New Understandings of Education's Contributions to Peace

Technical note

This document, is one of three Technical Notes prepared by UNESCO Section on Global Citizenship and Peace Education, that aims to inform the discussions of the International Expert Group in view of clarifying the scope, depth, and detail of the required revisions of the 1974 Recommendation concerning education for international understanding, co-operation and peace, with a view to inform the discussions of the IEG.

More specifically it seeks to summarize the state of current knowledge on the role of education in mitigating contemporary threats and fostering lasting peace.

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For more information on the revision visit the dedicated website.
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Published in 2022 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 7, place de Fontenoy, 75352 Paris 07 SP, France

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**Purpose**

On the basis of a review of evidence, this technical note identifies the building blocks of an effective and transformative approach to education that supports international understanding, co-operation, human rights, fundamental freedoms and lasting peace. It also explores the implications of the evidence found for the revision of the 1974 Recommendation.

**What can education concretely (and realistically) do to mitigate contemporary threats and foster lasting peace?**

**Understanding threats to peace**

In order to designate effective educational approaches, the nature of the threats to peace (i.e., war, inequitable/unsustainable development, exclusion, resource exploitation, climate change, pandemics and other threats to health, the rise of violent and hateful ideologies, declining democracies, gender-based violence) and the various related issues that education seeks to respond to, mitigate, and transform must be understood. Reflecting an evolved understanding over the past half century, global threats are now generally understood as interrelated and interdependent. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development further delineates these linkages. For example, the direct violence of war is interdependent with the indirect violence of inequitable global development and climate change.

Violence also manifests itself in structural and cultural forms. Structurally, violence is embodied in unjust laws and institutions that perpetuate gender, ethnic and social inequity and unequal access to resources and human rights for the most marginalized in societies. Structural violence is often rooted in and derived from exclusionary beliefs and hateful ideologies that are shaped by political agendas. Furthermore, many contemporary threats to peace transcend borders, thus requiring a global response rooted in a global mindset. These understandings of the interdependence of various threats to peace require the designation of comprehensive and holistic educational strategies and approaches to address them. Context is also an important consideration, as the influences of collective histories, cultures, languages, structures and institutions shape local conditions and social and political relations. Thus, transformative education is context dependent, and must be responsive and adapted to local needs and realities.

**Education as a tool for addressing threats to peace**

Education is widely accepted as a tool for addressing and transforming threats as well as a pathway to sustainable peace. However, we need to consider its roles and functions. In seeking to provide evidence for what education can concretely (and realistically) do to mitigate contemporary threats and foster lasting peace, it is important to begin with identifying generalized educational pathways that have historically shaped educational responses. Educational strategies addressing threats to peace might take one of three generalized and interlinked pathways: (1) response to a threat, (2) a

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tool for prevention, or (3) a tool for transformation and peacebuilding. Education as a response is, therefore, critical when threats arise, while the implementation and institutionalization of education as a form of prevention and transformation is strategically vital to the long-term goals of sustainable peace.

**Integrating peace education into formal schooling**

Incorporating peace education into formal schooling is an essential peace-building strategy. School is perhaps the most influential place of cultural production and reproduction in any society. Formal schools not only provide certain given knowledge and skills, but also form social and cultural values, norms, attitudes, and tendencies\(^2\). However, certain practices, policies, and teaching methods adopted in formal schools can undermine peace, often perpetuate a culture of violence, and contribute to spreading harmful stereotypes and ideologies\(^3\). Certain pedagogical approaches can even normalize violence, racism, and exclusive practices that are detrimental to learners and their ability to become peacebuilders. Many formal school systems around the world emphasize forms of testing that maintain a teacher-centric approach, knowledge reproduction, and individual epistemological assumptions and promote compliance with a narrower view of acceptable knowledge and thinking.

Some have argued that this is a form of epistemological violence: it "produces cognitive biases, and is an obstacle to the development of a learner’s full human potential, well-being, and flourishing"\(^4\).

More generally, schools have been used to bring about social conformity, in various contexts and throughout history, and they have also infused militaristic\(^5\) values that are seen as necessary for advancing the goals of the State, and to maintain social stratification\(^6\).

**So, what opportunities does integrating peace education into formal schooling present?**

- Development of critical awareness – that is the ways in which schools can produce and reproduce direct, structural and cultural violence;
- Enriching content of learning through contextual relevance (i.e. reflecting the needs, cultures, traditions, and interests of the community in which it takes place, as well as understanding that such local needs are also global in scope);
- Promote learner-centered pedagogy (i.e. meaningful to the local contexts, and derived from local cultural and indigenous practices); and
- Applying a whole school approach, which is an important strategy for integrating peace values school-wide and into the local community.

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Complementary role of non-formal and lifelong learning

While pursuing and institutionalizing peace through formal education is a vital strategy, it must also be complemented by non-formal and lifelong learning efforts. Research has demonstrated that non-formal grassroots education efforts contribute significantly to social, political and cultural change. In some contexts, non-formal educational interventions by NGOs and local community groups have led to the adoption of educational policies and legislation in support of peace education. These efforts are rooted in community spaces, where their values and educational goals become culturally accepted.

As explored through the work of UNESCO’s Institute for Lifelong Learning, the notion of lifelong learning brings focus to adult learning with a particular emphasis “on furthering educational equity for disadvantaged groups and in the countries most afflicted by poverty and conflict.” By promoting continuing education, lifelong learning contributes to equitable and sustainable development. Lifelong learning is more than vocational training, it is the foundation of a changing educational culture that promotes the spirit of a learning society, helping learners reach their full potential and address ever-evolving threats and challenges.

Transformative learning and addressing global threats

Global threats are complex, and to create lasting peace requires pursuing changes across multiple dimensions. In this regard, various scholars and practitioners have identified several broad and overlapping dimensions through which transformation must be pursued: personal, relational, political, structural, cultural & ecological. Learning from and reflecting upon experience is foundational to all transformative learning and is essential to fostering human agency. Therefore, transformative education requires holistic learning that pursues the development of knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and behaviours required for change from the personal to the ecological.

Peace and Human Rights Education, Global Citizenship Education (GCED), Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and Education for Health and Well-being (EHW), five of the most prominent guiding educational frameworks pursued by the UN and UNESCO in the 21st century, comprise holistic educational agendas and pedagogies particularly suited to respond to global challenges, and identify the breadth and scope of transformative education.

Social emotional learning (SEL) is also foundational to the development of the whole person and a key tool of transformative education. Several research studies have demonstrated that SEL programs improve “students’ social-emotional skills, attitudes about self and others, connection to school, and life skills.”

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positive social behavior, and academic performance; they also reduced students’ conduct problems and emotional distress. SEL, combined with cognitive and action oriented learning, supports the development of five fundamental competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. SEL has long-term impacts, with evidence showing higher levels of well-being throughout life.

Finally, one of the primary aims of transformative learning is to promote learners’ motivation to contribute to the construction of a more just world. Theory suggests that in order for learning to lead to human agency, it must provide an opportunity to reflect the interdependence between personal and political realities. Such reflection is the foundation of a transformative learning process.

Brief overview of educational interventions to mitigate threats and foster lasting peace

Five pillars of Education

The International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century put forth a vision of education as taking place inside and outside of the classroom, and as a lifelong process. More recently, UNESCO’s International Commission on the Futures of Education, emphasized that “education must aim to unite us around collective endeavours and provide the knowledge, science, and innovation needed to shape sustainable futures for all anchored in social, economic, and environmental justice. It must redress past injustices while preparing us for environmental, technological, and social changes on the horizon” (p. 11). Together, these reports establish five pillars of education that may serve as holistic, foundational elements of a transformative approach:


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Do educational interventions work?

Evaluation of educational interventions yields mixed results. Several studies generally substantiate the effectiveness of short-term formal peace education efforts. In other words, short term interventions are observed to be generally effective at transmitting fundamental knowledge and developing relational and conflict skills yet may fall short of achieving lasting behavioral change and the more longitudinal and transformative relational, structural and cultural changes that result from human agency.

Many theorize that deeper social and cultural transformation is not possible without the comprehensive and sustained integration of context specific educational interventions into the whole of society, through formal, non-formal and lifelong learning efforts. Such an integrative approach leads to the legitimization and acceptance of new ideas, norms and values by the general society. Similarly, as mentioned earlier, whole school approaches that integrate peace values into the curricula, school culture, institutional and disciplinary practices, and community generally yield more effective outcomes.

What is their impact and effectiveness?

Beyond measuring the outcome of the extent to which students learn new knowledge and skills, and change their attitudes and behaviours, is the question of efficacy. How does the learning contribute to social change? What actions do participants take due to their new learning and experiences? These outcomes are much more difficult to measure as they are less easily observable, more longitudinal in nature, and are impacted by culture, collective histories and traumas, as well as concurrent and evolving social, political and cultural realities.

Finally, while the research may be less than conclusive, hope can be found in an ever-increasing body of qualitative research conducted in nearly all world regions evaluating the overall impact of peace education in contributing towards lasting peace.

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Implications for the 1974 Recommendation

The preceding review suggests several opportunities for revisions, updates and additions to strengthen the 1974 Recommendation:

- **Re-prioritize Human Rights-based Approaches**: human rights are the ethical and normative core of a just and peaceful social, political and economic order and establish the guiding principles for equitable and sustainable development. Member States should take appropriate steps to assure the full adoption of normative human rights declarations and conventions.

- **Prioritize Gender Equality and Equity in and throughout Education**: gender inequality and gender-based violence are a significant threat to global peace. Gender disparities in education present additional obstacles to equitable and just social, economic, and ecological development. The revised recommendation should prioritize education about gender (and gender-based violence), as well as gender transformative education, and promote gender equality and equity in education as fundamental strategies for pursuing lasting peace.

- **Strategically Prioritize Lifelong Learning**: lifelong learning offers a strategic pathway for changing the culture of learning and for nurturing learning societies more capable of responding to emerging threats. Lifelong learning should be included as a priority concern for national policy planning and should be addressed more directly as a strategy.

- **Nurture Strong Partnerships between Formal and Non-formal Education**: in the pursuit of lasting peace, formal and non-formal education must be seen as symbiotic partners. While institutionalized education can formally prescribe social learning goals, non-formal and grassroots education often challenge and extend the aims of education. Member States should consider providing increased support for non-formal education efforts (including its actors), and should pursue opportunities to bring non-formal learning into formal spaces, and vice versa.

- **Introduce and Emphasize Global Citizenship Education (GCED)**: GCED is already well ensconced within UN and UNESCO agendas, and may offer a more inclusive framework capable of addressing the interrelated and interdependent nature of global threats of the 21st century that supersede national boundaries.

- **Priorities Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)**: the global climate crisis represents one of the greatest contemporary threats to peace. ESD provides a holistic framework and educational approach for just and sustainable social, economic, and ecological development essential for achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, while supporting learning that balances present needs with those of future generations.

- **Intensify Support to Countries on Education for Health and Well-being (EHW)**: the COVID-19 crisis has been a wake-up call to the fact that schools are more than just places of learning, and better awareness that schools can make substantial contributions towards the health and well-being of learners. EHW is a foundational element of SDG4 with strong links to the other SDGs. School health and nutrition plays a key and increasing role in ensuring the education system and the learners it serves will be strong and resilient for the future.
• **Emphasize Youth Engagement, Participation and Empowerment**: youth are generally seen as the recipients of education, but their concerns are rarely part of the education agenda. For education to be transformative, it must be learner-centered and prioritize the concerns and motivations of youth. Their participation in all public affairs should also be encouraged. Furthermore, the revised Recommendation should center content supporting the UN Youth, Peace and Security Agenda (UNSCR 2250 in particular).

• **Provide Increased Support and Autonomy for Higher Education**: Higher Education (addressed in the 1974 Recommendation: VI 25, 26, 27) has been deeply impacted by the global economic order due to the increased corporatization and privatization of higher education. For higher education to contribute to lasting peace, it must maintain academic freedom and remain independent of corporate and State influences in determining its curricular agenda, and should receive renewed support from the State.

• **Support Teacher Participation, Development, Preparation and Training in Transformative Pedagogies**: New knowledge and awareness of transformative pedagogies should be incorporated into pre- and in-service teacher training. Transformative pedagogies are essential building blocks of the majority of pedagogies that support peace. Educators should have a direct role in the development of transformative pedagogies as their pedagogies shape learner outcomes. Educational policy and legislation efforts not accompanied by teacher training are generally ineffective.

• **Pursue Context and Culture Specific Content and Pedagogies**: transformative education is context specific, and its content and pedagogies should resonate with local concerns and practices. When and where possible, teacher training should introduce a wide array of pedagogical frameworks, emphasizing their complementarities and intersectionalities for the development of a strong sense of belonging to humanity.

• **Close the Digital Divide, Harness New Media, Promote Critical Media and Information Literacy, and Foster Digital Citizenship**: several specific concerns should be addressed: (1) providing equitable and universal access to digital technologies; (2) providing teacher training in online pedagogies and experimenting in designing and applying transformative pedagogies in the digital space; (3) establishing access to lifelong and vocational learning focused on preparing learners to use digital technologies as a necessity for active democratic participation in shaping and transforming future societies (i.e. “digital citizenship”); and (4) prioritizing critical media literacy to counter disinformation and hate speech campaigns.

• **Support education to prevent the spread of violent extremist ideologies and bring renewed emphasis to education for disarmament**: the rise of violent extremism around the globe presents threats from the local to the global. While violent extremism has long existed, in recent years digital media has rapidly increased its spread, making many formerly domestic violent extremist movements now transnational in nature. Education for the prevention of violent extremism (PVE-E) provides a framework to address these dynamics through social-emotional learning, programming that addresses the push and pull factors, and most important, creating inclusive learning spaces.
Fundamentally, it’s also important to view violent extremism in a broader context. Thus, the revised Recommendation should bring increased attention to the importance of education for disarmament, as well as support the inclusion of learning objectives of PVE-E and accompanying teacher training.
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