent of the annual public budget spent on education in Libya, about 95 per cent goes on staff salaries. Once licensed, teachers are promised a monthly salary, regardless of whether or not they teach. Although the salary is not high, the promise of a de facto basic income is popular with women especially, who find this employment particularly attractive due to cultural gender norms of maternal and domestic responsibilities (OCHA, 2022; REACH, 2022).

Barriers and opportunities in teaching

Someone wishing to become a teacher in Libya would either follow a two-year vocational training route or a four-year university degree, in which they would specialise in the chosen secondary subject and take courses in pedagogy – all culminating in end-of-year examinations and a graduation project. If there is a teacher deficit in a subject area, a candidate can become licensed after graduating from university or 'training up' to teach the subject which is in deficit. Rote memorisation is used even at the higher education level, with critical and practical thinking not playing any significant role in the teaching and learning experience. Continuing professional development has slowly become more strongly encouraged since 2015, although training centres and courses have been available since the 1990s (Ghait, 2018). The uptake is still minimal, and it is not linked to any conceptions of professionalism or appraisal programmes. Anecdotally, the disproportionate size of the teaching profession, with its low but guaranteed civil service salary and pension, has attracted many employees through *wasta* (transactional connections), without the necessary qualifications or even practice. There was an attempt to address this issue by a former Minister of Education (2015–18), Dr Othman Abu Jalil, who implemented a system of 'lesson bonus pay' for teachers in service, and a more basic income for not-in-service teachers 'on reserve'. This has been met with considerable resistance from teachers, who insist that it is difficult to find work in subjects that are no longer on offer, in subjects with a surplus of teachers, or in schools that are not adequate for teaching.

It is in this context that teachers are expected to *transform* of their own accord – with the Ministry of Education claiming in 2019 that although their curricular reforms are in line with the UN SDGs (as

evidenced by the mention of SDG topics such as ‘citizenship’, ‘environmental issues’ and ‘earth science’ in subject textbooks), teaching and teacher education have ‘not yet reflected the positive trends ... The Ministry is looking for partners to persuade teachers of the importance of such topics’ (Libyan Ministry of Education, 2019: 64). The Ministry of Education seems to lay the full responsibility for social transformation on the shoulders of teachers, without referring to any support available from the ministry itself, and without any development of teacher education programmes. The need to consider teachers not only as individuals, but also as part of a system, with their subjectivities and lived experiences, and their teaching and learning, resonates with what some scholars in the fields of peacebuilding education and education in emergencies have pointed out (Clarke-Habibi, 2018; Gross and Davies, 2015; Horner et al., 2015; Pherali and Lewis, 2019) when trying to suggest programmes for development and reform.

When explicit, the aims of teacher education and training in countries such as Libya are linked to teacher-as-technicist performance in ensuring a certain level of student attainment, without paying much attention to the whole student (Ball, 2020; Biesta et al., 2015; Husbands and Pearce, 2012; Orchard and Winch, 2015), and with box-ticking alignments with SDGs for external monitoring. This view of teacher as technicist challenges the vital professionalism of teaching and teachers, in which they are seen as agents capable of developing critical thinkers and active members of society (Biesta, 2020; Freire, 1970/2017; Giroux, 2005; Kincheloe, 2007; Popkewitz, 1998; Saltmarsh, 2008; Uygun, 2008). Instead, a teacher’s competence is tied to their skills in examination coaching or examination fearmongering (the ability to successfully scare students into study).

On the surface, Libyan society subscribes to the human capital theory developed in the 1960s – the idea that education leads to qualification (knowledge and skills), which leads to gainful employment and earnings (Gillies, 2015). Considered within Biesta’s (2015b) exposition of education having three domains of purpose (qualification, socialisation and subjectification), human capital theory emphatically foregrounds the measurable qualification dimension, to the detriment of the other two. Paradoxically, in the Libyan context, this theory is still held, even though there is no Libyan economy to speak of (oil and gas being the only industries, and both being government owned), and even though youth unemployment is at the staggering height of 20 per cent (World Bank, 2022). This paradox is exacerbated by an unspoken consensus that it is not due to a problem with the theory, but to the incompetence and corruption of an education system still struggling with the aftermath of the Gaddafi regime. The so-called solutions to this problem, however, are laid squarely at the feet of teachers and schools (not the Ministry of Education), and they are expected simply to do better in getting students to pass examinations for entry into universities that produce graduates who ultimately find no occupation.

While there is agreement in Libya that ‘The quality of a school system rests on the quality of its teachers’ (Barber and Mourshed, 2007: 16), it is noteworthy that the quality of teachers is usually measured by the *performance of students* in high-stakes end-of-year examinations. The quality and value of non-academic teacher–student interactions, and of student well-being, creativity and productivity after schooling, are not easily measured, and so are deemed to be less important by omission (Ball, 2020; Biesta, 2015a). Furthermore, it is perplexing that while teachers are considered to be so important in education systems globally, their voices and experiences are rarely consulted when devising new curricula or designing reforms in Libya. In other words, it would be worthwhile to focus on teachers too (even while students are also important), as they are important day-to-day drivers of education. However, this call is not yet an invitation to study and improve what teachers *do* in Libya; instead, it would be interesting to consider the importance of what teachers *believe* and *think* about the aims of education, and their judgements based on experience and reflection (Biesta, 2017; Biesta et al., 2015; Foreman-Peck and Heilbronn, 2018; Knowles and Castro, 2019; Reichert et al., 2021; Waghid and Davids, 2014).

To apply the assertion that an education system is only as good as its teachers in a country such as Libya, a decade after the fall of the Gaddafi regime, leads to a necessary enquiry into what teachers believe about teaching and learning, and the consequences of their philosophies and pedagogies for Libyan society. The most progressive recommendations of scholars in the fields of CPE and peacebuilding education relate to teachers’ capacity for transformation (Bajaj, 2015; Clarke-Habibi, 2018; Gross and Davies, 2015; Novelli and Sayed, 2016), but only when there is also an explicit awareness of teachers’ own ‘political consciousness’ (Pherali, 2021: 14), and not just implicit expectations that peacebuilding or justice-sensitive education (Davies, 2017) purposes will somehow trickle through teaching and learning.

Next steps for Libya

Currently, Libya is in flux. It has two antagonistic and 'transitional' governments to help the country transition from dictatorship to an elected government – a transition that the Global North and most Libyans are keen on, proven by the fact that 2 million people registered to vote for the December 2021 elections, which did not take place due to a lack of security and the clashing principles of the various factions on the ground. While many would like to pursue an enquiry into the stabilising role of education (and teachers) at this point in the realm of peacebuilding and development, with a concerted effort towards social justice, reconciliation and even reparation, I argue for a pragmatist approach to teachers' relationship with ideas about culture and society. Pragmatism's transitional and melioristic approach is a way to take note of the possible links between school and society *right now* according to teachers, and what the future connections might be. The way out of the current sociopolitical dysfunction, characterised by continuous government instability and civil conflict in Libya since 2011, may not be peacebuilding education or CPE. For better or for worse, these fields have been appropriated by top-heavy international aid and development organisations, such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and even the UNDP (Hajir and Kester, 2020; Mac Ginty and Richmond, 2007; Novelli and Sayed, 2016; Zembylas and Bekerman, 2013). Furthermore, recent recommendations in many of these fields call for a return to home-grown, ground-up initiatives (Richmond, 2015), which takes us back to the realm of society or state-building education – the kinds of considerations that scholars, teachers and ministers might have in 'non-conflict' contexts. The questions, then, as ever, become what are the links between school and society in Libya, and what kind of schooling can bring about the society desired by Libyans?

For Libyan teacher education to rise to the challenge of teaching in today's Libya, consideration of what sort of education and what kind of teachers are needed must be a context-specific, home-grown and, preferably, even a grass-roots initiative. Indeed, an intriguing project would be to explore how activating Libyan teachers' philosophy of teaching (Colgan and Maxwell, 2020; Heilbronn, 2020; Orchard et al., 2016) at teacher education and professional development stages might awaken teachers' agency, as a community of teachers or 'a public', to use Dewey's (2016) concept from *The Public and Its Problems*, rather than as a group of disparate individuals within a crumbling and outdated structure.

Using a pragmatist conceptual framework, my ongoing doctoral research engages Libyan teachers in conversation about the role of education in Libyan society, as it is now (constituting the past–present temporality and historicity) and how it could be. On one level, it is a way of discovering and highlighting teachers' shared interests (the beginnings of a 'public'), and, on another level, it is an important step in building a more stable and progressive society in Libya. Rather than asking Libyan teachers which teaching practice is the best to ensure students' best performance, it is vital that the question turns to teachers' ideas about aims and purposes *in* education (and perhaps not the aims of teaching or education) for their unsettled society. This way, a pragmatist framing of the criteria of aims in general, as well as applying such aims to teaching and schooling, will be brought into view when awakening teachers' professionalism. This fits within a pragmatist understanding of the nature of aims: a teacher's articulated aims in education will influence the materials and methods used – their action – only if born out of the teacher's own experience. An aim is an intention, not a goal or an outcome (that is, a student's examination grades), which is formed based on imagined foresight of possible consequences of our directed activities (Dewey, 2018).

Conclusion

Teachers and education leaders have the opportunity to make a constructive difference when they undergo a conscientisation process (Freire, 2017) that allows teachers to see themselves as professionals, as subjects in an acting world, rather than as objects receiving dicta and applying them (Apple et al., 2022; Biesta et al., 2015; Giroux, 2005, 2021; Osler and Starkey, 2018), be they from ministers or from international non-governmental organisation consultants and curricular programmers. Vital to this conscientisation process is an appreciation that this is not done by someone from *without*, a saviour from the Global North coming in to show the way out or to share the latest state-of-the-art practices and technologies. To use pragmatist philosophy to explore the links between school and society in a context such as Libya is not a replacement of one programme developed in the Global North with

another. Pragmatism as transitionalism has no *content*; it is just a process, a vehicle that can be filled in with whatever substance is wanted and needed on the ground, a substance that is grown and modified by Libyans interacting within it.

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