

## **Why Peace Education Deserves a Place in Europe's Education Systems**

**Article by Saskia Basa**

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The reality of conflict is pervasive and inescapable, yet education systems currently seek to shield students from its complexity. In doing so they prevent young people from being able to fully understand and engage with the dynamics at work in the world today. Saskia Basa argues that approaches rooted in peace education, particularly when coordinated at a European level, have the potential to reduce conflict and foster more nuanced, balanced, and empathetic attitudes and understandings of the world.

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The Russian invasion of Ukraine has brought home the possibility of war, after decades of relative peace in Western Europe. This is a worrying prospect for all, but especially for young people, whose mental health has already been disproportionately impacted by the global pandemic, and who are increasingly experiencing eco-anxiety. Recent events have added to the mix the threat of nuclear war. In the face of overlapping crises and growing polarisation, are our schools and educational spaces providing young people with the necessary tools to constructively engage with the social and political issues of our time? And how can European policy contribute to building a culture of peace through education, supporting young people in acquiring the skills to deal with the conflicts of the future?

### **Teaching conflict in black and white**

Young people are bursting with curiosity and a desire to understand the political and social realities that surround them. However, our rigid education systems leave little space for dialogue, debate, or uncomfortable conversations. Young people learn about historical events in school, yet when interpreting these in the classroom there is a tendency to reinforce mainstream historical narratives, presenting them as monolithic and coherent events with "winners" and "losers". Students are rarely invited to reflect and understand the multiplicity of perspectives that emerge from any given conflict.

Moreover, history curricula are often disconnected from current political realities, and due to the pressure placed on teachers to remain politically neutral, educators often avoid talking about historical, contemporary, or interpersonal conflict altogether for fear of repercussion. As a result, conflict-blind educational approaches which aim to create an educational environment separate from the cruel and complex world "outside" have become generalised.

Conflict-blind strategies are defined by containment and conflict avoidance, rather than engagement. Yet these approaches are oblivious to the fact that in our age, young people are unavoidably exposed to conflicting perspectives in their daily lives; information is omnipresent and escaping it is unfeasible. This vacuum in our education systems is filled elsewhere, be it through social media, or other informal channels.

What prevents these issues being tackled in the classroom is a combination of lack of political will, absence of dedicated funding, and political sensitivities. The result of this is a deafening silence, which leaves young people exposed to polarising narratives and vulnerable to disinformation. While pornography is filling the void in the absence of sexual education in schools, Instagram and TikTok are becoming young people's social and political education. Politicians themselves are recognising this; Russian influencers have been paid to spread pro-Kremlin narratives, while Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy made an appeal to TikTokers to use their influence to help end the war.

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## **Infoxication, TikTok wars, and the internet's unregulated pedagogy**

While social media has allowed for unprecedented access to information, this comes with risks. First is the risk associated with social media algorithms and their echo-chamber effect. Algorithms tend to reinforce users' pre-existing beliefs by showing more content that is aligned with the user's views, while reducing exposure to different perspectives. A second risk is information overload, or "infoxication". When there is an over-abundance of information or noise, processing capacity is overwhelmed, making it difficult to make deliberate, quality decisions. Lastly there is the issue of disinformation, which has been particularly widespread in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Due to their special features, some platforms such as TikTok make it virtually impossible to fact-check videos or determine their origin.

In their physical and virtual existence, young people are already touched by the same sociopolitical realities that affect adults: overlapping crises, polarisation, fake news, and the attention economy. We can no longer rely on conflict-blind education systems to guide the next generation of citizens into the future. As war looms over Europe, it is more crucial than ever that we support the next generation to become resourceful, resilient, and ethically-engaged citizens in the face of social, environmental, and political volatility.

## **The missing piece of peace education**

Peace education is ideally placed to provide young people with the tools to engage with complex social phenomena and proactively seek peaceful transformation through nonviolent means. Peace education approaches can empower young people to transform

conflict in every sphere of their lives. Transformative approaches to conflict are rooted in an awareness that systemic issues produce and exacerbate conflict. Conflict-habituated systems, such as divided societies where outbreaks of violence or tensions persist over generations, cannot be “resolved”, but can be transformed by building alternative peace systems, particularly by fostering healthy relationships and thinking creatively around different processes. Conflict resolution approaches fall short in capturing these nuances, making it likely for conflict to re-emerge.

Global Citizenship Education programming evolved from peace education, and explicit mentions of the importance of peace education can be found in UNESCO’s constitution and the 2015 UN Sustainable Development Goals (Goal 4.7). Throughout its history, peace education has in essence been an evolving concept, developed in formal and non-formal educational settings, and adapted to local contexts. This has resulted in an immense variety of peace education initiatives across Europe and the world. However, what unites different practices under the peace education umbrella is a focus on developing core competencies such as critical thinking, empathic listening, creative problem-solving, negotiation skills, and non-violent communication, as well as attitudes such as tolerance, responsibility, self-awareness, and respect for others, oneself, and the environment.

Experiential methods are instrumental in helping young people find real life applicability and meaning to classroom approaches. To do this, peace educators act as facilitators and instead of remaining neutral, they guide the conversation while adhering to principled impartiality. The aim is to create a safe (though not sheltered), environment where difficult conversations can take place, and students can gain interpersonal, social, and emotional skills. These include being able to relate to others socially and listening, expressing, and managing emotions.

Students may reflect and learn about different definitions of peace and violence, as well as peaceful alternatives to dealing with conflict or disagreement. Peace education approaches also enable young people to analyse current events through diverging perspectives in a constructive way, think about their own prejudice or bias, and critically analyse their own sources of information.

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## **Peace education in action**

A number of examples provide evidence of the effectiveness of peace education approaches. An interactive video-based programme *Parallel Histories* worked with over 300 schools, inviting students to discuss a selection of contested historical instances through different perspectives. Students learned to identify complexities, examine and evaluate evidence, and form their own judgement while recognising the importance of narratives in defining our sense of the world. [Pathways Institute for Negotiation Education](#) continues to do important work in Belgian schools teaching young people creative negotiation skills.

Pioneers of peace education in Europe also include [Transforming Conflict](#), a programme introducing restorative practice in schools across the United Kingdom, and [Quaker Peace and Social Witness](#), whose peace education programme offers students tools to use mediation approaches in their own conflicts in the classroom. When evaluating the impact of peer mediation approaches, educators [found](#) that after receiving training, students were more likely to reach constructive outcomes in disputes, reducing the number of interpersonal conflicts.

Peace education approaches have also proven fruitful in post-conflict settings. For example, the [Nansen Model for Integrated Education](#) was launched in 2015 in three cities across [Bosnia-Herzegovina](#) (BiH), training educators to apply peace education methods in multi-ethnic classrooms. This is in stark contrast with the prevailing decentralised education systems of BiH, which favour separation along ethnic lines. The Nansen initiative promoted dialogue and non-violent conflict transformation, contributing to a sense of shared belonging among students. However, it is crucial to remember that peace education efforts are context dependent. Especially in post-conflict settings, peace education programming needs to be conflict-sensitive, making sure programming is relevant, rooted in local meaning and in line with “do no harm” principles and standards.

## **A European approach to peace education**

Is the European Union doing its part to implement peace education? Given that education remains a national competency, the EU has focused primarily on promoting a sense of European identity and shared history. To this end, Erasmus+ was developed to facilitate student mobility within the EU and partner countries. However, concerns have been raised regarding the accessibility of Erasmus+ programmes. Despite new efforts to reach students from under-represented groups, participation remains limited to students with the necessary awareness and resources.

Some Erasmus+ projects which are regarded as [success stories](#) focus on building social and intercultural skills, which are endorsed by peace education approaches as core competences. The new Erasmus+ programme generation 2021-2027 focuses on four broad cross-cutting themes, including supporting inclusion and diversity across Erasmus+ initiatives. However, Erasmus+ still lacks a coordinated strategy for peace education across programmes, as efforts have remained informal and dispersed. Peace education competences are not taken into account in data collection and evaluation exercises, making it difficult to determine to what extent Erasmus+ programmes contribute to positive peace outcomes.

This is a missed opportunity, as the EU is uniquely placed not only to develop guidelines for a coordinated strategy for peace education across member states, but also to extend them to the programming of EU bodies with internal and external mandates, including in the context of emergency and humanitarian operations. If the EU wishes to honour its commitments as a political project for peace, emphasis should also be placed on integrating peace education approaches across European initiatives on education.

In 2020, the Quaker Council for European Affairs produced a report making the case for peace education in the EU, including recommendations on how to implement a coordinated, multi-layered strategy for peace education across EU internal and external programmes

(*Peace Education: Making the Case*, 2019). *Quakers in Britain* make the same case for wider adoption of peace education approaches in the British context (*Peace at the Heart*, 2022). The recommendations outlined in *Peace Education: Making the Case* remain relevant today, as the Russian invasion of Ukraine calls us to redouble peacebuilding efforts within the EU and in its neighbourhood.

Peace educators are already coming up with novel classroom approaches to promote an empathy-based, balanced perspectives on the recent events in Ukraine, which also helps challenge misinformation and taps into young people's desires for a better world. Organisations such as *Global Dimension*, *Save the Children*, and *Oxfam* have published resources and guidance for caregivers and educators to include discussions on Ukraine in their curriculum, tackling conflict using an impartial approach and helping young people develop an understanding of the context in which divergent perspectives emerged.

The future is an infinite succession of presents, and what we do today will define the fate of the EU as a political project for years to come. This is especially the case when we talk about young people, as the competencies and attitudes they develop in our education systems will determine the sociopolitical realities of the future. Peace education may represent an important cornerstone in the EU's transition from polarised to pluralistic societies. Therefore, a coordinated strategy for peace education in the EU's internal and external policies is more important than ever. There is untapped potential in educating young people to become empathic listeners, eager facilitators, and skilful negotiators in the conflicts of tomorrow. In the face of overlapping crises, the stakes could not be higher.

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