

## ***The United Nations and Peace Education***

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### DEFINITIONS

The United Nations (UN) is a global intergovernmental organization established on October 24, 1945 with the general aims of maintaining international peace and encouraging international cooperation. The UN refers to the overarching organization, although specialist UN agencies and forums have been established to further specific objectives. With some exceptions, UN declarations and instruments constitute so-called soft law, which is to say that they work through the power of moral persuasion. Since international peace and co-operation are central to the founding principles of the UN, it is logical that, within the official declarations and instruments of the UN, one ought to find formulations regarding peace education. Further, in seeking to understand peace education, it is logical that we ought to be aware of these formulations including their strengths and weaknesses.

### THE UN CHARTER AND THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

The Charter of the UN specifically outlines the purpose of the organization as that of preventing future war. Peace education is one crucial means by which this aim can be fulfilled. The Preamble to the Charter contains a reference to "reaffirm faith in the ... dignity and worth of the human person" and to "establish conditions under which justice and respect" for international obligations can be maintained (UN, 1945). It is difficult to see the tasks of establishing or re-affirming faith in the dignity of the human person or establishing respect for international obligations without involving education. The other fundamental recognition of peace education lies within the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 26 declares: "Education shall be directed ... to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship ... and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace" (1948).

### UNESCO AND PEACE EDUCATION

The agency within the UN system that has pre-eminent responsibility for education and educational policy is the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and thus, it would be expected that this international organization would have the most to say about peace education. In fact, peace education is central to the constitutional mandate of UNESCO: the Preamble to its Constitution (1945) commences by noting that, as war begins in the minds of individuals, so too should the defenses against war be constructed in the minds of individuals. Indeed, most of the declarations within the Preamble deal expressly with either building peace or preventing war. UNESCO shares with other United Nations organizations a fundamental commitment to international peace, but is unique in its mandate to operate through the mediums of education, science, and culture. If we ignore the Preamble, it could be argued that the commitment of UNESCO to peace education within its 1945 Constitution is only implied. However, since that time, there have been a number of more explicit commitments by UNESCO to peace education, namely in 1974, 1980, 1995, and, most recently through the UNESCO commitment to the "culture of peace" programs, which will be discussed in further detail below.

One specific activity of UNESCO in encouraging peace education is the Associated Schools Project Network (ASPnet), founded in 1953, and currently involving a network of some 7,900 educational institutions in 176 countries. ASPnet is committed to the UNESCO objectives of encouraging

peace and international understanding, although it is noteworthy that this commitment has become more open, with, for instance, a commitment by ASPnet to the "four pillars of education", as outlined in the Delors Report, including the pillars of "learning to know, learning to be, learning to do, and *learning to live together*" (1996, p. 91-96, emphasis added). The activities of ASPnet espouse peace education principles and include: the linking of schools from different countries, student projects, local and regional networking, international camps, conferences, discussions, campaigns and student competitions, all oriented towards improving the quality of education and towards enhancing respect for other cultures and traditions.

## PEACE EDUCATION AND THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN

The commitment of the United Nations to peace education is also reflected in the instruments on the rights of the child. The 1959 *Declaration of the Rights of the Child* might be summarized as emphasizing the right that children have to protection and education. The seventh principle expressly states that a child has the right to an education that will develop a sense of moral and social responsibility. As a corollary of this, one could argue that a child has the right to peace education. In the same vein, the 1989 *Convention on the Rights of the Child* Article 29.1 (d) indicates that the education of the child shall be directed to "the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of the sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and person of indigenous origin." Given the importance of peace and peace education for children, it is not surprising that peace education figures prominently in promotional literature from the United Nations' Children's Fund (UNICEF), although UNICEF's emphasis on peace education mostly concerns post-conflict situations. It is also not surprising that in 1996, UNICEF adopted peace education as part of its anti-war agenda.

One of the general observations one might make regarding UN international instruments dealing with peace education is that they have become gradually more assertive in terms of rights and expectations. This is evident with the 2002 document *A World Fit for Children*, which was adopted unanimously by the UN General Assembly. In Article 5, "a world fit for children" is described as one of sustainable development "founded upon principles of democracy, equality, non-discrimination, peace and social justice and the universality, indivisibility, interdependence and interrelatedness of all human rights, including the right to development" (UNGA, 2002b). Much of the document focuses upon the right of children to protection from harm and violence. However, an important section deals with the challenge of providing quality education. Within Article 40, the signatories to this document indicate that they will implement a range of strategies and actions, including, at point 40.7, strategies and actions which will "ensure that education programmes and materials reflect fully the promotion and protection of human rights and the values of peace, tolerance and gender equality, using every opportunity presented by the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence for the Children of the World, 2001-2010" (UNGA, 2002b). Clearly this is a forthright commitment to peace education.

## THE UN AND DISARMAMENT EDUCATION

The United Nations has long held a commitment to disarmament education, generally perceived to be an element within peace education. In 1978, the Tenth General Session of the United Nations General Assembly was devoted entirely to disarmament, and is thus generally known as the Special Session on Disarmament I or simply SSOD I. Articles 106 and 107 of the *Final Document* specifically urged governments and international organizations to develop programs in disarmament and peace education at all levels, and indicated that disarmament education ought to be included within formal curricula (1978). In 1980, UNESCO convened the World Congress on Disarmament Education, as promised in the previous SSOD I. *The Final Document and Report of the Congress* is noteworthy in that disarmament education is posited as being an essential

component of peace education, involving how to think, rather than what to think, and is also linked with development and equity issues. Importantly, the *Final Document and Report* indicated that the commitment to disarmament education should be manifest throughout curricula at all levels of education.

In 1982, the United Nations General Assembly held the Special Session on Disarmament II (SSOD II), the centerpiece of which was the World Disarmament Campaign, lasting from 1982 to 1992. The World Disarmament Campaign might be described as an exercise to mobilize popular support for disarmament and was thus linked very much to the efforts of the peace movement and of the work of non-government organizations. The Campaign might be also described as an effort in non-formal peace education, in that the aim was to educate people about the importance of disarmament, although the mechanism for doing this was generally outside of formal educational institutions. Edith Ballantyne and Felicity Hill (2001) have suggested that it remains an open question as to whether the Campaign was successful. Major limitations were a lack of funding and the inherent problems with saying anything that might imply specific criticism of UN member states. One could argue that the Campaign was not a success, in that disarmament during the following decade was minimal. However, one could also argue that the pressure leading to the end of the Cold War was part of the general consciousness-raising engendered by the Campaign.

In 1992, the World Disarmament Campaign was converted into a permanent organization, namely the United Nations Disarmament Programme, which was perhaps a tacit admission of failure. If the Campaign had been truly successful, then the process of creating a permanent agency would hardly have been necessary. Nevertheless, throughout the 1990s, the General Assembly made periodic statements on the importance of disarmament education. In 2000, the United Nations General Assembly called for the Secretary-General, with the assistance of experts, to produce a study on disarmament and non-proliferation education. In 2002, the study was presented and accepted by the General Assembly. The resulting document, *The United Nations Study on Disarmament and Non-proliferation Education*, is an important international document that confirms the international commitment to peace education. Notably, the document gives a prescriptive definition and list of the objectives of disarmament and non-proliferation education, within Articles 6 – 10. The authors summarize the province of such education in Article 20, in that such education is “a base of theoretical and practical knowledge, [which] allows individuals to choose for themselves values that reject violence, resolve conflicts peacefully and sustain a culture of peace” (UNGA, 2002a).

### PEACE EDUCATION AS A HUMAN RIGHT

One of the interesting developments in the thinking of the UN has been the meshing of peace education and human rights education. The *Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action* of the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, at Part 2, paragraphs 78-82, sees peace education as being part of human rights education and human rights education as crucial for world peace. The Vienna Conference was organized by the United Nations and the Declaration subsequently published by the General Assembly. More recently, peace educators such as Betty Reardon (1997, 2000) have warmed to this idea of peace education as a right. Indeed, if peace is a human right, it is not something that we merely hope for, but rather, as Douglas Roche forcefully puts it, something we demand (2003). Further, peace education, in this perspective, also becomes what we ought to demand as a right, rather than an altruistic addition to the educational endeavor.

The conception of peace education as a human right thus flows very much from seeing peace itself as a human right. The UN enunciated this view in a brief yet powerful document, *Declaration on the Rights of Peoples to Peace*, UNGA Resolution 39/11, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on November 12, 1984. Interestingly, most Western nations abstained

from voting on this resolution and on a similar resolution, two years later, expressing a right to development. Nevertheless, the above Declaration still has the status of being an officially adopted instrument of the United Nations. The connection between the right of peace and right to peace education is quite a straightforward one. If peace is to be regarded as a right, then people therefore should have the right to be educated and informed about that right, as any particular right is rendered meaningless if individuals and societies are not informed that they have it.

#### THE UN AND EDUCATION FOR TOLERANCE

Within UN programs on education for tolerance, there are also numerous commitments to peace education. The year 1995 was designated as the United Nations Year for Tolerance, with UNESCO as the lead agency. The UNESCO *Declaration of Principles on Tolerance* (1995) and the UN General Assembly *Follow-up to the United Nations Year for Tolerance* (1996) make it clear that tolerance is an essential requirement for peace. Article 1 of the UNESCO document goes so far as to describe tolerance as the virtue which makes peace possible and which contributes to the replacement of a culture of violence by a culture of peace. The UNESCO document also makes specific reference within Article 4 to the importance of education. Education is the most effective means for preventing intolerance and the initial step is informing people what their rights and freedoms are. Education for tolerance should encourage development of independent judgment, critical thinking and ethical reasoning skills. Interestingly, Article 4.4 involves a pledge by the signatories to improve teacher training, curricula, textbooks, lessons and educational materials "with a view to educating caring and responsible citizens open to other cultures, able to appreciate the value of freedom, respectful of human dignity and differences, and able to prevent conflicts or resolve them by non-violent means" (UNESCO, 1995). As such, the above statement serves as a useful summary of the aims of peace education.

#### PEACE EDUCATION AND A CULTURE OF PEACE

The emergence of the emphasis on a culture of peace and education for a culture of peace is part of a wider realization that the attainment of peace is not merely an institutional problem, but rather one that requires the subtle elements of cultural change. The formal commitment of the UN towards a culture of peace can be best understood through a remarkable and ambitious document, the *Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace*, UNGA Resolution 53/243, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on September 13, 1999. In sum, this instrument reflects the trend to a more integrated understanding of both peace and peace education, encompassing direct, structural and cultural peace. The document also acknowledges that peace must be something that emerges from local sources, rather than being imposed from above. In other words, there needs to be a grassroots movement for a culture of peace.

The year 2000 was designated by the UN as the International Year for a Culture of Peace, and this commitment has been extended with the recognition of the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence for the Children of the World (2001-2010). UNESCO has been the lead agency for the programs associated with a culture of peace. Article A/4 of the *Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace* indicates that education is one of the principal means to build a culture of peace, and Article B/9 contains specific actions for fostering a culture of peace through education. Such actions include involving children in activities for instilling the values and goals of a culture of peace, revision of curricula and textbooks with consideration to previous declarations of UNESCO on peace, ensuring equality of access for women, re-invigorating international educational co-operation, encouraging and strengthening efforts by actors involved in developing values and skills conducive to a culture of peace, encouraging the relevant entities of the United Nations system, and expanding initiatives promoting a culture of peace in institutions of higher education.

## CONCLUSIONS

Overall, it seems reasonable to contend that the commitment of the United Nations to peace education has reflected an evolving awareness of the nature of peace and the peace process itself. The weakness of the UN is that it tends to operate upon a very statocratic paradigm (Galtung, 1986). This is not surprising, given that it is an intergovernmental organization, and peace has therefore often been understood in a limited sense as constituting the absence of violence between nation-states. It is evident, however, that there has been a gradual increase in awareness of the importance of civil and social processes in the encouragement of peace and of the importance of education for a culture of peace. It is also evident that the commitment of the UN to peace education has progressively become more forthright and explicit. Ultimately, what makes the commitment of the UN so important is symbolic: the documents themselves have no coercive power. However the power they do have, that of moral persuasion, is perhaps the most influential of all, especially if used astutely by peace educators.

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