



Children learning in Mali

Teaching peace

In an era marred by escalating conflicts and diminishing peacefulness, the question of education's role in peacebuilding has never been more urgent

Ute Kollies and Dimitra Zapri *

The recent 2023 Global Peace Index (GPI) reveals a disturbing trend of declining peace worldwide, prompting the need for a systemic overhaul in how we address conflict, especially within our schools and universities. This article delves into the multifaceted concept of peace education, arguing that it is not merely a utopian ideal, but an actionable practice that can fundamentally change behaviors, mitigate violence, and foster a culture of understanding and compassion. We explore innovative methods and actionable steps to integrate peace education into various educational settings, from early childhood to university. By promoting a curriculum that prioritizes empathy, critical thinking, and nonviolent conflict resolution, we can enhance the academic environment and also contribute to a broader societal transformation towards a more peaceful world.

A world at war? The deterioration of peacefulness needs action

In the 2023 Global Peace Index – Measuring Peace In A Complex World - as published by the Institute for Economics & Peace, the authors underlined that, “the need for a systemic response to building peace” was urgent, especially as this was the 13th deterioration in peacefulness in the past 15 years. While 84 countries improved, 79 deteriorated in 2022. These figures are shocking and require not only an in-depth analysis, but a reaction in terms of our behavior towards conflict. Whilst reading the GPI, we asked ourselves, “Where could this behavior be better reviewed and changed than in our educational institutions?”

In this world of permanent competition among and between individuals and groups over resources,

power, financial gain and racial and gender division, the white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal class structure perpetuates violence and a complete absence of love and compassion, empathy and understanding of the other and their needs. This is enforced in our educational institutions, where competition is encouraged and critical thinking and finding different positions towards problems is discouraged, as rote learning for tests with the one right answer is more effective in passing the various hurdles.

What can we do? Creating a practice for peace in schools and other educational institutions

Analyzing conflict, looking for options to resolve them, experiencing the perspective of the other within the conflict structure and history is not taught in schools or universities – except in the realm of “peace research” in specialized sections. With the influence of the propaganda media, who often support only one narrative, we are losing opportunities for peaceful resolutions of conflicts and within our homes and in the wider public sphere are often quickly associated with ‘one right view’ on an issue that is pushing for a violent solution rather than searching for alternatives to stop the violence and return to the negotiating table.

To avoid clashes at home that lead to terrible domestic abuse, injury and death, suicide and other forms of destruction (drug and alcohol abuse and dependency) as well as the violence in schools (mobbing, harassment, discrimination, racism, etc.), it is imperative that we teach peace in schools and at universities. We need to offer online courses and TV programs to address this fundamental human urge that “might is right”.

Can we ensure peace and hope through educating children, the future leaders of the world?

Teaching peace needs to promote the knowledge, skills, attitude and values to change behavior. It should aim at preventing violence as a management tool to conflict and facilitate a peaceful resolution, creating the conditions conducive to peace.

Johan Galtung wrote extensively about the need to ensure that peace education in “its form, is compatible with the idea of peace” – no direct violence, no structural violence should be perpetrated on the students. This requires a level of consciousness of the teacher about structural violence – which includes a “highly vertical division of labor, one way communication, lack of horizontal interaction, lack of creativity and

multilateralism in the field.” When reviewing the content of education, this structural violence often becomes even more apparent.

Peace education should therefore deliver:

- (a) The encouragement of using communication skills that allow all to participate in the discussion – no one-way communication;
- (b) Reinforced social and emotional learning to create more empathy and compassion, but also accept other viewpoints;
- (c) Peer mediation;
- (d) Mindfulness and meditation;
- (e) Restorative instead of punitive justice;
- (f) Teaching about peace and the peacebuilding movements;
- (g) Restorative circles and dialogues.

The education sector suffers generally from a lack of investment, a serious lack of teaching staff (Germany alone has currently a lack of over 30,000 teachers in the public school sector while other European countries suffer from similar shortages) and a general drift into privatization. This should not lead to a situation of despair and hopelessness, but to a renewed motivation to address the situation as soon as possible, and formulate policies and programs that convince voters to support our movement. At the same time, leaders must look at a complete reform of the current system with a view to introduce peace education as soon as possible in order to address the need to reduce violence in schools, at homes and in the wider society. In addition, this approach will lead to a more reflective and analytical student body, able to discuss and defend their ideas and critically review suggestions made – rather than fall for the propaganda they are bombarded with in the media.

How to build a peace culture in early childhood education

Early childhood education settings are listed among the first social structures, along with family and neighborhood settings, to which human beings are exposed to and involved in. Therefore, they ideally provide a starting point for action, a baseline of fundamental premises, which would essentially serve as the contextual prerequisites to prepare a fertile ground for action within school communities of any grade. Far from being merely defined as anti-war formulas and antidotes for conflict, these premises would seek to promote peace as a thinking and living ethos per se, primarily conducive to democratic, just, eco-friendly, creative, respectful, empowering and (self-)reflective lifelong learning places.



Ute Kolliès with the team in Mopti/Mali

A list of such contextual prerequisites would include (in alphabetical and not hierarchical order) soft-skill-based features that apply to all members of a school community (educators, pupils, families, school leaders, assisting school staff), namely:

- **Boundaries:** clear, well-defined and precisely communicated set of rules as to who does what and how (roles and related responsibilities and activities), according to formal education policy frameworks and school regulations.
- **Collaboration:** creative, systematic, culture-sensitive and flexible, according to individual skills and potential, at all levels (among teachers, teachers-parents, among pupils, among parents, with local authorities and partners and other relevant institutions).
- **Communication:** flexible, regular, transparent, non-judgemental, encouraging and integrated, with informative feedback sessions, in various forms suiting the needs of the people involved and on any subject concerning the school community.
- **Consensus:** a key to establishing rapport, based on transparency and informed consent from all members involved in various functions of the school community.
- **Creativity:** refrain from ready-made products, solutions and excess spending; estimate and appreciate existing resources (materials, skills, built and natural environment) available both within and around the school community; encourage open-ended problem solving (rather than “problem seeking”) by any available means, tools and forms of expression; apply and assess democratically possible solutions, focusing on opportunities (rather than on threats, which may often be

deployed for manipulation and control purposes).

- **Ecological consciousness:** being alert to the impact of any action to the environment and to any limitations imposed by environmental features and properties on human activity (water and energy consumption, waste production and management, use of recycled/upcycled materials, security, health and safety, school garden, outdoor activities...).
- **Monitoring:** formative and ongoing reflective process, focusing on the level and degree of motivation and of meeting all the prerequisites stated in this list, through the appointment of rotating committees (at class, school and area level).
- **Outreach:** contribution to, collaboration with and dissemination of school achievements and initiatives within broader local, national or international communities.
- **Participation:** learning by doing; equal opportunities for all, valued diversity of all kinds (in terms of socio-cultural, linguistic, ethnic background and special needs, abilities and skills); seeking to develop a sense of ownership through active involvement.
- **Peer teaching:** celebrate a lifelong learning process through structured peer exchanges of knowledge, skills and experience (among pupils, among teachers, among parents); challenge power relations.
- **Proactiveness:** initiate innovation and improvement measures rather than reacting to problems.
- **Self-reflection:** an ongoing process leading to further development and progress by discussing emerging questions.
- **Support:** provide all necessary assistance and information in time depending on the task purpose and according to individual needs and potential; empower all members by joining different skills together in a complementary fashion, so everyone feels valued in the community.
- **Vision:** the beacon of cultural change within the school community which inspires people’s motivation and informs the quality of roles, activities and relationships in all the aspects above.

The aforementioned contextual prerequisites should be clearly communicated, established and agreed among the members of a school community and serve as reference points for any action. ▀

* Ute Kolliès is a former UN Diplomat in crises zones, former Head of OCHA and a Member of Greycells. Dimitra Zapri is an Early Childhood Educator at the Museum Edu.