

PEACE EDUCATION: WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Importance and challenges of peace education programmes

by the Coalition for Peace in Africa, COPA

The importance that the international community is putting on peace education is prevalent. Over time the pronouncements and resolutions of the United Nations have become more explicit regarding the importance of peace education. *"Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed"* - (UNESCO) Constitution.

Peace education is a right and an integral part of the process of encouraging a culture of peace. It is the process whereby an individual develops the skills and attitudes and obtains the knowledge of how to live in a harmonious way with his/her surrounding environment. Since its conception, peace education has been used and focused on various issues including environmental responsibility, human rights, democracy and gender equality among other.

Peace education can encourage commitment to peace by increasing one's belief that each individual can be an agent of peace imagining a peaceful future and working towards it. During peace education, the student has the chance to understand and realize the consequences of both injustice and war as well as the main principals of peace. In the process the student gets informed on how to work towards developing social structures for justice and thereby peace. The process results into more informed and caring individuals committed towards a fair, peaceful and just world.

Peace education for integrated peaceful existence

Despite advances towards Education for All the past decade in sub-Saharan Africa, with increased primary net enrolment ratios by almost 1/3, educational attainment in many countries is still rather low. Sub-Saharan Africa is home to 43% of the world's out-of-school children with the situation being worse in fragile states. Only 66% of young people are literate in conflict-affected countries in sub-Saharan Africa, compared with 93% in the world's non-conflict-affected countries. (GMR, 2011). Consequently, priority of the international community during the post conflict or reconstruction phase is the re-establishment of basic education with some cases incorporating peace building activities within the programmes. However, the need to institutionalize peace building in the school system remains.

Across the African continent, civil wars abound and in all cases, the role played by the youth in perpetrating violence cannot be overstated. Most conflict situations are fuelled and funded by the older generation namely political leaders and elders but it is the young generation that prominently engages in violence and executes crimes. In Rwanda, unemployed, undereducated rural male youth figured prominently among the perpetrators of the 1994 genocide. (GMR,2011)

Furthermore, 43% of the continent's inhabitants are below 15years old (UNFPA). Due to the socio-economic circumstances (44% of the population living below the national poverty line) and lack of access to opportunities most of them are living in conditions which promote idleness and frustration. (UNFPA) The youth has a lot of energy which if not channeled to creative activities and positive causes, under the frustrating circumstances can be used towards violence. Reaching out to them through peace education and increasing their peace capacities could result into influencing almost half of the continents population with positive attitudes towards building the communities they live in.

Peace is a long process and conflicts are part of human existence; sustainable peace can only be achieved when deliberate efforts are made to inculcate values that promote peace and coexistence in the minds of the youth. The future of any nation depends on how responsible its youth is. Inculcating a culture of peace in the young generation would ensure that in years to come Africa would have a core group of people in decision making positions who value diversity, social cohesion and community coexistence and have the capacities and desire to work towards peace.

The case of COPA's peace education programme in Kenya

Realizing the increased need for peace education and acknowledging the uniqueness of each conflict, COPA implemented an adjusted peace education programme in Kenya in the period 2006-2008. The programme aimed to contribute towards the rebuilding of a 'new generation' of young thinkers equipped with skills for positive conflict engagement.

Prior to the implementation a survey was conducted by COPA to establish existing capacities and needs. This survey demonstrated the increased interest of schools in both incorporating peace education within the formal curriculum and in receiving support for student-led extra-curricula peace clubs.

During the implementation of the programme many of the challenges were realized. Most crucial, the importance of carrying out peace education programmes in partnership with learning institutions supported by the government. The experience further demonstrated that successful peace education programmes have to be implemented parallel with additional activities which will strengthen its effectiveness. Thereby, including the teachers in the process and familiarizing them with peace education prior to targeting students is crucial.

The general conclusion from the programme was that: Sustainable formation of attitudes towards peace is only achievable if deliberate efforts are made to reach out to young people in schools with programmes which instill positive behaviors in addition to equipping them with skills that empower them to engage positively in conflict situations both at school and community level. For maximizing the outcomes all relevant stakeholders have to be actively involved in this process.

Not all that easy

The challenges when implementing a broad peace education programme are many and could significantly hinder its effectiveness. The lack of government policy to enforce or regulate peace education in learning institutions is a major drawback. Implementation of relevant programmes is at the mercy of school administrators. As a result peace education is frequently not given the weight it deserves and is viewed solely as an extra curriculum non examinable subject.

Furthermore, in relatively stable countries the importance of peace education is often underestimated. In the case of Kenya, until 2008 when the post election violence occurred, the country had always been relatively calm. During the pre post election violence period, talking about the need for peace education in the country was met with skepticism by relevant stakeholders.

Finally, limited documentation on peace education and implementation of such programmes in many African countries hinders efficiency and effectiveness as people have to keep re-inventing the wheel.

What's next?

The violence which followed the 2007 disputed electoral results in Kenya and the high involvement of youth demonstrated the need for intensive civic and peace education in the country. Similar is the case of other African fragile states trying to achieve sustainable war to peace transition.

Children and youth are the ones who will soon be voting, taking political decisions, determining one way or another the future of their country. If the African continent is to achieve sustainable peace, there is an urgent need to work on a new generation with values that promote social cohesion and celebrate diversity.

For maximizing the impact of peace education, cooperation and support from all stakeholders at all levels is crucial starting from recognition by the government and the school administration. Important is also the provision to students with a 'space' to share their peace building experiences as a way to motivate them to remain engaged in the subject. Therefore, if sustainable peace is to be achieved, institutionalization of the peace building in the formal school system is essential.

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