

**OHASSTA Leadership Award Keynote Address by Professor
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Good morning, teachers. It is a pleasure and an honour to be here with you this morning, as co-recipient of this year's Leadership Award and as you kick-off these two important days together. Thank you so much for inviting me.

When I was in kindergarten, our class made hand prints in plaster as our end of year project and our teachers wrote us messages on the back as a souvenir for years to come. My teachers wrote that I was “most likely to be a teacher”, so I feel in very good company this morning. In fact, as someone who researches peace, conflict, and development, with a special focus on youth and schools, you are among the most important audiences with whom I want to discuss some critical ideas that affect how we go about the enterprise of teaching history and social studies the world over.

This year's theme for your conference, related to conflict, reconciliation and commemoration, presents a perfect opportunity to tell you about my book called *From Classrooms to Conflict in Rwanda* that was published earlier this year (see: <http://www.cambridge.org/us/academic/subjects/politics-international-relations/international-relations-and-international-organisations/classrooms-conflict-rwanda>). The Title – *From Classrooms to Conflict* – sometimes gives people pause because what I'm going to talk about today, as a great believer in the power and promise of education, is uncomfortable for many of us. It goes against the way we typically think about schooling.

When violence ends, getting children back into schools is often a priority. Besides education being an essential human right and crucial to sustainable development, there is an overwhelmingly common belief that education leads to peace. The last panel on display at Rwanda's main genocide memorial sums up this belief. It says: "Education has become our way

forward”. But, by focusing almost exclusively on the conviction that schooling can build peace, we have too often overlooked the ways in which schooling can do the reverse – contribute to conflict.

The central argument of my book is that as much as we *hope and believe and act* globally as if education, by which I mean schooling, contributes to peace, there are also a number of ways in which schooling can contribute to underlying conflict between groups. Today I’ll tell you about my research in Rwanda where I argue that not only *can* education contribute to underlying conflict, but here is a case where it very much *has* done so, including in the lead-up to the Rwandan genocide.

Let me be equally clear, though, about what my argument is not. That education can lead to conflict, of course, doesn’t mean that no education must build peace. I intend that my work draw more attention and funding to the importance of education, not less.

With our time together this morning I would like to first tell you a little bit about my personal trajectory that took me from being a high school student here in Ontario to my career and passion for international education in conflict-affected contexts. Then, I'll tell you about research that I conducted in Rwanda and elaborate on arguments that I make in the book. Finally, I will talk through some of the implications of the argument for teachers. I understand that as an organization, your goal is “to promote, foster and nurture new and innovative teaching methods for the critical study of Canadian and World Studies, Humanities and Social Sciences”. I hope you'll agree that my work – and the dilemmas and challenges it raises – is very consistent with that enterprise.

I grew up in the French-language school system here in Ontario. When I arrived at my English-language university, I realised that I had learned, or at least internalised, history from a

different perspective than my friends attending English-language high schools. I was in secondary school at the time of the 1995 Quebec referendum and we were still asking high level questions about the future of our country as a country when I became a student of political science at university. In pondering our country's conflict between Anglophones and Francophones, it struck me as important that I had a different understanding of where we had been as a country than others who became my university classmates.

I wondered about similar situations in countries that suffer even more acute conflict, especially violent ethnic conflict. My interest in international development and peace-building grew throughout my undergraduate degree in political science and masters in international relations.

After my masters, I worked for an NGO on the landmine issue, largely raising awareness among Canadians about the landmine crisis and Canada's role in putting an end to these

dangerous weapons that last long after wars are over. I was, and remain, very committed to landmines as a solvable global problem, but it was again an education-related experience that shaped the road I would take. I was in Bosnia learning first-hand about the process of demining when a local colleague pointed out two schools at the end of a road, one for Croats and one for Bosniaks, in a place where there had been one school before the war. I intuitively felt that this move was in the wrong direction.

During my doctoral studies, when I further pursued my strong interest in post-conflict peace-building, I was surprised by how schooling was left out of most texts on conflict and reconciliation and how, when it was included, it was often mentioned in passing as an important part of rebuilding a society after conflict, without details or *questions*.

As I became interested in Rwanda, which was, then and now, undertaking significant educational reform, I realized that more thoroughly investigating the role of education in peace-

building and conflict could make an important contribution to pressing global debates.

Indeed, when I present this book, people often approach me to discuss how it resonates with their personal experiences in places as different as Afghanistan, Israel, and the United States. I hope that it similarly resonates, or prompts critical reflection, among this group as well.

I found myself in Rwanda for the first time in 2006. Most of us know very little about this stunningly beautiful country in the middle of Africa – what many call the land of a thousand hills. What most of us do tend to know stems from tragic events 20 years ago this year: the 1994 genocide that left 800,000 people dead in about 100 days. Rwanda has two main groups: Hutu and Tutsi. Most basically, during the genocide, Hutu killers killed Tutsi victims, leaving perhaps 75% of Rwanda's resident Tutsi population dead. The situation is much more complicated, though,

as Hutu were also killed, perhaps hundreds of thousands, and not all Hutu participated in the violence. The genocide ended with the military victory of the Rwandan Patriotic Front, a group of mostly minority Tutsi exiles that had long been in Uganda.

Whereas journalistic accounts described the killings as sudden and driven by ancient tribal hatred, scholars generally agree that the killings were organized in advance by specific Hutu hardliner elites who feared a loss of power and who were able to mobilize and coerce the population into violence. But, for that mobilization and coercion to work, a number of underlying factors had to be present. I'll return to those underlying factors in a moment.

Over the course of roughly six months of field work, I conducted more than seventy interviews with Rwandans who had been students and/or teachers in each of Rwanda's modern epochs: the colonial period, the independent republics (1962-1994), and post-genocide. I spoke with them (*presque toujours en*

français – une opportunité unique grâce à mon éducation en langue française ici en Ontario) about their experiences in schools, their experiences with conflict, and where these two might intersect. I also interviewed more than thirty experts in Rwanda's universities, government, and civil society sector. In Belgium, I tracked down five people who had served as missionaries or colonial administrators with responsibilities for education in Rwanda during the Belgian colonial period. I also reviewed history curriculum and archival material.

It was a privilege to learn from Rwandans themselves and I am grateful for all of the interviews. In the end, I had roughly 1,500 pages of typed interview transcripts. I have sometimes been asked to share some of the most interesting interviews and will share a couple with you this morning.

The youngest participants in my research were 16 years of age at the time of the interview, meaning they would have been 4 at the time of the genocide. Of course, their memories of the

genocide struck me in a heart-breaking way. I write in the book about one boy with whom I spoke, remembering the strangely, or perhaps understandably, casual, detached tone in which he spoke. I quote him talking about, “a lot of macheting and such”, making a chopping gesture with his hand on his neck. At the same time, I remember how well-spoken he was and really full of hope for his future. Interviews like this one reinforced why children and education are at the centre of thinking about the future of Rwanda.

I conducted 4 interviews with former teachers, now prisoners, at the central prison in Kigali. These interviews too, struck me. One man in particular spoke so eloquently about the importance of education and his experiences as a student and teacher. He was in prison on class 1 genocide crimes (the most severe), and while he claimed innocence, it is quite unlikely. I reflected on the paradox between thinking about education and teachers as peace-builders and *génocidaires*.

More broadly, I argue in my book that from the perspective of those inside the system, Rwanda's schools were a key instrument of the state and contributed to categorizing Rwandans into unequal and stigmatized ethnic groups. More specifically, who had best access to schools (either Hutu or Tutsi Rwandans in different eras), what was taught (especially in history class, with a narrative that changed a good deal depending on the ethnic group in power), as well as pedagogy and classroom practices contributed to collectivizing and stigmatizing groups and promoting inequality between Hutu and Tutsi Rwandans.

All of these factors – collectivization, stigmatization and inequality – are widely recognized as part of that underlying foundation for conflict I mentioned earlier, that foundation upon which hardliner elites were able to mobilize people into violence. What I'm doing in the book is arguing that one of the places where this collectivization, stigmatization and inequality developed was in Rwanda's primary and secondary schools. I

am not presenting schooling as a smoking gun – schools did not directly teach or bring about violent conflict or genocide on their own – but instead were an important part of an underlying foundation, and a part that is almost always overlooked given our tendency to focus only on the peace-building, reconciliation, and transformative potential of education.

Rwandans who had experience with the school system between independence and the genocide told me, for example, about the common record-keeping practice of teachers asking Hutu and Tutsi to stand up in class in order to self-identify by ethnic group. They recounted how this exercise was sometimes paired with a lesson wherein the teacher taught the physical and behavioural stereotypes of each ethnic group or with teasing the minority Tutsi. They recalled this as just one of the ways in which schools divided Rwandans rather than bringing them together.

Just one example of a history lesson from that same period, that Rwandans deem divisive, has to do with the arrival of the

populations. The narrative that was taught explained that Hutu had been in Rwanda long before Tutsi, and that Tutsi came several hundred years later, taking over the country and its leadership, colonizing the Hutu and putting in place complex relationships of servitude. Moreover, what I heard time and time again about history teaching in Rwanda is that the past was brought into the present. Students felt that the lesson was that since Tutsi were *historically* the last to arrive, they had less entitlement to the country *at the time of the lesson*. Historical narratives are often used to justify action in the present.

Given this year marks the twentieth commemoration of the Rwandan genocide, I have chosen to provide you with examples of how education contributed to the underlying foundation in the lead up to the genocide. But, I make similar arguments about schooling in the colonial period and the violence that surrounded independence. Unfortunately, I also make the case that although the post-genocide government has taken some steps in the

direction of peace-building – such as equalizing access to primary schools, the only level of education to which most Rwandans have access – it is also replicating past destructive practices, especially in terms of a historical narrative that collectivizes and stigmatizes the majority Hutu population and largely excludes their suffering.

As teachers, you know that primary and secondary schooling are particularly important times in young people's lives. Primary education is important for the questions we are discussing today since ethnic attitudes are formed early and, once formed, tend to increase in intensity with time. According to theories of cognitive development, children develop perceptions of others and develop race and social class attitudes between ages seven and nine. Secondary school is also important since both early childhood and adolescence are critical periods in which significant events can have a greater impact on our understanding of history than later on.

Schooling is in many ways a microcosm of society. Its structure serves as a reflector of existing societal conditions, illustrating how those in power understand entitlement to the state and its resources. Its content, history or social studies, for instance, typically reflects common understandings of a certain time and place. Schooling *mirrors* and reflects a government system, a time and place. However, schools are not merely passive reflectors; they also actively shape politics and intergroup relations. The case of Rwanda reminds us that as passionate as we may be about education, not just *any* schooling builds peace.

Let me finish with some of the implications of this research that reach far beyond Rwanda. First, we cannot overlook or oversimplify education in conflict prevention and peace-building strategies. My work shows that there is no one-size-fits-all cure for conflict-ridden countries and that any type of education is not necessarily a “good thing” in terms of intergroup relations. Rather

than simply prescribing *more* education, we need to understand what *kinds* of education contribute to conflict, and what kinds foster peace. We have a lot of work still to do in that vein. In the past fifteen years, the global community has brought much deserved attention to the quantity of education in the Global South, with the Millennium Development Goals, for instance, getting more children into schools; I argue that we ignore quality at our peril.

Another reason not to overlook the complexities of education in conflict and peace-building relates to global demography. 43% of the sub-Saharan African population is comprised of people under fifteen years of age. Those trends extend to many areas of the world, and many areas of the world that are conflict-affected, such as Pakistan and Afghanistan, to name just a couple. Given that more than half of all out-of-school youth in the world currently live in conflict-affected states and that school enrollment rates are steadily increasing, more and more children in countries most

prone to violence are likely to find themselves affected by the content and structure of schooling in the years to come.

The possibility that education can underlie conflict is not only a Rwandan problem, it is not an African problem, and it is not one restricted to places that are affected by acute violent conflict. I suspect you each grapple, in your own ways, with many of the same questions that arose in interviews with Rwandan teachers.

After the Rwandan genocide, there was a moratorium on teaching history. For ten years or so, there was no Rwandan history on the official curriculum and only fairly recently has history been reintroduced. With time and resource pressures, teachers asked, which history lessons should we teach? Knowing that history can contribute not only to peace, but also to conflict, what should we include and exclude? Should we talk about conflict that we've experienced first-hand? Or, should we use "distancing techniques" and talk about conflict and genocide in

other parts of the world as an indirect way to tackle our own conflicts?

Can there be one “true” history? Some Rwandan students and teachers wanted schools to present a definitive recounting of the past. The reality was that there were highly divergent memories based on such things as ethnicity, but also class, gender and experiences of conflict. How should we deal with conflicting narratives?

How can we teach topics related to personal experiences and memories that are painful for students and teachers? A good number of teachers were too fearful to even tackle these issues, even if they are in the curriculum. Others asked, how can do so in a way that is safe, socially just and inclusive?

How can we make our commitments to the importance of pedagogy and critical thinking in history and social studies more than rhetorical?

What role can students play? Rather than simply relying on youth to be subjects to education decisions, young people could be invaluable contributors in the process of school change. Article 13 of the *United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child* gives children the right to have a say in matters affecting their lives. How can that work in practice? I have been working on a new research project in Kenya where I talk to youth directly about their aspirations and how education fits in.

I discuss all of these issues in the book, and I hope some of you will read it. There are book flyers, and I hope you might convince your public or school libraries to purchase it (or contact me if you can't get a hold of a copy). But of course, I don't offer definitive answers. There is a lot we still don't know about how to teach history, especially in conflict-affected societies, and even in ones where we do not experience acute violent conflict.

To conclude, as my husband and I are making educational choices for our 3-year old daughter who will start junior kindergarten next fall, I am reminded about the enormity of the task with which our society charges teachers. I am very glad that this task lies in the hands of people who are coming together to tackle the difficult issues you are facing during the coming days. It is a privilege to kick off this conference and thank you again for the honour of your leadership award.

Toronto, November 14, 2014.