Education, Youth, and Peacebuilding in Conflict-Affected Contexts

Post-Conference Report

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Introduction

The Education, Youth and Peacebuilding conference explored the contribution that education can make in helping fragile and conflict-affected societies successfully transition from armed conflict to sustainable peace. Taking place in Waterloo, Ontario from November 30 to December 1, 2017, the conference brought together leading experts working at the intersection of peace education and peacebuilding. It sought to both assess the current ‘state of the art’ of peace education and to explore ways of enhancing the impact and sustainability of peace education programming in conflict-affected contexts. Moreover, in the interests of promoting more integrated strategies to help societies prevent and recover from armed conflict, it sought to re-connect the work of peace education scholars and practitioners not only with ‘mainstream’ approaches to peacebuilding that have focused on more formal processes of democratization, institution-building, and rule of law promotion, but also with the emerging Youth, Peace and Security agenda.

The practice of peacebuilding is currently at a crossroads, which makes this an opportune moment to re-consider the place of education within the larger peacebuilding project. The era of ‘big peacebuilding’, which featured well-funded and intrusive international interventions designed to socially re-engineer conflict-affected societies within relatively short timeframes, appears to be coming to a close. In its place has emerged a growing recognition that peacebuilding is a necessarily long-term process of re-constructing both state-society and inter-group relations — which can be supported and facilitated by outsiders but which ultimately must be driven by the citizens of conflict-affected societies themselves. Within this emerging vision, peace education has a crucial role to play in providing the foundations for more inclusive forms of peacebuilding that are more participatory and that operate at, and across, all levels of society.

Within this wider context, the conference provided an opportunity to re-consider the various roles that education can play in contemporary peacebuilding. Across a range of thematic panels, conference participants presented evidence and reflected together on the mechanisms through which peace education programming can affect broad processes of social change, on the political and cultural constraints within which educators in conflict-affected contexts must operate, on appropriate curricular and pedagogical strategies for promoting peaceful relations both within and outside the classroom, and on ways in which the impact and long-term sustainability of peace education programming can be assessed.

The broad objective of this initiative is to facilitate a dialogue — and ultimately to foster transnational research collaboration — among scholars, educators and practitioners on the role of peace education in comprehensive peacebuilding in conflict-affected contexts.
Session I: Peace Education and Conflict Transformation
Chair/discussant: Karolina Werner (Wilfrid Laurier University)

Following a short welcome and introduction by conference organizers, Timothy Donais and Kathy Bickmore, the first session of the conference focused on Peace Education and Conflict Transformation. Sarah Dryden-Peterson and Bethany Mulimbi, Harvard University, discussed the role of the education system in Botswana as an instrument of both nation-building and peacebuilding. Botswana offers free, universal access to education through a highly centralized, government instituted system. The presenters argued that the written curriculum largely reflected the implemented curriculum, focusing on civic elements and assimilation, avoiding references to Botswana’s varied ethnics, with the sole exception of the Tswana majority. Teachers rarely deviated from the curriculum, with discussion and questions initiated by students uncommon. This narrow adherence to the curriculum, they suggested, was driven by a fear of inciting tribal violence as well as a focus on teaching the required material to ensure students pass centralized exams. Small differences between schools across a variety of geographic locations were found, with those outside of Tswana-majority areas more likely to acknowledge diversity and discuss multiculturalism. The presenters noted that broader constraints on the acknowledgement of multiculturalism within the school system might need to be reconsidered.

Julia Paulson, University of Bristol, addressed the connection between history and peace in the context of education in emergencies. History education can be considered a component of peace education, or they might in fact be the same. She argued that there is a need for policy-level decisions on how to teach history and peace education, creating culturally and linguistically inclusive curricula that recognize diverse perspectives and acknowledge any state violations. In addition, little work has been done on living memory and education, and how peace education can happen not only within but also outside of schools. Many approaches to peace education do not focus on history, though in addition to dialogue and empathy, this could, and possibly should, be included. The presenter offered various questions that need to be considered in creating peace education curricula, including whether teaching about a recent, traumatic history is desirable; how peace is defined; how to develop empathy and conflict resolution skills; how transformation happens; and how to engage young people in social change.

This session highlighted the difficulties of creating a peace education curriculum that caters to the various understandings of peace and acknowledges diversity, all while avoiding conflict triggers. While diversity and multiculturalism in education can celebrate differences, they can also contribute to conflict by emphasizing the existence of distinct groups of ‘us’ and ‘them’. Similarly, discussions of recent conflicts within living memory offer the possibility both of fostering reconciliation and understanding, while also on account of the extremely sensitive nature of such subjects – of perpetuating or renewing conflict.
Session II: The Emerging Youth Peacebuilding Agenda: Spaces for Education?
Chair/discussant: A. Salehin Kaderi (University of Toronto)

The second session began with a presentation by Timothy Donais, Wilfrid Laurier University, who spoke about education and the Youth, Peace, and Security Agenda. As top-down models of conflict transformation have proven to not be very successful, there has been a shift from focusing on international actors and perspectives, to looking at local actors as agents of change. But this focus on local actors has systematically excluded youth, despite their potential as peacebuilders. The presenter noted that empowering youth, rather than victimizing them, is a critical point for education for peacebuilding. By highlighting the complexities underpinning the impetus to ‘empower the disempowered’ in conflict-affected contexts, and the limited levers at the disposal of external actors to support the conditions in which youth agency in support of peace can flourish, the presentation raised important questions about the connection between education and peace, education for control, disempowerment, and programming for the greatest impact.

The second presentation by Prateek Awasthi, Global Peace Centre Canada, focused on youth leadership for peace and security. The presenter noted that young people are often identified negatively in conflicts, either as belligerents, radicals, or victims, particularly when they are immigrants, refugees, or women. Despite their considerable abilities, courage, and leadership in promoting peace and building inter-cultural understanding in their communities in the face of overwhelming obstacles, their potential is not being maximized and they lack the resources and support needed to be truly effective. There is a need for education programs that build their leadership and support change makers. Lead4Peace is one such program that is results-oriented, facilitates learning-in-action, and grounds students and practitioners in their existing expertise while guiding them to strategize about system-level change. The program is founded on the belief that each person can unleash his or her leadership and advocacy potential by drawing on his or her values, creativity, and values of human rights and dignity for strategic action through innovative methodologies.

The third presentation by Chernor Bah, UN Advisory Group of Experts on Youth, Peace and Security, focused on youth, peace, and security from the perspective of West and Central Africa. The presenter discussed the voice of young people in conflict-affected societies, offering insight on what it might mean to be a young person in the region. He argued that many young people who decide to engage and promote peace and development are left out of conversations and opportunities to contribute. It is thus important to consider carefully the role of education in peacebuilding, as in some cases education can actually generate exclusion and promote violence.

The presentations in this session all highlighted the key role of young people in promoting peace and development. Despite this, each also acknowledged the current shortcomings of educating and empowering
youth for peace, offering new perspectives on youth-focused programming, the role of external actors, and the importance of context-specific approaches to empowering youth to be peacebuilders.

Session III: Curriculum, Teaching, and Schools: Spaces for Peacebuilding?
Chair/discussant: Sara Rose Taylor (Wilfrid Laurier University)

The third session brought together scholars from the field of education to explore how curricula and schools can act as spaces for peacebuilding. Kathy Bickmore, University of Toronto, presented research on the understandings of gendered social conflict and violence narrated by youth based on experience, compared with the understandings taught in school—in marginalized neighborhoods affected by violence in Mexico, Bangladesh, and Canada. While classroom settings may provide myriad opportunities to address lived experiences of conflicts as learning opportunities, in few instances were such opportunities fully developed in case study schools. Although students in all settings voiced concern over gender-based violence, teachers typically did not engage with this issue during classroom instruction, except in Bangladesh where it was framed as a matter of individual morality. In all contexts, both teachers and students identified causes of gender-based conflicts—and especially, potential avenues for mitigating and transforming such conflicts—as primarily individual and symptomatic, as opposed to addressing collective cultural or socio-structural dimensions. Overlooking such systemic causes and barriers yields missed opportunities for peacebuilding, as political actors and collective democratic agency are ignored.

Diego Nieto Sachica, University of Toronto and Universidad Icesi, focused on the implementation of peace education in Tumaco, a rural area directly affected by the armed conflict in Colombia. The Colombian education system introduced a Cátedra de la Paz [Peace Lecture] requirement in 2015, adding to existing citizenship education and convivencia (peaceful coexistence) curricula and regulations. Given that the Colombia system is decentralized and has varying levels of resources for teachers, a diversity of approaches towards peace pedagogies is found across schools—many emphasizing compliance-oriented peacekeeping and individual peacemaking skills rather than democratic peacebuilding. International agencies, NGOs, and civil society actors play crucial roles in rolling out peace education initiatives. In a decentralized system, segregation and inequality across the system means that schools with resources (generally private schools) take advantage of the autonomy they have, while the quality of peace education in public schools in marginalized areas is highly dependent on ‘heroic’ teachers.

Shifting to Liberia, Laura Quaynor, Lewis University, discussed trends in peace and civic education in Liberia during 2009-2012. During this period, the National Peace Education Initiative was implemented to integrate peace education into the civic education component of the formal curriculum. In order to explore understandings of citizenship, peace, and civic education, Quaynor studied eighth-grade students and teachers in four schools. Results
suggest that young people do see the importance of peace and that civic education is related to tolerance and that desire for peace.

What tied together much of the work presented in this panel was a concern with how controversial issues are addressed, or left unaddressed, in the context of educational programming. ‘Peace’ was seen as a controversial topic by armed rebels in Colombia. Students in Liberia did not feel that there was effective discussion of controversial issues in classrooms, and teachers generally avoided addressing conflict in class discussion, in Mexico, Bangladesh, and Canada. These studies also showcased a tension between learning about peacebuilding at the level of the individual and that of social structure. This is both in terms of causes of conflict and of understanding sites of peacebuilding.

Public Panel Discussion: Education, Youth, and Peacebuilding

Moderators: Timothy Donais (Wilfrid Laurier University) and Kathy Bickmore (University of Toronto)

A public panel on Thursday night opened the conversation to the wider community in the Waterloo region. Presenters took the opportunity to share their personal experiences, giving the audience insight into their varied experiences working at the intersections of education, youth, and peace and security. Sarah Dryden-Peterson, Harvard University, discussed refugee education through a series of stories. She challenged the group to make a better future, to think differently from the box that education has been packed into. Prateek Awasthi, Global Peace Centre Canada, shared his experiences working in the United Nations and the role he sees for young people working with that system. Youth have an important role to play as peacebuilders, and their enthusiasm for joining something bigger than themselves can and should be harnessed. Diego Nieto Sachica, University of Toronto and Universidad Icesi, further emphasized the role of youth based on his work in Colombia. Young people have been mobilizing in the wake of the rejected 2016 peace agreement between the government and the FARC. He highlighted the importance of understanding how youth interact with peace education programs, all in the context of the connections between global and local dimensions of conflict. Following the panel, Wilfrid Laurier University’s Faculty of Education hosted a reception for attendees to continue the conversation.

Session IV: Identity, Ethnicity, and Cultures of Peace

Chair/discussant: Mona Ghali (University of Toronto)

Elisabeth King, New York University, compared post-conflict educational approaches in Rwanda and Burundi. Both countries have adopted educational strategies meant to promote inclusion in the aftermath of ethno-regional violence, yet these strategies differ in their treatment of ethnic differences. The Rwandan strategy erases differences, focusing on unity without considering how identities matter to individuals. In contrast, the Burundian system explicitly recognizes these differences although we know little of the effect of this approach on unity. King’s current book project (with Cyrus Samii) explores the wisdom of these diametrically opposed strategies in Burundi, Rwanda and beyond.

Training teachers in new, innovative approaches to teaching peace can help teachers better address differences in identity and associated stereotypes. Amanda Cortes Salcedo, Instituto para la Investigación Educativa y el Desarrollo Pedagógico, discussed UAQUE, a training program for teachers in
Colombia. The program presents different arts-based pedagogies to teach about peace and coexistence. This approach showcases how using a pedagogy of emotion within peace education programming helps to eliminate discrimination and harmful stereotypes.

**Alexander Cromwell**, American University, highlighted the long-term impact that peace education programs can have on peacebuilding efforts at the ‘meso’, or community level, connecting micro and macro level changes. By studying four peace education programs that brought Pakistani youth to the United States, Cromwell saw the importance of these programs in encouraging and supporting participant-led follow-on projects for alumni to create community-level change. Participants’ views towards enemy groups transformed and they became motivated and developed a belief in their ability to bring positive change to their communities. As a result, alumni’s projects were built on creating mutual understanding between different religious groups similar to the understanding they developed while they were in the United States.

Finally, **Pacifique Borauzima**, Interpeace, shared his experience in supporting formal peace education in the African Great Lakes Region. In 2013, Interpeace hosted a regional summit to promote, advocate for, and implement peace education. The summit highlighted the need to support dialogue between a variety of actors, connecting people at grassroots, national, and international levels. By supporting different voices and combining different strategies, actors could learn from each others’ impacts and challenges.

This panel presented the audience with key challenges that exist in peace education when trying to foster a culture of peace. There may be disconnections between educational stakeholders and civil society, which follow different roadmaps. There are also problems with finding the time and resources required to implement a given strategy.

**Session V: Navigating Structural, Political, Cultural Dynamics**

*Chair/discussant: Elena Toukan (University of Toronto)*

The session began with a presentation by **Wendy Kroeker**, Canadian Mennonite University, who spoke about grounding peace education by looking beyond cookie cutter approaches. Based on the experience of the Mindanao Peacebuilding Institute in the Philippines, she explored how peace education helps restore conflict-impacted communities. By focusing on context, the affected locals and their voices, grounded spaces are created in which conversations about peace can take place. This allows for the emergence of more context-specific understandings of peace. The question of whether peace education is producing peace requires evaluation and participation at the level of those impacted by conflict, as well as the development of joint pedagogical processes accentuating the local context.

The second presentation by **Sarfaroz Niyozov** and **Munir Lalani**, Aga Khan University, offered perspectives on peace education in Pakistan. With the conflict still very much ongoing, the subject matter is fresh, and varying perspectives are common – from the religious (Islamic) view that conflict is a result of steering away from religion, to the governmental belief that the military is key to defending the country.
against both local and external militancy and violence, to the nationalist point of view that conflict has been brought into Pakistan from the outside. Conflict is also present in the very structure of the education system, from bullying to teachers using beating to discipline students, and from having three schooling systems (private, public, and madrassa) which are reproducing inequalities to curricula imposing a single perspective to discourage critical and creative thinking. Low-level violence is also embedded in patriarchy, daily traffic, pollution, absence of basic resources and mistreatment of minorities. Despite the fact that there are many peace education initiatives in Pakistan, few see real opportunities for creating peace out of conflict. There are few formal opportunities for peace education in the country, and engaging conflict as a learning opportunity for creating peace is rarely an option. In the studies presented, discussion of conflict was brought into the classroom, but students and teachers were scared to talk about the tensions. In a more promising study, a teacher-researcher was able to introduce a number of innovative ideas such as using narratives from Anne Frank to encourage students to critically examine social issues and their own biases and prejudices. Much more work needs to be done to better understand how to resolve conflicts in Pakistan, including a closer examination of the various local perspectives on understanding conflict and peace education.

Finally, Elizabeth Buckner, University of Toronto, discussed refugee education programming in Lebanon and Jordan, and the gap between policy and practice in refugee education. Her findings indicate that a focus on children’s rights by foreign donors encouraged the creation of a national refugee education framework that expanded refugees’ access to schooling. However, refugee education policies set by large bi- or multi-lateral donors are rarely implemented in full. Moreover, in local communities and classrooms, many unofficial educational programs are operating in contradiction to government policy, and it is not clear who has the authority or legitimacy to make educational decisions for refugees. The presenter argued that while such gaps between policy and practice in education are common, refugee contexts present distinct challenges for policy implementation due to the role of international actors in setting policy, weak state authority, and refugees’ lack of legal status. Policy implementation gaps are particularly prevalent in urban refugee settings. She suggested that a better starting place for understanding education policy implementation is to understand the often competing sources of state and non-state authority that affect decision-making at the local level. It is also necessary to make the policy adaptable to changes in refugees’ status, allowing the community and experts to lead the way.

This final session featured three presentations each using country case studies – the Philippines, Pakistan, and Lebanon and Jordan. Each country presents unique challenges for peace education, and thus highlights the need for context-specific transformation and empowerment to facilitate peace. With conflicts deeply entrenched and structural violence existing at all levels, educational interventions geared towards peacebuilding are particularly challenging. Each presentation emphasized the need for more research into the understanding of peace and conflict in specific cultural communities.
Networking luncheon
The final afternoon sessions on December 1 wrapped up the conference by reviewing common themes and charting a path forward. The networking luncheon provided a valuable opportunity to discuss next steps for the newly-formed network; the workshop was not just a one-time event, but the beginning of potential research collaboration. This discussion included:

Organizing themes for future work: regions, youth empowerment, tensions between norms & policy, missed opportunities, and different scales and the tensions between them.

Ways to stay connected: Slack group, create panels at other conferences (ex. ISA, CIES, PACSCAN), virtual meetings, and building bridges with government and NGOs.

How to best support each other in the work we are already doing: sharing information on conferences, soliciting feedback, sharing recent publications, recommending teaching tools, and serving as discussants or reviewers.

Wrap-up discussion: Concluding questions and recommendations
The concluding discussion allowed for informal, small-group discussion and reflection. It started with graduate student rapporteurs presenting key lessons learned from each panel. Conference attendees then broke into small groups for a World Café, a conversational process for knowledge sharing, which organized conversation around three main themes that came out of conference talks. Attendees found many ways to connect different ideas from the conference and came away with new questions to explore.

The first theme was ‘Actors’. Who are the actors involved, how do they collaborate, and at what scales do they operate? Discussions addressed questions of agency, how teachers both drive change and reproduce norms, and how agendas can be mobilized for change.

The second theme was ‘Identity’. What are the roles of culture, of stereotypes, of diversity? The multiplicity of and potential conflicts between identities were discussed, as was the role of outsiders?

The third theme was ‘Challenges’. What are the barriers that we face? There are many challenges to peacebuilding with no cookie cutter answers. Peacebuilders must contend with policy, evaluation, limited resources, representation, and oppositional attitudes.
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Connect with us
We invite you to join our Slack group for networking, sharing resources, and learning about upcoming conference and publishing opportunities.
Publications of Works Presented


Buckner, Elizabeth, Dominique Spencer and Jihae Cha. (Forthcoming 2018) “Between Policy and Practice: The Education of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon.” *Journal of Refugee Studies*. Available at: [https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fex027](https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fex027)


Mulimbi, Bethany & Dryden-Peterson, Sarah. (Under Review). Experiences of (Dis)Unity: Students’ negotiation of ethnic and national identities in Botswana schools.


Selected Key Sources Cited by Conference Presenters


