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The Visualising Peace Project: Youth-led peace education

Researchers from the Visualising Peace Project at the University of St Andrews discuss the importance of engaging in peace education initiatives with young people.

On the International Day of Education 2024, UNESCO hosted a dialogue on *Learning for Lasting Peace*. This underlined the need for education to equip young people with more pertinent skills to navigate our challenging, changing and conflictual world – by teaching principles of inclusivity, participation, dialogue, solidarity, co-operation, equality and sustainable development. The overlaps between this conceptualisation of peace education and global citizenship education are clear, and we think that Citizenship teachers can benefit from understanding their work as making an important contribution not only to peace education, but also to peacekeeping and peacebuilding, locally and globally.

As well as preparing young people to thrive in a world characterised by multiple, interconnected crises – from wars and climate change to a surge in mental health issues, especially amongst younger generations – successful peace education should empower young people to engage in futures thinking. Specifically, it should help them develop the ability to envision and shape more just realities by co-producing alternative narratives to scenarios of conflict and violence. This is exactly what the Visualising Peace Project aims to do, by recognising the inclusive and world-building power of storytelling in shaping social, cultural and political dynamics.



The Visualising Peace Project

Based at the University of St Andrews, Visualising Peace is a vertically integrated project, with students from different levels of study collaborating in interdisciplinary research under the guidance of an academic supervisor. Over the past three years, Senior Lecturer Dr Alice König has mentored over 40 undergraduates in a joint investigation into how peace and peacebuilding are conceptualised in different fields of knowledge and through different media.

Peace is a seemingly simple concept. But how would you define it? Is peace always imagined in relation to conflict? How does peacebuilding differ from conflict resolution? What is meant by ‘everyday’ peace? How do inner peace and geopolitical peace relate to each other? And can we build or experience peace without social justice or the ‘fight’ for equal rights?

Key research questions being considered by the Visualising Peace Project include:

- What recurring stories do individuals and communities tell about war’s aftermath, conflict resolution, peace and peacebuilding in art, text, film, photography, news reports, museums, music, sculpture, gaming, and other such media?
- What (if anything) makes any given narrative identifiable as a ‘peace story’? And are narratives of peace always constructed in relation to narratives of war?
- Whose narratives or ideas of peace dominate in different parts of the world, and why?
- What role can peace-storytelling play in peacebuilding?

The research gap that our work fills is significant. In the Global North in particular, our academic, cultural, social and political worlds are filled with representations and interpretations of war, and the idea and practice of peace is all too rarely understood as something that can exist separately from violence. Responding to the scarcity of peace-centred narratives in formal education and mainstream media, we have been looking for ‘pockets of peace’ in our academic reading but also (and maybe most importantly) in our everyday lives and in the world around us. Realising that we need to improve our ‘peace literacy’, as individuals and communities, has helped us recognise the importance of using our experiences as both students and researchers of peace to contribute to the field of peace education.

The project’s link to Citizenship

Citizenship is at the heart of our project. Both educators and learners are encouraged to bring their experiences as citizens and social actors into the classroom, and public engagement (taking action) is as important as academic study. Our lived experiences become both critical lenses used to build alternative visions of the future, and objects of analysis for what they can teach us about the past. For those involved in the Visualising Peace Project, peace education is a field of both theory and practice. Since 2021, multiple cohorts of students

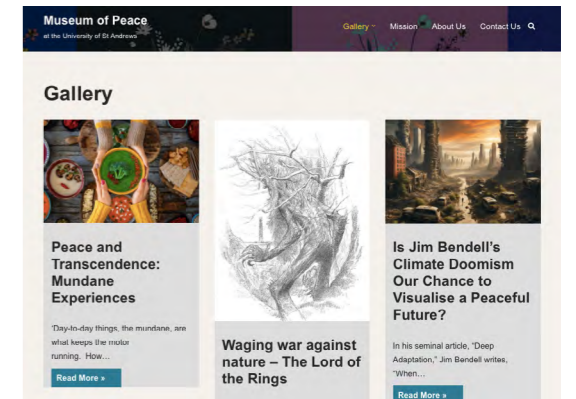
have been at once learning about and engaging directly in shaping and delivering, peace education.

As such, while we write this article as researchers interested in pedagogies of peace education, we are also an example of how peace education empowers students to proactively apply their learning to influence the communities they are part of. We hope that Citizenship teachers can take inspiration from this and involve their own students in designing and delivering education as part of their learning.

“Peace is a seemingly simple concept. But how would you define it? Is peace always imagined in relation to conflict?”

The peace education teaching resources we have been collating are free to access through our project website. We have also been publishing guided ‘Learning Journeys’ through the Visualising Peace Library, and reflections on different manifestations of peace and peacebuilding in our virtual Museum of Peace (for an introduction to the Museum, see Consiglio, König, Oberholzter, 2023). Citizenship teachers can use these resources to explore – together with students – understandings of peace and approaches to peacebuilding that are not addressed by formal education.

The following discussion offers some concrete examples of how to do this, with further reflections on involving students as co-creators of knowledge and co-instructors in joint educational endeavours.



PEACE EDUCATION AND CLIMATE COMMUNICATION

2023 was the hottest year on record and the planet reached average temperatures that had likely not occurred in over 120,000 years (Haustein, 2023; UN, 2023). More intense and frequent weather extremes will continue to cause human security crises and play a defining role in different kinds of conflict. Addressing climate change is therefore tightly entangled with peacebuilding, which we understand in this context as a process that aims to ensure the freedom of all people from insecurity. Yet, climate education and peace education are often taught separately.

Broadening the hypernym of peace to include climate change mitigation and sustainable adaptation can improve the ways in which we communicate climate change to agents of change, including students. Through the Visualising Peace Project, student Madighan Ryan has studied how to communicate climate change effectively, not just to educate, but also to inspire concrete pro-environmental – and peacebuilding – action, like voting, activism, and everyday lifestyle change. Here she explains how her research process led to the identification of a gap in peace education:

“My research began with autoethnography. I wrote about my reactions to the climate change communication I received, and I questioned which headlines, lectures, and political leaders’ or activists’ speeches motivated me to act. For example, I found that fear-inducing headlines, while accurate, made me feel as though any action would be ineffectual. Conversely, professors who skipped over obvious political or economic challenges, and instead focused on the inevitability of a technological solution, filled me with a false sense of calm that promoted inaction. I delved further into scholarship on the effects of too much, or too little, hope or fear, as well as the causes of a paradoxical phenomenon called the Attitude–Behaviour Gap. In brief, the Attitude–Behaviour Gap is the (primarily Western) phenomenon of the reluctance of a person who believes in climate change to take mitigatory or adaptive action or engage in any personal lifestyle change. Their inaction represents a failure of climate communication – or climate education – to inspire.”

The product of Madighan’s research is a publicly available report aimed at all climate communicators in areas where the population frequently embodies the Attitude–Behaviour Gap. The fundamental premise is that all climate communicators, like policymakers, journalists and teachers, carry a largely unexplored power to affect emotional reactions to climate change, and that they can use this strength to ensure that climate change is not just something acknowledged, but something that people are motivated to take action about.

Connected to this, another Visualising Peace researcher, Joe Walker, has contributed research on emotional, rather than cognitive, ways of learning within peace education. Madighan’s report is not a step-by-step instruction manual, but rather an invitation to all climate communicators to interrogate their current styles of communication, thoughtfully gauge their audience’s emotional response, and find what the balance between constructive hope and worry looks and sounds like in their newsrooms, parliaments or classrooms.

Putting it into practice in the classroom

In a classroom setting, an exercise much like Madighan’s personal autoethnography – where students describe in what situations related to climate change they have been inspired, scared or hopeless – could be useful to determine what the unique balance between constructive hope and fear looks like for a cohort.

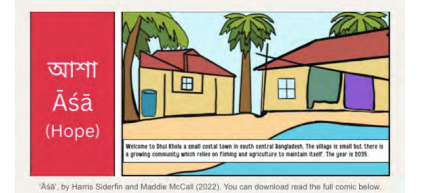
Introspective exercises also teach students to value the process of reflecting on their own emotions in relation to the concept of climate change. Citizenship teachers could build on this exercise by challenging their students to design more effective communication strategies, taking action not only as citizen scholars but, as peace activists by helping to address inner peace as well as global security.

Our podcast series, Museum of Peace, and Visualising Peace Library include resources designed to be a springboard in the classroom. For example, Visualising

Peace researchers Harris Siderfin and Maddie McCall designed an award-winning teaching resource in a comic book format to inform younger children about forced displacement and empower them to write and draw their own solutions by experimenting with different possible endings to the story.

Older students could explore the museum entry inspired by Jim Bendell’s ‘Deep Adaptation’ theory, an agenda that suggests humanity should prepare for the possibility of the devolution of society due to climate change. It examines how we might constructively pair rational worry with the assertion of our own agency and reimagine what peaceful, political, judicial and emotional systems of the future could look like.

The Power of Comics in Peace Education



PEACE EDUCATION AND INNER PEACE

The official report *Mental health of children and young people in England*, (NHS England, 2023) claims that 1 in 5 children between the ages of eight and sixteen years have a ‘probable mental disorder’, disproportionately affecting children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Evidence further shows that mental health is a pressing issue for young people of our age (18–25 years). Our work on inner peace thus originates in personal interests and becomes academically grounded in the question: How can inner peace be taught in different classrooms, in dialogue with other citizenship and peace educators?

As discussed in a recent report by Quakers in Britain (2022), peace education should aim to help students cultivate inner peace as a fundamental step towards building sustainable interpersonal, local and global peace. The interconnection between inner and outer peace is significant to our own research, which draws inspiration from childhood psychology and mindfulness in education (Schonert-Reichl and Roeser, 2016), engaged pedagogy (hooks, 1994), critical peace education (Bajaj and Breitmeier, 2011; Ogunnusi, 2020; Quakers, 2022), and the Buddhist peacebuilder Daisaku Ikeda’s educational vision (Goulah and Urbain, 2013). Below we highlight four key principles that underpin our approach, identified through our research:

1. Inner peace is intertwined with other peace-related topics and can be taught in relation to these rather than in its own silo. For example, as the preceding section suggests, environmental issues can effectively be taught with a sensitivity to the students’ abilities to regulate emotions.
2. Inner peace is a context-dependent concept and must be engaged with differently according to different classroom contexts. As bell hooks (1994) notes, this is the essence of engaged pedagogy that urges students to make sense of what inner peace means to them in their learning environments. In keeping with this, the peace educator Michael Ogunnusi’s (2020) research shows that engaged and situated learning effectively strengthens students’ inner senses of peace in classroom settings. Thus, context-driven learning is key for positive engagements with the topic of inner peace.
3. Following the principles of ‘Participatory action research’ (Institute of Development Studies, no date), whereby researchers and participants work together “to understand a problematic relationship and change it for the better”, we seek regular input from young learners as well as their teachers in developing our understanding and approach to peace education. We seek to work with all stakeholders (particularly young learners) to co-produce teaching resources and theory that are meaningful for students.
4. We are sensitive to the varying barriers and bridges to inner peace in different classrooms. Therefore, if the term ‘inner peace’ does not resonate with you and/or your classroom, then we ask you to either question why that is or to use a different concept: personal peace, wellbeing, mental health, self-care, love, compassion or any other notion that speaks to you.

Our approach is set out more extensively in a report ‘Young people’s experiences with peace education: from inner to outer peace’ (2023) by Visualising Peace researcher Otilia Meden.

Putting it into practice in the classroom

You can find a growing portfolio of teaching resources on our project website. We do not claim that any of our lesson plans are complete, definitive, perfect ways to deliver peace education in any classroom setting. We encourage teachers to engage with them as pilot resources, to test them out and to share feedback with us, so that we can continue to develop them as our own research develops.

Otilia’s worksheet on inner peace, for example, is based on well-evidenced ways to enhance mental wellbeing through mindfulness and meditation practices in school settings (see, for example, *Handbook of Mindfulness in Education*, Schonert-Reichl & Roeser, 2016). Tailored to children between the ages of 5 to 7 years, it aims to build bridges between school-based mindfulness practices, inner peace education, and broader understandings of interpersonal peace and peace in the world.



Inner peace, as many other peace-related topics, remains under-theorised and under-recognised in many school curricula. In investigating how mental health can be centred on peace education and wider peacebuilding work, we are committed to amplifying youth perspectives on what meaningful education for inner, local and global peace looks like to them. Thus, we listen to students (and teachers) who speak back to our research and who explore practical ways to cultivate inner peace in classroom settings together with, alongside, and beyond us.

Why does peace matter?

Peace is vital for planetary health and climate protection.

Peace in space directly impacts peace on Earth.

Peace enables individuals to thrive, learn, grow and reach their potential.

Peaceful communities are safer, fairer, healthier and more resilient to challenges.

Peace between communities benefits all life on Earth.

How does peace (or its absence) affect YOU?

Visualising the future

Ultimately, peace education is about learning how to develop healthy relationships in the face of crises. Two blog posts in our Library’s ‘Learning Journeys’ section by researcher Lia da Giau (*Peace education for sustainable systemic change and education for sustainable peace: an ongoing journey*) reflect on how we need to rethink current approaches and change whole systems, not just tweak isolated issues. Citizenship teachers can contribute to transforming the education system by integrating elements of our approach to peace education, exploring at once the local and global dimensions of social justice and responsibility. If we become more attentive to peace and peacebuilding in all its parts in the classroom, we as youth will arguably be better positioned to concretise positive and co-ordinated change across sectors in society, in our professional and civic lives.

In our discussion, we have tried to show how peace education in the context of Citizenship education is concerned with everything from personal to global dimensions of theory, feeling and practice. The topics that can be covered through this approach are contemporarily relevant, ranging from personal wellbeing and inner peace to global wellbeing and sustainability, with conflict resolution practices mapping from classroom settings to international problem-solving.

The findings of our research – and our use of methodologies such as autoethnography and participatory action research – highlight the importance of individual experiences and emotional responses as influential factors in the learning experience, which can and should be nurtured in the classroom. Through our participatory experience as students and researchers, we have learned how peace education

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becomes particularly impactful when it encourages and empowers youth to become knowledge-producers, experts and (peace) activists themselves. It is because of the personal and social value we have found in designing and delivering (as well as receiving) peace education ourselves that we are advocating for more embedded, creative and empowering approaches to the study of peace, in all its forms, in Citizenship teaching environments. Our hope is that more Citizenship teachers will adopt a similar model, so that more students are able to engage in education that is world-building and transformative for individuals and communities.

If these ideas resonate with you and you would like to use any of our resources in your classroom, we are always looking to engage in conversation at vispeace@st-andrews.ac.uk.

You can read more about peace education in Teaching Citizenship Issue 37 (Building peace through education) and Issue 58 (Conflict and peace).

Key takeaways:

- Peace education and Citizenship teaching should inform each other.
- Successful peace/Citizenship education can empower young people to envision and shape a more just future by developing alternative narratives to scenarios of conflict and violence.
- Peace education should encompass (and draw connections between) everything from personal peace to sustainable development and geopolitics.
- Students are most empowered to act on their learning when they are involved as equal partners in knowledge production and education delivery. ●

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