Young People's Experiences with Peace Education:
From Inner to Outer Peace

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

INTRODUCTION

I am interested in how young people have learned about peace in school, and how they understand the connection(s), if any, between the inner and outer dimensions to peace. I situate these questions within the lives of young people from Argentina, Denmark, and the United Kingdom (UK) because these are the particular experiences with which I am most familiar. This paper unfolds in three parts. Initially, I outline the used methods and reviewed literature to define the terms 'peace education' and 'inner peace'. Secondly, I present the cross-national survey and interview data, bridging the perspectives of young respondents with insights of academics and practitioners in the field of peace education. Lastly, I acknowledge the study's limitations and suggest directions for further research. In conclusion, I assert the voices of the young people, hoping that education can provide us with tools to cultivate peace within ourselves, between us, and around us.

1. – METHODS AND LITERATURE

1.1   METHODS

I have used mixed methods to map what young people have been taught about peace in school and how their learnings align with their understandings of peace and inner peace. Following the review of extant literature, I defined peace education (PE) and inner peace to disseminate surveys among young people aged from 18 to 35 years[1]. With a total of 66 responses; 14 from Argentina; 26 from Denmark; 26 from the UK, I followed up with four interviews with two

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[1] To ensure responses, the surveys have been disseminated among young people from 18 to 35 years on various platforms and networks such as Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, University fora in Argentina, Denmark, and the UK.

people from Argentina and two from Denmark[2]. In brief, the combination of quantitative and qualitative data offers substantial, yet preliminary findings restricted to the number of responses and reviewed literature.

1.2   INTRODUCING PEACE EDUCATION

In 2004, PE became academically represented by *The Journal of Peace Education*, covering a broad range of topics from, e.g., conflict resolution and gender equality to environmental care (Ogunnusi 2020, 20). PE asserts an understanding of 'peace' as not merely the absence of violence, but on a practical level as the presence of relationships and communities that work well (Sztompka 2008, 25). In David Gee, Ellis Brooks, and Isabel Cartwright's report (2022) *Peace at the heart: A relational approach to education in British schools,* the practices of PE are grouped according to four complementary aims (4):

1) Individual wellbeing and development ('peace with myself');
2) Convivial peer relations ('peace between us');
3) Inclusive school community ('peace among us'); and
4) The integrity of society and the earth ('peace in the world').

In keeping with these aims, recent literature (Jenkins 2016; Ogunnusi 2020; Gee, Brooks, and Cartwright 2022; and Global Campagain for Peace Education 2023) premises that PE is a critical approach to the personal and social development of young people rooted in a commitment to peace. This contemporary approach is recognised as Critical Peace Education (CPE) and deviates from PE in that its context and corresponding impact is understood in terms

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[2] The scheduled interviews with British respondents fell through.

of power (Ogunnusi 2020, 12). In practice, CPE, e.g., addresses the power relations wielded in educational settings (Bajaj and Brantmeier 2011, 221). Essentially, CPE supports students and staff to ask what better relationships mean and how they can develop them with themselves, each other, and their wider world (Gee, Brooks, and Cartwright 2022, 3). While appreciating that CPE offers a holistic approach, it has been difficult to use the term beyond academic borders and language barriers. Therefore, to conduct this study, I use the definition that:

> Peace education is a process of cultivating knowledge, attitudes, and skills to live in harmony with oneself, others, and the natural environment. For example: education on how peace treaties are negotiated, how local peace initiatives work, how 'a peaceful environment' can be understood etc.

1.3 INTRODUCING INNER PEACE

Contemporary literature holds that the relationship between the inner and outer dimensions of peacebuilding is vital in PE (Jenkins 2016,1). While most scholars and practitioners support this position, the relationship is a subject of much rhetorical debate. The concerned scholars express that under conditions of violence and oppression 'there is little luxury afforded to focus on personal and spiritual development' (ibid., 2). Importantly, recent conflict-situated work challenges this argument when asserting that to disrupt injustices, the inner sense of wellbeing is crucial (Obregón 2019, 4). In keeping with this notion, inner peace is conveyed as 'peace with myself' and/or 'self-development' in current educational materials (Gee, Brooks, and Cartwright 2022, 4; Oxfam Education and Youth 2015, 14). Moreover, scholars commonly evaluate inner peace in classroom settings as the students' outcome of mindfulness or meditation practices (Xinghua et al 2015; Schonert-Reichl and Roeser 2016; Hanley, et al 2022).

To extend the scope in practice, CPE emphasises Everyday Peace Affirming tactics (PATs) for young people. Dr Michael Ogunnusi's extensive research (2020) *Young people, situated learning, and peace at the margins of everyday life* uses PATs as the framework in which the students recognise what peace can look like within the praxis of everyday life. Evidently, the young people respond positively to the conception of inner peace as 'self-initiated peace' and 'detached from the stress of school' (ibid., 115). Building upon the collective knowledge, I use the definition that:

> Inner peace is a process of finding peace with oneself by cultivating attitudes, skills, and experiences of calmness, serenity, tranquillity, and contentment. For example, by either talking about or practicing mental wellbeing, meditation, peaceful coexistence etc.
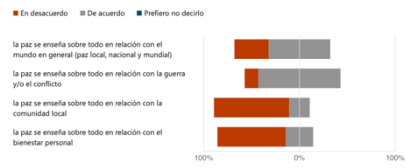
2. – RESEARCH FINDINGS

2.1 DATA ON PEACE EDUCATION

In Argentina, Denmark, and the UK, the word peace is not explicitly stated in national curricular[3]. However, respondents who answer "yes" to the question: "Have you ever learned about peace in school?", make up 64% in Argentina, 69% in Denmark, and 73% in the UK. The majority of all answers "agree" that: "At school, peace is mostly taught in relation to war and/or conflict", with 85.7% in Argentina, 96.2% in Denmark, and 92.3% in the UK. Following on, to the statement: "My learning in school has largely shaped how I understand peace", the percentage of respondents that "disagree" is 71.4% in Argentina, 61.5% in Denmark, and 65.4% in the UK.
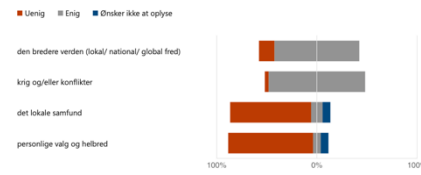
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[3] There were little results in my initial searches on subjects, topics, and words with 'peace' in the countries' curricular.
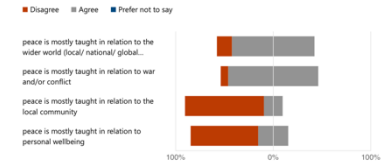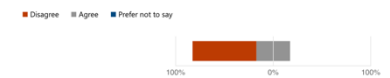
Argentinian responses	*Danish responses*	*British responses*

Evidently, there is a trend across all countries that while most find that they have learned about peace in school, they believe that this learning has primarily been in relation to war. From the following question: "Where else have you learned about peace?", respondents share that they have learned about peace through personal experience, news and media, and religion. Two respondents turn attention to the necessity of education and family relations:

> From my perspective, the difference lies in the fact that the media are irresponsible when communicating, […] and do not generate awareness or commitment. Whereas, in theory, the school is expected to provide the necessary tools to generate awareness and commitment to peace in the students. (Anonymous respondent from Argentina)

> I have learned about peace through having siblings, whom I have had many fights with, which has resulted in many "peace treaties" between us. But my question is, as long as humans exist, will pacifist peace ever be possible? (Anonymous respondent from Denmark)

These contributions show how young people have shaped their perception of peace outside school as well as how they question the concept of peace. Such findings direct attention to if and how school can support young people's learnings about peace. In follow-up interviews, Christian from Denmark[4] raised the concern that: "it is difficult to see how peace fits into school

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[4] Christian, interviewed by author, June 27th, 2023.

curriculum," because he did not see: "a burning need to learn about peace in Denmark". As the conversation developed, he kept with the idea that school might not be the ideal setting to teach peace. However, when asked to share an argument for PE, he said that: "I believe it must be integrated into every aspect of education, affirming that peace is more than just the antidote to war." In contrast, Matías from Argentina[5] shared that because there are many deep-seated problems, there is little sense of community, which fosters violence and sustains the problems: "This is a vicious circle wherein we don't perceive each other as real people. When someone is not a part of your circle, then you can point a gun at them… again and again." He expressed further that: "We need to learn to be in community with each other, and such work comes from the very root of peace education." Similar to how the respondents focus on community, scholars consider that PE enables schools to cultivate intentional communities in any and every aspect through 'collaborative learning, circle-based exchanges, informal student-teacher conversations etc.' (Gee, Brooks, and Cartwright 2022, 22).

In short, the evidence shows that there are positive overlaps between what young people urge to learn about peace and what PE advocates. Moreover, there are noteworthy differences in the attitudes toward PE across the three countries, especially between Argentina and Denmark. For example, when Matías urged for more education on peace due to the absence of peace in Argentinian society, Christian raised that the presence of peace in Denmark makes it a more trivial topic in school. Supporting this, 36% of the Argentinian say that they have had a direct experience of armed conflict, compared with 8% of the Danish and 12% of the British youth. Thus, the findings suggest that the societal presence/deficit of peace is important to consider when incorporating peace into education.

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[5] Matías, interviewed by author, June 29th, 2023.

2.2   DATA ON INNER PEACE

The first question asked respondents to share their perspective on the definition of inner peace. The Argentinian answers were observed as positive, with one participant expressing that: "it is the definition of peace that I agree with the most. If we are not at peace with ourselves, we will never be able to be at peace anywhere in the world." In comparison, the answers from Denmark expressed greater confusion with the term, where one shares that: "I agree, but take it with a grain of salt because my perception of inner peace is 100% based on what I've heard in Kung Fu Panda." Meanwhile a British respondent reflected that: "Inner peace and wellbeing do not mean being calm all the time, especially not in the face of injustice and mistreatment. Sometimes peace also looks like standing up for yourself, setting boundaries, or advocating for those who do not have the tools/resources to self-advocate."

The respondents were further asked to share their experience with inner peace in education. Here, 21% in Argentina, 23% in Denmark, and 31% in the UK answers "yes" to the question: "Have you ever learned about inner peace in school?". Moreover, most of all responses consider that inner peace is "important" or "extremely important" to their experience of the world, with 57.2% in Argentina, 69.3% in Denmark, and 80.8% in the UK. In keeping with this, when respondents were asked to what extent they agree with the statement: "Strategies to find inner peace should be taught in school.", 85.7% in Argentina, 61.5% in Denmark 73.1% in the UK "agree" or "strongly agree". Though these answers express a similar trend across the countries, deviations occur. The Argentinian responses were comparatively more positive towards learning about inner peace in school (85.7%), though they were less likely to consider inner peace important to their own experience of the world (57.2%). Moreover, the Danish responses were less likely to agree that inner peace should be taught in school settings (61.5%).

22. ¿Qué importancia le darías a la paz interior en tu experiencia del mundo?
(1 = nada importante; 5 = extremadamente importante)

■ 1 ■ 2 ■ 3 ■ 4 ■ 5 ■ Prefiero no decirlo

100%   0%   100%
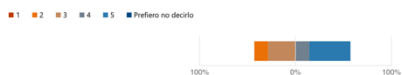
22. Hvor vigtig vil du sige, at indre fred er for din oplevelse af verden?
(1 = slet ikke vigtigt; 5 = ekstremt vigtigt)

■ 1 ■ 2 ■ 3 ■ 4 ■ 5 ■ Ønsker ikke at oplyse

100%   0%   100%
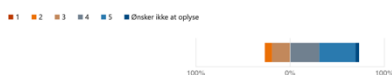
22. How important would you say inner peace is to your experience of the world?
(1 = not at all important ; 5 = extremely important)

■ 1 ■ 2 ■ 3 ■ 4 ■ 5 ■ Prefer not to say

100%   0%   100%

24. ¿En qué medida estás de acuerdo con la afirmación:
(1 = totalmente en desacuerdo; 5 = totalmente de acuerdo)

"Las estrategias para encontrar la paz deberían enseñarse en la escuela".

■ 1 ■ 2 ■ 3 ■ 4 ■ 5 ■ Prefiero no decirlo

100%   0%   100%

24. I hvor høj grad er du enig i udsagnet:
(1 = meget uenig; 5 = meget enig)

"Der bør undervises i strategier til at finde indre fred i skolen."

■ 1 ■ 2 ■ 3 ■ 4 ■ 5 ■ Ønsker ikke at oplyse

100%   0%   100%

24. To what extent do you agree with the statement:
(1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree)

"Strategies to find inner peace should be taught in school."

■ 1 ■ 2 ■ 3 ■ 4 ■ 5 ■ Prefer not to say

100%   0%   100%

*Argentinian responses*   *Danish responses*   *British responses*

A closer examination of the interplay between inner and outer peace adds an additional layer of complexity. Danish respondents display a notably lower percentage (23%) when considering inner peace's connection to peace in the wider world, in contrast to the Argentinian (57.2%) and British (42.3%) perspectives.

23. ¿En qué medida dirías que están conectadas la paz interior y la paz general (local/nacional/global)?
(1 = nada relacionadas; 5 = muy relacionadas)

■ 1 ■ 2 ■ 3 ■ 4 ■ 5 ■ Prefiero no decirlo

100%   0%   100%

23. Hvor forbundet vil du sige, at indre fred og lokal/national/global fred er?
(1 = slet ikke forbundet; 5 = stærkt forbundet)

■ 1 ■ 2 ■ 3 ■ 4 ■ 5 ■ Ønsker ikke at oplyse

100%   0%   100%
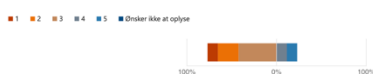
23. How connected would you say inner peace and wider (local/national/global) peace are?
(1 = not at all connected; 5 = strongly connected)

■ 1 ■ 2 ■ 3 ■ 4 ■ 5 ■ Prefer not to say

100%   0%   100%
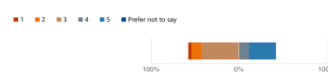
Argentinian responses   *Danish responses*   *British responses*

Importantly, inner peace does not translate easily into Danish and as a respondent shared: "Inner peace seems to be a religious phrasing." Likewise, Katrine from Denmark[6] stated that: "Inner peace is of course individual, but you will quickly react unpeaceful towards others if you don't feel well with yourself, so it is a community thing. Inner peace and community must be addressed in dialogue with each other." In another interview, Alejandro from Argentina[7] stressed that issues with mental health among the youth in Argentina indicate that inner peace is a vital tool for survival. He shared that: "This sad reality forces a wide-spread understanding of a huge urgency to learn what inner peace means and the importance of mental health." In

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[6] Katrine, interviewed by author, June 27th, 2023.
[7] Alejandro, interviewed by author, June 29th, 2023.

keeping with this, the disparities, I suggest, may be influenced by linguistic nuances beyond the cultural contexts.

In short, the collective voice of the youth wished to learn strategies in school to find inner peace, but they struggled with identifying what these might be. To this, they commonly described that formal education and exams are the very root of why they do not feel at peace in their everyday lives. These final observations align with scholars' concern that school can enact structures that stifle rather than promote peace for young people (Ogunnusi 2020, 115).

3. – LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

3.1 LIMITATIONS

A limitation to this study is that the reviewed literature is developed within the context of education in the UK. Though the concepts are not streamlined into curriculum in the UK, it is rarely even mentioned in Danish and Argentinian school materials. This asymmetry challenges my findings, but it also suggests the potential to develop PE in conversation with young people across linguistic differences. Moreover, the young people are between the ages of 18 to 35 years, which is a considerably older age group than normally conceived as the youth[8]. Therefore, what is learned in school today might have evolved beyond what respondents were taught. A final limitation is that words do not translate succinctly, and it has been difficult to compare across the countries without overstating yet still appreciating the language barriers.

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[8] E.g., The United Nations (1981) defines 'youth' as people aged from 15 to 24 years.

3.2 FURTHER RESEARCH

This study has contributed to what is known about how young people understand peace and inner peace in educational settings. Furthermore, it has successfully evidenced that young people largely wish that school taught about peace in alignment with what PE aims. From the findings, I have identified following suggestions for further research:

- Continuing to critically question and reconsider what is known about how young people understand peace, their knowledge of peace, and what PE aims.

- Continuing to question how the inner and outer dimensions to peace connect to one another from the perspectives of young people.

- Examining further how young people's different lived realities impact their perceptions of peace and inner peace.

- Investigating what and where the obstacles are to incorporating peace into national curricular.

In conversations with academics and practitioners, more specific questions have been raised:

- How does the dominant narrative of peace (as the absence of violence) reinforce gendered stereotypes of 'women as peaceful' and 'men as violent'?

- How do we move beyond an Anglo-American/Westernised perception of what PE is?

- How do we decolonise the curricular together with those who study and practice peace (in education) across the world?

CONCLUSION

I have examined the ways in which young people from Argentina, Denmark, and the UK experience peace education, along with their perceptions of the connection between inner and

outer peace in their everyday lives. My findings shed light on several important aspects. Firstly, while peace education is not explicitly integrated into curriculum in the studied countries, a significant number of respondents have encountered teachings related to peace in school (mostly within the context of war and conflict). Additionally, the study highlights the significance of inner peace in the lives of young people. Respondents across the three countries emphasised the importance of inner peace to their experiences of the world, and expressed a desire to learn strategies to cultivate inner peace in school. Variations in attitudes toward peace education and inner peace were observed among respondents, and these can be considered as influenced in part by the societal presence or absence of peace, as well as the linguistic and cultural differences. Crucially, such disparities underpin the need for culturally sensitive approaches with respect to young people's lives when implementing peace into any curriculum. All in all, these findings were brought into conversations with academics and practitioners, underlining the alignment of interests and learnings across academic borders and language barriers. In brief, this paper has contributed with preliminary findings to the ongoing conversation about how education can play a pivotal role in cultivating peace in society.

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