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Global Failure of Peace Education from International Relations Perspectives

Uluslararası İlişkiler Perspektifinde Barış Eğitiminin Küresel Başarısızlığı

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Abstract

This article examines the systemic weaknesses of peace education from an international relations perspective, focusing on critiques from realist, liberal/constructivist, and critical frameworks. The Realists dismiss peace education as utopian and foreign to their world of power politics, state-centered security, and imperatives. The Liberals and Constructivists, on the other hand, agree with the normative potential of peace education but cite the political will interface, underfunding, and misalignment between the curricula and local conflict trends as some of the critical implementation challenges. Critical theorists situate their critiques within organic virulence by capitalist inequality and histories of colonialism, which are often side-stepped by mainstream programs. Political obstructions, crime, nationalism, militarism, and authoritarian censorship can thereby be identified as major roadblocks, with pedagogical obstacles in the form of trauma-insensitive methodologies and a lack of training for peace educators. The regional analysis shows discrepancies between the opportunities and resources granted to peace education across various regions: post-conflict countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America do suffer from a lack of resources, whereas, in developed countries, such educational matters are often placed on the back burner in favor of security considerations.

Keywords: Peace Education, International Relations Theories, Disarmament Demobilization Reintegration (DDR)

Özet

Bu makale, barış eğitiminin yapısal zayıflıklarını uluslararası ilişkiler perspektifinden incelemekte ve realist, liberal/Konstrüktivist ve eleştirel kuramsal çerçevelerden gelen eleştirilere odaklanmaktadır. Realistler, barış eğitimini güç politikaları, devlet merkezli güvenlik anlayışı ve çıkar temelli zorunluluklar dünyasına yabancı ve ütopik olarak görerek reddederler. Buna karşılık, Liberaller ve Konsrüktivistler barış eğitiminin normatif potansiyelini kabul ederler; ancak siyasi irade eksikliği, yetersiz finansman ve müfredatın yerel çatışma dinamikleriyle uyuşmaması gibi uygulama zorluklarını vurgularlar. Eleştirel kuramcılar ise eleştirilerini kapitalist eşitsizliklerin ve sömürgecilik tarihinin organik etkilerine

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dayandırır; bu yapısal sorunlar ise ana akım barış eğitimi programlarında sıklıkla göz ardı edilmektedir. Siyasi engeller, suç oranları, milliyetçilik, militarizm ve otoriter sansür gibi faktörler barış eğitiminin önündeki temel engeller olarak öne çıkarken; pedagojik açıdan da travmaya duyarsız yöntemler ve barış eğitmenlerinin yetersiz eğitimi önemli sorunlar olarak belirlenmektedir. Bölgesel analiz, barış eğitimine sağlanan fırsatlar ve kaynaklar açısından farklılıkları ortaya koymaktadır: Sahra Altı Afrika ve Latin Amerika'daki çatışma sonrası ülkeler kaynak yetersizliği yaşarken, gelişmiş ülkelerde barış eğitimi genellikle güvenlik öncelikleri nedeniyle geri planda bırakılmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Barış Eğitimi, Uluslararası İlişkiler Kuramları, Silahsızlanma, Terhis ve Topluma Yeniden Entegrasyon (DDR)

Introduction

Peace Education – the effort to teach values, knowledge, and skills for peaceful conflict resolution and global harmony – has often been upheld as a key to a more peaceful world (Leonisa Ardizzone, 2001; Salomon, 2006; Tinker, 2016; UNESCO, 2024). The United Nations enshrined this ideal in 1945, declaring that "since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed" (Bokova, 2021). This liberal internationalist vision assumes that educating people for peace will gradually eliminate war and violence. Yet, decades on, war and conflict persist across the globe, and peace education remains sporadic and marginal in many countries (Salomon, 2006; Tinker, 2016). The Cold War era saw peace education evolve, focusing on addressing ideological divides and promoting tolerance. However, the end of the Cold War brought new challenges as ethnic and communal conflicts replaced ideological struggles. This shift highlighted the need for peace education to adapt to new forms of conflict, yet the field struggled to keep pace with these changes (Yaro & Longi, 2023). In the post-9/11 era, peace education increasingly intersected with security agendas in regions perceived as hotbeds of extremism. Schools and policymakers often prioritized anti-terrorism and patriotic education, shifting focus away from broader peacebuilding and global citizenship initiatives (Selenica, 2023).

As illustrated in Figure 1, this study analyses the global shortcomings of peace education from an International Relations (IR) perspective. It reviews major IR theoretical critiques—realist, liberal/constructivist, and critical—as well as practical implementation hurdles, political and structural barriers, curriculum content issues, and regional and historical patterns. In particular, it examines how peace education fared in developed and developing contexts and how the initial post-Cold War optimism gave way to the headwinds of 21st-century nationalism, terrorism, and geopolitical rivalry. By integrating theoretical and empirical insights, this study aims to explain why peace education has often failed to fulfill its promise of promoting durable peace. Beyond theoretical critique, this paper also investigates the role of peace education in Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) processes, especially in post-conflict contexts where educational transformation is critical to sustainable reintegration.

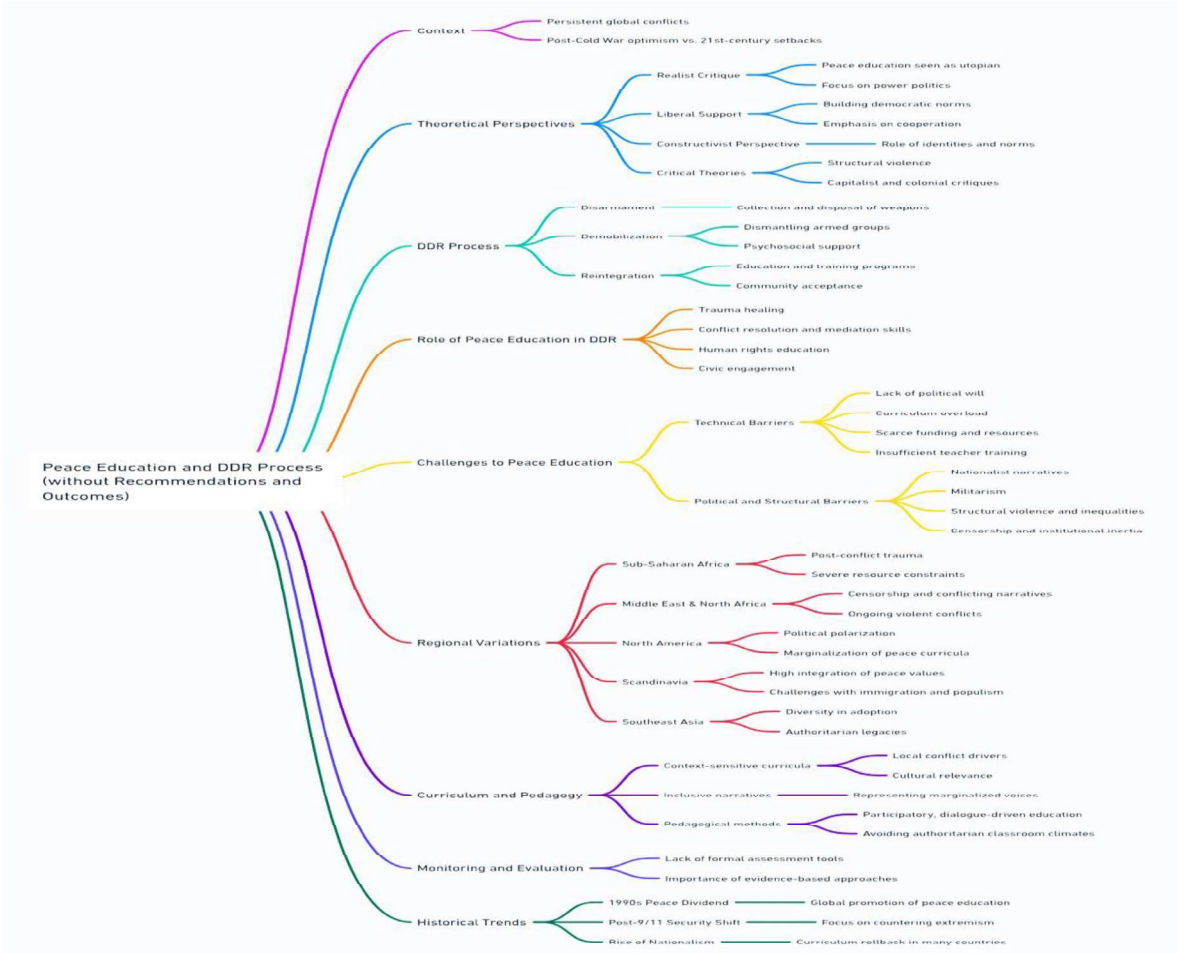

Figure 1 illustrates the intersection of peace education components (pedagogy, curriculum, institutional support) with DDR process phases (disarmament, demobilization, reintegration), highlighting theoretical and implementation challenges

This study employs a qualitative, theory-oriented methodology, combining a critical literature review with interpretive discourse analysis to investigate peace education within the framework of major International Relations (IR) theories. The analysis is grounded in scholarly publications from 2000 to 2024, selected through Scopus, JSTOR, and Web of Science databases.

Peace Education in DDR Contexts

DDR (Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration) processes aim to transition combatants from armed struggle to civilian life. Education is vital in this reintegration, particularly in transforming conflict-driven identities and promoting social cohesion. However, the integration of peace education within DDR programs has been inconsistent and under-theorized.

In Sierra Leone, for example, following the civil war, former child soldiers were provided basic education as part of reintegration programs. While literacy training was prioritized, psychosocial education and peace curricula were often missing, leading to superficial reintegration (Rose, 2018). In South Sudan, some DDR programs included civic education and trauma healing workshops, but these efforts lacked coordination with the national education system, limiting their sustainability (UNESCO, 2024). Peace education, when aligned with

DDR, has the potential to foster empathy, address collective trauma, and instill democratic values necessary for long-term stability. It can also serve as a platform to discuss grievances, foster reconciliation, and counteract extremist narratives. Studies such as Salomon (2006) have shown that peace education can yield short-term attitudinal shifts, especially in controlled environments and among younger students. However, political will, funding, and cultural relevance remain major obstacles.

Peace education must be systematically integrated into DDR frameworks to improve outcomes, not as a peripheral activity but as a core pillar. This would involve tailoring content to local contexts, training facilitators in conflict-sensitive pedagogy, and ensuring post-DDR support structures, including community education hubs and mentorship programs.

Theoretical Critiques of Peace Education in IR Theory

Realist Skepticism

Classical realist thought views the international system as anarchic and driven by power competition, leading to skepticism about peace education. Realists argue that conflict is inevitable due to security dilemmas and that state interests precede moral goals. Consequently, peace education is dismissed as "utopian" and irrelevant to realpolitik (Zhizhko & Beltran, 2022).

Critics argue that teaching values of peace cannot overcome the realities of power politics and national security, suggesting that concepts like a “culture of peace” understate the importance of military power and national interest. Some scholars label peace education initiatives as lacking intellectual rigor or even ideological indoctrination, claiming they present violence and conflict in an overly idealistic way (Zhizhko & Beltran, 2022).

From a classical realist lens, exemplified by thinkers like E.H. Carr and Hans Morgenthau, the failure of interwar “idealist” beliefs about education preventing war was evident in World War II, as power and security concerns persisted. Thus, they argue that peace education cannot change fundamental drivers of war, resulting in minimal impact on state behavior in an anarchic international system (Hajir, 2019; Zhizhko & Beltran, 2022).

Liberal and Constructivist Support

Liberal IR theory, by contrast, is more optimistic that international cooperation and norms can mitigate conflict (Grigat, 2014). Liberals often endorse peace education as part of building a “Kantian” peace–educated citizens are seen as more likely to support democracy, human rights, and international institutions that foster peace (Behr et al., 2018). Indeed, the founding of UNESCO and its education programs were rooted in liberal faith that *“peace must…be founded…upon the intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind”* (Bokova, 2021). Liberal scholars point to democratic peace theory, which posits that educated democratic publics prefer peace, and argue that schools teaching tolerance and critical thinking can cultivate a generation more adept at peaceful conflict resolution.

Constructivist IR theory similarly highlights the power of ideas and identities, viewing peace education as a norm entrepreneur strategy to reshape identities and see former “enemies” as partners (Hoffmann, 2010). However, even among liberal and constructivist advocates, there are caveats. Scholars note a persistent gap between the ideals of peace education and the realities of entrenched conflict. Simply “preaching peace” in classrooms does not easily overcome deep historical animosities or strategic security dilemmas between states (Salomon, 2006; Song, 2012).

Critical Perspectives (Marxist, Postcolonial, Critical Peace Education)

Critical theorists critique mainstream peace education for overlooking underlying power structures and social justice issues (Kumar, 2024). Early efforts were seen as politically neutral, failing to address oppression and inequality (Zembylas & Bekerman, 2013). The Critical Peace Education[4] (CPE) movement emerged, advocating for a radical pedagogy that confronts colonial legacies and class inequality (Hajir, 2019). CPE proponents encourage students to examine historical injustices rather than accept dominant narratives critically. Debates around peace education reveal a lack of consensus on its effectiveness for promoting global peace. Realists question its relevance in a competitive world, while critical and Marxist perspectives call for transformative approaches. Marxist scholars argue that mainstream peace education often ignores the economic inequalities and capitalist structures that fuel conflict. Postcolonial critics highlight the Western-centric nature of many models, which can alienate local communities by disregarding indigenous practices and historical grievances (Shapiro, 2022). These critiques emphasize the need for peace education to address deep-seated economic, social, and colonial issues alongside moral teachings.

Implementation Challenges in Policy and Practice

Even with conceptual support for peace education, implementing it in practice faces significant challenges. Policy adoption is often half-hearted or inconsistent. As is seen in the following chapter, a few countries have made peace education a core requirement in national curricula – more often, it is relegated to optional pilot programs or after-school activities. A UNESCO report (2024) notes that ensuring peace education is embedded across education systems "is a key challenge," as many schools continue practices that inadvertently perpetuate conflict rather than peace. The typical implementation hurdles are Technical Barriers and Political and Structural barriers.

Technical Barriers

Lack of Political Will

In principle, governments may sign on to peace education but show limited political will to implement it. This reluctance may arise from various factors, such as prioritizing other policy areas (like economic growth or security), insufficient understanding of the value of peace education, ideological disagreements, fear of political backlash, budget constraints, or perceptions that peace education might conflict with national interests (Enaigbe & Igbinoghene, 2016; Ndwandwe, 2024).

Peace education programs often emerge in the aftermath of crises (for example, Kenya introduced a Peace Education Programme in 2008 following post-election violence), but they tend to lose momentum once the immediate crisis subsides (Lauritzen, 2016; Rasari, 2024). A similar dynamic unfolded in Ukraine, where post-2014 education reforms integrated peace education to address the conflict in the Donbas. However, the 2022 Russian invasion disrupted implementation, highlighting how geopolitical instability can derail even well-funded initiatives (Kushnir, 2023; Salkutsan & Stolberg, 2022).

[4] Critical Peace Education (CPE) is an approach to peace education that emphasizes the examination of structural violence, power relations, and social injustices, rather than simply promoting conflict resolution or interpersonal harmony.

Curriculum Overload, Resources, and Funding

School systems are typically overloaded with existing subjects and high-stakes exams while facing severe resource shortages. Introducing peace education as a new subject or cross-cutting theme often faces resistance from educators overwhelmed by competing demands. Peace education is usually not examinable and thus marginalized, compounded by a lack of funding for materials, participatory activities, or teacher training. A UNESCO report (2024) notes that overcrowded classrooms in developing countries and underfunded programs in developed ones leave peace education vulnerable to being sidelined.

Insufficient Teacher Training

A critical bottleneck is that most teachers have never received specialized training in peace education pedagogy. Many are unfamiliar with how to facilitate sensitive discussions on conflict, trauma, and prejudice (Candice C. Carter, 2021; Carter, 2010). In Kenya's rollout, for example, the lack of trained teachers was identified as a significant factor impeding implementation (Rose, 2018). Without pre-service and in-service training on peace education pedagogy, even well-intentioned curriculum guides remain deadlocked (Mishra, 2011). Teachers may feel unprepared to moderate dialogues on ethnic tensions or to adopt the interactive, reflective methods that peace education often requires, as opposed to traditional rote teaching. This can lead to superficial delivery or avoidance of the content altogether (Brantmeier, 2003; Bussey, 1996).

Curriculum and Guidelines Clarity

Even when peace education is mandated, authorities often provide vague or incomplete guidance about what it should entail. Teachers and schools may be unsure about the content and objectives. This occurred in countries like Colombia, where a 2017 law mandated peace education but left considerable discretion to schools. Research in rural Colombian schools showed teachers had widely varying interpretations of what peace education meant, from values education to history of peace treaties (Pineda & Meier, 2020).

Without clear, context-appropriate curricula and objectives, implementation becomes inconsistent. Likewise, if peace education is integrated across subjects (a common approach), busy teachers may miss the cross-curricular links without explicit directives and coordinated curricula (Bilign, 2022). This ambiguity means that student experiences of "peace education" vary widely, reducing its overall impact.

Monitoring and Evaluation Difficulties

A further challenge is the lack of monitoring of peace education outcomes. Few education systems have metrics to assess whether peace education is being taught effectively or achieving its goals. Only around 30% of peace education programs attempt to evaluate their effectiveness formally (Salomon & Nevo, 2013). This makes it hard to learn from past experiences or to justify peace education as a worthwhile investment. The absence of evaluation can lead to stagnation – curricula remain unchanged, and successful pilot projects cannot present data to convince policymakers to expand them (Bilign, 2022; Kukhianidze, 2022). Thus, peace education often operates in a feedback vacuum, relying on anecdotes rather than evidence, making securing policy support or funding even more challenging (Salomon, 2011).

These technical barriers contribute to the global ineffectiveness of peace education by limiting its consistent implementation and depth across educational systems.

Political and Structural Barriers

Beyond technical hurdles, peace education faces deeper political and structural barriers stemming from conflicts of interest and societal power structures. Education is inherently political, and curricula often reflect dominant narratives and agendas (Haavelsrud, 2019). Introducing peace education can threaten entrenched interests or national ideologies, provoking systemic resistance (Savard, 2018). Even when there is no active conflict, the politics of identity and power shape what is permissible in schools. One observer notes that truly critical peace education — which might question government narratives or address root causes — is often "fraught with challenges" when teachers try to implement it (Hajir, 2019).

State Agendas and Nationalist Narratives

States have long utilized public schooling to forge a national identity – often through patriotic history lessons, heroic narratives, and justifications of past wars (al-Rubaiy et al., 1984). A peace-oriented curriculum emphasizing empathy for "the Other," reconciliation, or anti-militarism may directly clash with these nationalist indoctrination aims (Moser et al., 2024). Those in power often want to preserve the status quo, using education to reinforce loyalty rather than critical questioning (Leonisa Ardizzone, 2001). For example, in countries with ongoing ethnic or territorial conflicts, official curricula often omit or heavily bias the history of the conflict.

Introducing a balanced peace curriculum could require acknowledging contested narratives or injustices, which ruling elites (or the majority population) may resist (Patterson, 2023; Verma, 2017). In the Middle East, history textbooks on both sides of divides (Israeli vs. Arab, Indian vs. Pakistani, Turkish vs. Kurdish, etc.) have traditionally presented mutually exclusive narratives that demonize the other side (Alayan & Podeh, 2018). Attempts to revise textbooks for peace have met political pushback as "appeasement" or betrayal of one's group. In short, state-directed curricula can serve as a vehicle for nationalist mythmaking, and the call for peace education's critical reflection and inclusivity often faces an uphill battle against such established narratives (Power, 2017).

Militarism and Security Interests

In some states, especially those with powerful militaries or real security threats, there is an inherent conflict of interest with peace education. Military establishments and defense industries have little incentive to support educational programs that might reduce martial values or question military solutions (Bilign, 2022; McCorkle, 2017). In authoritarian regimes or any state mobilized for war, teaching children pacifism or negotiation skills might be seen as undermining the readiness to defend the nation (Lombardo & Polonko, 2015). For instance, during the Cold War, peace education initiatives in the West were sometimes attacked as communist-influenced efforts to weaken resolve. Even in contemporary democracies, calls to incorporate anti-nuclear or anti-war education can be labeled "politically biased."

This dynamic creates systemic resistance from pro-military or security elites, who may quietly block funding or approval for peace education initiatives (Power, 2017). The result is that education systems may continue to glorify past wars or legitimize violence (through, for example, triumphal war anniversaries and military training programs in schools), directly counteracting any peace education messages (Morales, 2021; Parkin, 2023). In such environments, peace education competes with strong security narratives that keep populations oriented toward conflict readiness.

Structural Violence and Social Inequalities

Many societies suffer deep structural injustices — poverty, ethnic marginalization, gender inequality, and repression — that themselves breed conflict (Alexander, 2018). These conditions also severely impede the effectiveness of peace education. In schools serving impoverished or post-conflict communities, students and teachers may be coping with unhealed trauma or daily violence (Bashir, 2024). Unaddressed trauma is a significant barrier to learning; without psychosocial support, asking youth to engage in peace dialogue may be futile (UNESCO, 2024). Moreover, if peace education curricula fail to acknowledge youths' lived realities — such as police brutality, hunger, or foreign occupation — the lessons can seem abstract or hypocritical. For example, critics note that if systemic issues like unemployment or corruption remain unaddressed, a few classroom discussions on empathy will not stop a teenager from joining an armed group (Ikelegbe, 2020). This is why Critical Peace Education advocates for linking the classroom to social transformation, yet such politicization of education often alarms authorities. Thus, even at a systemic level, there is a reluctance to let peace education delve into socioeconomic or political critiques. Schools might prefer a "safe," apolitical version of peace education, focusing only on interpersonal kindness, which avoids challenging structural violence and limits its impact on real peace (Danesh, 2007; Telleschi, 2023). The result is an education that steers clear of systemic critiques and thus limits its impact on genuine conflict resolution.

Conflicting Collective Memories

In protracted conflicts, each side carries its collective memory of grievances. These memories are often institutionalized through education, for example, by memorializing certain events or teaching history from a particular perspective (Berrahmoun, 2022; Bilali, 2011). Peace education that encourages understanding the enemy's narrative or forgiving past atrocities runs into the obstacle of *conflicting collective memories*. Researchers note that in intractable conflicts, "mutually exclusive historical memories" and "deeply rooted beliefs about the conflict and the adversary" form the backbone of group identity (Salomon, 2006). Schools are usually expected to reinforce the approved memory.

Changing this through education can become a political flashpoint. For instance, in Bosnia, after the 1990s war, attempts to create a unified, peace-oriented curriculum encountered fierce opposition from ethnic nationalist factions, each of which wanted its curriculum to validate their suffering and victory (Emkic, 2018). In such environments, education is a contested space, and peace curricula may be watered down or blocked entirely due to zero-sum perceptions – any acknowledgment of the other side's perspective is seen as diminishing one's own (Davies, 2015). Following the military takeover, Myanmar's education system reverted to promoting nationalist-militarist narratives. Peace education NGOs were banned, and teachers faced persecution for discussing federalism or ethnic rights, illustrating how authoritarian regimes weaponize education to suppress dissent (Salem-Gervais et al., 2024).

Institutional Inertia and Censorship

Even without overt conflict, institutional culture can serve as a barrier. Authoritarian governments tightly control curricula and discourage pedagogy that promotes critical thinking or activism, which are central to meaningful peace education (Adams, 2022; Bilign, 2022). Topics such as human rights, democracy, or the critical examination of history can be deemed subversive. For example, in China and some other countries, civic and moral education emphasizes social harmony and patriotism, leaving little room for discussing dissent, civil disobedience, or historical controversies – all of which are crucial for students to learn peace

with justice (Ashford, 2023; Shi et al., 2023). In such cases, teachers who attempt peace education may face administrative penalties. Even in democracies, school administrations may shy away from "controversial" peace activities (like simulations of peace negotiations on Palestine or student debates on military policies) for fear of community backlash.

The "power of the victor" in a conflict or the ruling party in an authoritarian context means they can impose red lines on what is taught (Hajir, 2019). Thus, structural power imbalances often skew peace education or truncate it to sanitized themes (e.g. "we should all just get along") that don't threaten the system.

Curriculum Content and Effectiveness: Issues and Critiques

Even when peace education is implemented, questions remain about what is being taught, to whom, and how effective it is. A critical analysis of peace education curricula across regions reveals issues of contextual relevance, inclusivity, and mixed evidence of impact.

Relevance and Contextualization

Peace education is not a one-size-fits-all endeavor. Curricula developed in stable Western contexts, focusing on issues such as school bullying or multicultural awareness, may be ill-suited for societies emerging from civil war, and vice versa. A recurring critique is that some peace education programs are too generic or "universal," failing to address local conflict drivers or cultural norms effectively (Higgins & Novelli, 2020). For instance, a program in a Sub-Saharan African country mired in structural violence and poverty will ring hollow if it only teaches students to be polite and resolve playground disputes (Leonisa Ardizzone, 2001). Peace education must address food insecurity and corruption, effectively merging with development and human rights education. Latin American peace educators linked peace education with popular education and "social literacy," making it relevant to communities facing systemic violence (Leonisa Ardizzone, 2001).

In practice, however, many formal curricula simply insert a token peace chapter into an existing civics or social studies textbook without genuinely adapting teaching methods or content to local realities. The result is often superficial. Students may find the material abstract or irrelevant. Stakeholders sometimes end up "fighting the symptoms" of violence — such as disciplining bullying behavior — without addressing the deeper causes, like historical injustice or mass trauma (Rose, 2018). Effective peace education requires tailoring: for example, in post-genocide Rwanda, it was necessary to integrate peace themes directly into how history and social studies were taught, fostering reconciliation (King, 2005).In contrast, a peace education program in a U.S. classroom might focus more on prejudice reduction, global awareness, or conflict resolution skills appropriate to that context. Many programs struggle to achieve this level of contextualization, often because curricula are designed without sufficient local input or because political constraints prevent realistic adaptation.

Inclusivity and Narrative Balance

A key component of peace education is promoting empathy and understanding across divides. This requires that curricula include multiple perspectives and voices – especially those of former adversaries or marginalized groups. However, inclusivity is often lacking. Curricula may be biased towards the official or majority narrative, thereby undermining the goal of mutual understanding (Kupermintz & Salomon, 2005; Kurian & Kester, 2019). For example, in the context of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, joint peace education efforts have had to confront two entirely different historical narratives. A truly inclusive curriculum would need to validate elements of both and encourage perspective-taking. Yet, political pressures can lead to

sanitizing or omitting contentious truths, resulting in a curriculum that pleases authorities but fails the students (Haavelsrud, 2019). Critics argue that many peace education programs present conflict in overly simplistic or depoliticized terms, avoiding discussions of thorny issues such as injustice, rights, or power – essentially, attempting to teach peace without addressing war. This limits their credibility with learners who are living in conflict.

In response, the Critical Peace Education movement emphasizes the inclusion of marginalized narratives and promotes "critical consciousness" about social and political contradictions (Hajir, 2019). For instance, CPE programs encourage students to *"recognise other historical narratives"* and explore societal contradictions (Hajir, 2019). Such approaches are more inclusive and have the potential to be transformative. However, implementing them is, as noted, challenging. Where it has been attempted (e.g. integrated schools in Northern Ireland or mixed education in Cyprus), teachers must carefully facilitate open dialogues on identity, memory, and justice. Many educators default to safer, "harmony-only" curricula that stress generic kindness but avoid local grievances – an approach that may miss the mark in divided societies (Dang & Chia, 2023). While easier to implement, this safer approach may miss the mark in deeply divided societies where students expect their history and suffering to be acknowledged.

Empirical Effectiveness

The effectiveness of peace education is mixed and often limited. While many small-scale studies report positive short-term outcomes—like enhanced conflict resolution skills and more tolerant attitudes—these changes can be superficial and short-lived. For instance, while programs may improve cooperation among students from conflicting backgrounds, such gains can quickly evaporate in the face of ongoing violence or societal narratives perpetuating division.

Many peace education programs lack rigorous evaluations (Salomon, 2006), leading to an evidence gap about their long-term impact. While some research, such as findings from Northern Ireland, shows reduced prejudice among youth, societal segregation and mistrust persist. Similarly, in Rwanda, post-genocide peace education has fostered a new civic identity but may suppress discussions of ethnic identity, questioning the depth of reconciliation. "In Northern Ireland, prejudice among Protestant and Catholic students dropped by 15% after two years of integrated schooling, yet residential segregation remained above 85% (Kupermintz & Salomon, 2005).

Quality and Pedagogy

The effectiveness of peace education is also tightly linked to *how* it is taught. A participatory, student-centered pedagogy is widely considered essential – students must actively engage in dialogue, critical thinking, and collaborative problem-solving rather than merely memorizing peace slogans. Where peace education has been most successful, it often employs innovative methods, such as theatre, role-play, community projects, and peer mediation programs (Montanari, 2023). However, many teachers revert to lecture-style pedagogy, even for peace education, thereby blunting its impact. A UNESCO review warns that specific traditional pedagogies "can normalize violence, racism, and exclusionary practices", in subtle ways, reinforcing the very attitudes peace education seeks to change (UNESCO, 2024). For example, an authoritarian classroom climate can undermine the teaching of tolerance and cooperation. Thus, the hidden curriculum, encompassing school culture, teacher-student relationships, and disciplinary methods, must align with peace values; otherwise, a formal peace course may appear hypocritical to students (UNESCO, 2024). Effective programs tend to adopt a "whole-school approach," embedding peace values in all aspects of school life (UNESCO, 2024).

However, achieving such holistic change system-wide is challenging. Many programs remain confined to a single course or club, limiting their reach and consistency.

Regional and Global Patterns in Peace Education

The state of peace education – and the challenges it faces – varies widely between regions and contexts as can be seen in Table 1. Comparing developed and developing settings, as well as specific areas, reveals both common obstacles and unique circumstances.

Sub-Saharan Africa

This region has experienced numerous conflicts, including civil wars, ethnic violence, and insurgencies, resulting in a pressing need for peace education, particularly during post-conflict nation-building. Many African countries have, on paper, embraced peace education. For example, Kenya integrated peace education into its national curriculum following the 2007–08 ethnic violence, recognizing the role of education in promoting a cohesive and integrated society (Rose, 2018). Likewise, countries such as Sierra Leone, Liberia, Rwanda, and post-apartheid South Africa have all implemented some form of peace or reconciliation education in schools. Despite this commitment, challenges are severe.

Despite this commitment, challenges in Africa are severe. Resource constraints are among the most acute. In many schools, overcrowded classrooms, scarce materials, and low teacher pay make it difficult to introduce any new curriculum (Barrios-Tao et al., 2016). A study of West African peace education efforts identified a problem of "lack of resource prioritization" – peace topics were introduced but not supported by training or materials and, thus, were not effectively taught (Rose, 2018). Indeed, a frequent complaint across Africa is the lack of trained teachers and high teacher workloads, which leave little time for the interactive and reflective teaching that peace education requires (Rose, 2018).

Another challenge is the trauma and psychosocial needs of learners in post-conflict areas. In countries like Rwanda or Uganda (northern region), students and teachers may carry unhealed trauma from violence, which can impede open dialogue. Programs that do exist (often run by NGOs or church groups) sometimes bypass formal schools – for instance, peace clubs or youth programs run outside school hours or community reconciliation workshops (Alipanga & Luberenga, 2023; King, 2005). These can have a significant impact locally but remain fragmented.

Cultural relevance is also crucial. African educators have sought to ground peace education in indigenous values such as *ubuntu* (humanity towards others) and traditional conflict resolution methods. Imported curricula often do not resonate with these local values. For example, the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding has tailored programs to address issues like child soldiers and community healing, which differ from the global citizenship themes of many European peace lessons (Egbe, 2014). Some positive examples exist: Rwanda's post-genocide curriculum strongly emphasizes unity and anti-discrimination, and Sierra Leone integrated peace education with life skills training after its civil war. These innovations show that there is high demand for peace education in Africa. However, structural problems constantly undermine implementation — lack of funding, insufficient teacher training, and the enormity of societal wounds (Leonisa Ardizzone, 2001; Rose, 2018).

Middle East and North Africa (MENA)

The MENA region exemplifies how protracted conflicts and political authoritarianism can hinder the development of peace education. Many MENA countries have ongoing conflicts or rivalries – the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, wars in Syria, Yemen, and Libya, sectarian divides in

Iraq and Lebanon, etc. These conflicts deeply polarize societies, and education often becomes a tool of that polarization, with war propaganda and the exclusion of the "enemy" language and culture in curricula, among other measures (Cochran, 2018; Samier, 2018). Peace education efforts here face exceptional political realities. In countries like Syria or Yemen, active war simply makes normal education difficult, let alone specialized peace programs. In more stable states, there have been attempts, such as Lebanon incorporating peace education elements into civics to address Christian-Muslim coexistence, and Jordan and Tunisia collaborating with UNESCO on peace and tolerance education modules (Jabbour, 2013; Moliterni & Moliterni Canna, 2017). The Gulf states, such as the UAE, have recently promoted curricula on tolerance and anti-extremism as part of their branding efforts to convey moderation (Alhashmi, 2022; Baycar & Rakipoglu, 2022).

However, a study examining peace education in Arab states identified challenges including government censorship, lack of teacher understanding of peace concepts, and "lack of critical and diverse perspectives" in curricula(Vandenbussche, 2023). Authoritarian regimes in the region often suppress discussion of conflict issues. For example, Egyptian or Iranian curricula glorify national achievements and may cast dissenters or external rivals negatively, leaving little room for the empathy and historical critique that peace education requires. Any joint peace education programs (such as the Seeds of Peace camp or bi-national schools like the Hagar School in Beersheba) operate on the fringes and often encounter skepticism or hostility from their communities (Vandenbussche, 2023). In short, region-wide, the prevalence of conflict and authoritarian control has meant peace education remains rare and politically fraught. It is telling that a recent seminar bluntly titled "Why Peace Education Fails: Problematising Peace Curricula in the Middle East" pointed to *"political realities… oppression, occupation, and injustice"* as fundamental challenges (Silberberg, 2019). Without broader peace processes and political openness in MENA, school curricula alone struggle to counter hate and violence.

North and South America

In North America, the context is almost the same as that of regions like Africa or the Middle East – societies here are relatively peaceful internally, with advanced education systems and resources. One might expect North America to lead in implementing peace education domestically, but progress has been limited. In the United States, peace education in K-12 public schools is not a formal part of the national or state curricula in any significant way. Individual programs (often led by passionate teachers, NGOs, or university outreach) include conflict resolution programs, anti-bullying campaigns, and global citizenship clubs. During the Cold War and Vietnam War eras, there were efforts to incorporate peace studies into schools, but these initiatives often encountered resistance (Brown & Morgan, 2008; Manzoor Bhat & Laxmi Jamatia, 2022).

A significant factor is the political polarization and culture wars around educational content. Peace education can be tarred as "leftist" or unpatriotic – for instance, teaching about the human costs of war or critiquing militarism may draw fire from conservative groups. The U.S. famously withdrew from UNESCO in the 1980s, partly over perceived ideological differences (Leonisa Ardizzone, 2001), reflecting a distrust of international education agendas. That withdrawal signaled that many Western policymakers did not support the ideas of global peace education from the developing world (Leonisa Ardizzone, 2001). In recent decades, American schools have focused on testing and STEM, leaving little room for non-tested subjects like peace. Additionally, patriotic education has even seen a resurgence in some areas. Security concerns following 9/11 led to a greater focus on counter-terrorism and patriotic unity in discourse rather than peace and mutual understanding. The concept of peace education is often

subsumed under labels like “social-emotional learning (SEL)” or “anti-violence education” to make it more palatable (Manzoor Bhat & Laxmi Jamatia, 2022; Sellers, 2013).

Canada has been relatively more receptive, with global education and multicultural tolerance included in many provincial curricula. Some Canadian schools incorporate Indigenous perspectives on peace and reconciliation (especially after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission addressed abuses against First Nations) (Deer & Heringer, 2024). Nonetheless, even in Canada, peace education is usually not a standalone subject.

In both countries, grassroots initiatives —such as Peace Jam, Model UN, and peer mediation programs —have arguably done more than official curricula to teach peace values (Adelson, 2000). The main challenges in North America are not resources but ideology and inertia. In the United States, several state legislatures have introduced bills banning ‘divisive concepts,’ which indirectly restrict peace curricula that address racism or U.S. military history (Douglass, 2021). Peace education competes with national narratives and a strong preference for apolitical schooling. It remains mostly an elective or extracurricular pursuit, lacking the broad implementation that proponents desire. Countries like Colombia and Brazil have integrated peace education with transitional justice. Colombia’s 2016 peace accord mandated curriculum reforms to address historical grievances; however, rural areas struggle with teacher training (Morales, 2021).

Scandinavia and Northern Europe

The Scandinavian countries— Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, and some other Northern European nations —are often regarded as exemplars of progressive education. Indeed, values of democracy, human rights, and social cohesion are deeply embedded in their national curricula. While they may not label it “peace education,” much of what is taught aligns with the goals of peace education (Brooks, 2017; Drakenberg & Malmgren, 2015). For instance, the Swedish national curriculum has been analyzed for “peace elements” and found to emphasize international understanding and conflict resolution skills (Elmersjö & Lindmark, 2010). Norway has a tradition of peace research and funds peace education internationally. These societies generally have high levels of peace and low internal conflict, which provides a supportive context for education about peace. Students in Scandinavia typically learn about the UN and global cooperation and are encouraged to develop critical thinking and egalitarian values from an early age. As a result, the need for explicit peace education programs is less urgent in regions affected by conflict – the ethos is more implicitly woven into education. That said, Scandinavia is not without challenges.

One challenge is addressing new forms of polarization, such as immigration tensions and the rise of right-wing populist sentiments in recent years, even in these countries. Ensuring that curricula promote the inclusion of immigrants and combat xenophobia has become a task akin to peace education. Another subtle challenge is complacency- being distant from war (for generations, in some cases) may lead youth to take peace for granted. Peace education here might focus more on global solidarity (e.g., understanding wars in other parts of the world or issues like climate peace). A comparative point noted by Salomon (2006) is that peace education in Sweden proceeds without the “heavy yoke of painful historical memories,” unlike, for instance, Northern Ireland’s case. This suggests that teaching peace in inhomogeneous, peaceful Scandinavia is relatively straightforward, as there are no deep internal divisions to navigate, whereas it is far more complex in divided societies. So, while Scandinavian countries arguably have the most conducive environment and supportive policies for peace education, the impact of their approach is mainly seen in producing citizens with strong peace-oriented values. These

nations also generously support peace education abroad through organizations such as UNESCO.

Southeast Asia

South Asia features a mix of internal conflicts and more harmonious nations. For instance, Myanmar and southern Thailand grapple with ethnic conflicts, while Indonesia faces religious tensions. The Philippines has made notable advancements by institutionalizing peace education through Executive Order No. 570 in 2006, focusing on topics like cultural tolerance and conflict resolution, especially in Mindanao, where peace education has included theatre-based storytelling sessions co-facilitated by elders and teachers, addressing inter-ethnic tensions directly (Kilag et al., 2023). However, challenges include teacher training and availability of materials in local languages (Kilag et al., 2023).

In contrast, Indonesia has launched peace education initiatives in conflict-affected provinces, but NGOs often drive these and lack nationwide support (Nadhirah, 2023). Thailand's southern conflict has led to interfaith dialogue programs, but the national curriculum largely promotes Thai nationalism, limiting alternative perspectives. Myanmar's military rule has suppressed peace education, while Malaysia and Singapore emphasize harmony through strict control, lacking open dialogue on conflicts (Pherali, 2021).

A common issue in Southeast Asia's education systems is their exam-driven, rote learning approach, which hampers the exploratory nature of peace education. Teachers may feel uncomfortable discussing sensitive historical issues. Nevertheless, Timor-Leste has successfully integrated peace and democracy education in civics classes, supported by external assistance. Overall, the region displays varied progress in adopting peace curricula based on governance and conflict experiences. The following table summarizes some key challenges by region:

Table 1. Comparative summary of peace education challenges by region

Region	**Key Peace Education Challenges**
Sub-Saharan Africa	*Post-conflict trauma* among students and teachers hinders learning; Severe resource constraints (lack of textbooks, training, funding) limit implementation (Rose, 2018); Peace education often reliant on NGOs/outside support rather than institutionalized; Need to reconcile traditional customs with formal curricula for relevance.
Middle East & North Africa	Ongoing conflicts and occupation fuel mistrust, making joint narratives hard; Authoritarian or sectarian state agendas censor peace and human-rights content (Vandenbussche, 2023); Education used to entrench one-sided historical memories; Teachers and students fearful of reprisals for discussing taboo topics (e.g. minority rights, past abuses).
North and South America	Political polarization – peace education seen by some as partisan or "unpatriotic"; Low curriculum priority due to focus on tested subjects and STEM; Implementation mostly ad-hoc or extracurricular, lacking systemic support; After 9/11, emphasis on security over global empathy.
Scandinavia	*Implicitly supportive context* but few explicit programs labeled "peace education"; Challenge to address new tensions (immigration, extremism) in otherwise peaceful societies; Risk of complacency – peace values taken for granted by youth with no direct experience of war.
Southeast Asia	Authoritarian legacies in education (rote learning, obedience) conflict with a critical pedagogy of peace ed; Ethnic/religious conflicts in certain areas require highly sensitive approaches; Varied political will – e.g. strong in the Philippines weak in others; Need for translation into multiple languages and alignment with local cultural norms.

Historical and Contemporary Contexts

Post-Cold War Hopes and Initiatives

The end of the Cold War was a watershed for peace education globally. The collapse of bipolar confrontation and a surge of democratization (Eastern Europe, Africa, Latin America) generated optimism that a more peaceful era was at hand, often dubbed the "peace dividend." International organizations and NGOs seized this moment to advance peace education as part of peacebuilding and global citizenship. In 1994, UNESCO launched its *Education for Peace, Human Rights, and Democracy* initiative, updating a 1974 recommendation to integrate these themes into all education (UNESCO, 2024). Peace education was increasingly framed within a "culture of peace," the UN even declared an International Decade for a Culture of Peace (2001–2010).

Many post-conflict countries during the 1990s embraced educational reform as a tool for reconciliation. South Africa's post-apartheid curriculum emphasized human rights and unity; Mozambique and Guatemala included peace education after civil wars; Bosnia and Herzegovina, under UNESCO/OSCE guidance, tried (with difficulty) to remove hate content from textbooks; and Northern Ireland implemented systematic cross-community contact programs, in schools as part of its peace process. At the same time, Western countries expanded programs in global education and peer mediation, reflecting a liberal belief that globalization required teaching students to be peacemakers and world citizens. The academic field of peace education also grew in stature, with new journals, university programs, and handbooks summarizing practices worldwide. However, even in this relative heyday, challenges loomed. Some wars and genocides erupted (the Balkans, Rwanda in 1994), catching educators off-guard and illustrating that simply educating the youth differently could not prevent atrocity in the short term. Nonetheless, the post-Cold War 1990s can be seen as a period when peace education gained global endorsement – it was written into peace agreements (e.g. the 1999 Sierra Leone Lomé Accord called for education for peace) and UN resolutions.

21st Century Setbacks – Terrorism, Nationalism, and Geopolitical Tensions

The early 21st century faced challenges for peace education, particularly after the September 11 attacks and the subsequent "Global War on Terror," which shifted priorities toward security over intercultural understanding (Ford, 2017). In the U.S., funding focused on STEM, homeland security, and military training, sidelining global peace education. Efforts like UNESCO's initiatives aimed to promote dialogue, but were limited by ongoing wars that polarized opinions (Leonisa Ardizzone, 2001). By the 2010s, rising populist and nationalist movements in countries like the U.S., U.K., and India spurred suspicion toward global institutions and liberal education. Nationalist perspectives favored glorifying local history and downplayed values of peace (Zajda, 2015). Countries like Hungary revised textbooks to emphasize national sovereignty, while India and Russia introduced curricula that diminish pacifist teachings and promote patriotism (Edwards & Ramamurthy, 2017).

Additionally, geopolitical tensions among major powers revived competitive narratives, further deterring global peace education efforts. As a result, educational trends increasingly leaned towards insular and security-focused approaches rather than critical, global-minded peace education (Manzoor Bhat & Laxmi Jamatia, 2022).

Persistent Conflicts and New Crises

The unresolved conflicts in regions such as the Middle East, Afghanistan, and the Sahel have resulted in entire generations growing up amidst violence, despite efforts in peace education

(Swain, 2024). By the mid-2020s, the Global Peace Index indicated a noticeable decline in peace across many regions, with some countries experiencing intensified violence despite international peacebuilding initiatives (UNESCO, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic further disrupted education systems and exacerbated inequalities, hindering peace education delivery in low-income countries. However, post-pandemic recovery presents an opportunity to rebuild educational frameworks centered on peace and equity. Climate change also adds pressures that can ignite conflict, highlighting the need for peace and sustainability education (Henrico & Doboš, 2024).

In recent years, there have been attempts to connect peace education with preventing violent extremism (PVE), focusing on tolerance and critical media literacy. Nonetheless, there are concerns that this approach may neglect the broader goals of peace education. Historically, peace education emerged in the 1990s, confronting challenges in the 21st century such as terrorism and nationalism. Its implementation has often followed conflict recovery in certain regions, while in others, particularly OECD countries, it is sidelined by other priorities (UNESCO, 2022).

Today, UNESCO (2022) Others advocate for revitalizing education for peace and global citizenship as part of a new social contract for education, emphasizing the need for cooperative approaches to shared global challenges like climate change and pandemics. Achieving this vision requires overcoming significant political and practical obstacles.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This article has argued that while normatively appealing and widely endorsed, peace education remains globally ineffective due to theoretical limitations, structural and political barriers, and context-insensitive implementations. By analyzing the issue through realist, liberal/constructivist, and critical IR lenses, and connecting it to DDR processes, the study reveals that peace education often fails not because of a lack of intention, but due to its fragmented, decontextualized, and technocratic application.

Yet, acknowledging failure does not mean abandoning peace education. Instead, it calls for a strategic recalibration. Below are four key policy recommendations based on the findings of this study. First, curricula must reflect the socio-cultural and historical realities of the communities they serve. International organizations such as UNESCO and UNICEF should collaborate with local educators, youth, and community leaders in co-designing peace education modules. For example, Uganda's district-level curriculum development initiatives could be adapted elsewhere to ensure cultural relevance and local ownership. Secondly, peace education must be systematically embedded into all stages of DDR—especially reintegration. This includes offering community-based education for ex-combatants, psychosocial support through school systems, and inclusive civic education programs aimed at reconciliation. DDR programming must go beyond vocational training and treat education as a pillar of post-conflict transformation. Thirdly, top-down reforms are insufficient without teachers empowered to deliver meaningful peace education. Ministries of Education should establish in-service training programs that prepare teachers in trauma-informed, participatory, and inclusive pedagogies. In post-conflict Colombia, theater-based peace workshops facilitated by educators have fostered empathy and critical thinking. Lastly, peace education must be resilient to modern crises such as pandemics, climate disasters, and digital radicalization. Governments and NGOs should invest in hybrid learning infrastructures to sustain peace curricula during school closures and crises. Moreover, integrating climate peace education—emphasizing environmental cooperation and resilience—can expand its relevance in the 21st century.

Peace education must move beyond moral aspiration and become a contextually embedded, politically supported, and pedagogically sound process to be effective. As this article suggests, a reimagined peace education—rooted in local agency, global awareness, and structural reform—holds promise not only for post-conflict societies but for an increasingly polarized and uncertain world.

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