

Peace at the heart

A relational approach to education in British schools

Quakers in Britain, 2022

Executive Summary



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The need for a relational approach to education

This paper presents peace education as a comprehensive approach to teaching and learning that puts good relationships – peace – at its heart.

The years that young people spend in education shape their whole lives. Their sense of self, relationships, and life chances, as well as the attitudes they take to their community and society into adulthood, begin to mature in this period. Their experience of school in all its aspects is critically influential: the commitments that their teachers model, their relationships with their peers, and the ways that school responds to challenging behaviour, for example, are at least as significant as academic learning to the healthy development of young people. In these and other ways, schools may support young people to grow as they learn, but may also cause harm, compounding disadvantage and perpetuating social problems.

Young people experience a heavy psychological load, which is magnified by mounting expectations to achieve academically and the many demands of an increasingly complex society. The need has grown for schools to be enabling, convivial, inclusive communities that support young people not only to learn academically but also to develop as persons in their social environment. Many schools work hard to support their students accordingly, particularly when care is absent at home, but many young people are left disaffected, feeling that their school experience fails to engage their needs and hopes. When students disengage, teachers struggle to maintain a conducive environment for learning, staff stress intensifies, and job satisfaction declines.

An education centred on good relationships has much to offer schools in Britain. Students and staff agree that schools could do more to cultivate wellbeing and supportive peer relationships, for example. Schools that successfully cultivate a community ethos report that students are more engaged and staff enjoy their work more. Students and staff both believe that schools should equip young people with the skills they need to navigate their increasingly complex world into adulthood, and to help shape its future in the face of pressing global crises.

Peace education: Learning to relate

Peace education is a critical approach to personal and social development rooted in a commitment to ‘peace’: not only the absence of violence but also the presence of relationships that work well. Conscious of disaffection in the classroom, bullying in the playground, and a troubled society, peace education asks what better relationships mean and how students and staff can cultivate them – with themselves, each other, and their wider world.

We believe that every school can develop as a community committed to the healthy development of all their members, supporting students and staff alike to build the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enable them to relate well. Even within the contested mix of approaches that frame education in Britain, we show that schools can offer young people a unique, extended opportunity to develop effective ways of relating in every sphere of their lives.

Such a relational approach brings many evidenced benefits, including the fuller development of young people, a more effective learning environment in school, and emerging citizens who are more conscientiously involved in their society. We have seen young people grow in wellbeing and confidence, demonstrate leadership, and take critically conscious perspectives on their world. Young mediators have become community workers and peacebuilders, former gang members have become youth coaches, teachers have witnessed their relationships with students transformed.

Children are to be ‘brought up in the spirit of peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity’.

Convention on the Rights of the Child



In this paper, we outline evidence of the need and demand for a corpus of peace education practices, as well as their effectiveness in meeting the needs and hopes of students, staff, and policymakers. The paper closes with policy proposals to enable more schools in Britain to take up the approach effectively.

Cultivating relationships

We group the practices of peace education according to four complementary aims:

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

'Peace with myself': Taking care

A pedagogy for good relationships begins with young people's relationship with themselves, inviting them to explore what matters to them, what is good in them, what they need to be well, and what others may need from them to be well.

As the mental health of young people comes under increasing strain, students, parents/carers, and teachers are calling for a greater emphasis on wellbeing in formal education, an appeal that bears on both what is learnt and how. By integrating social and emotional learning into the school day and establishing an environment of collaboration and appreciation, peace education supports both students and staff to develop more self-aware, self-affirming relationships with themselves.

Research shows that when students perceive that their peers support them and that their teachers believe in them, they are more likely to develop their emotional literacy, empathy, and self-esteem. Schools that successfully enhance student wellbeing tend to see less disruption in the classroom and greater engagement in learning. Emotional health is also a powerful predictor of life satisfaction in adulthood, more so than is intellectual development, for example.

Sustainable Development Goal 4.7 aims by 2030 to ensure that citizens worldwide develop the knowledge and skills necessary to promote sustainable development, including through education for a culture of peace and non-violence.

'Peace between us': Working together

An essential task of education is to support young people to cultivate good relationships with one another, such that they learn to discern common needs, negotiate divergent wants, and handle conflicts when they arise. A measure of healthy peer relationships may be found in how welcome individuals feel at school, how appreciated by each other they feel, and how willing they are to care for one another, for example.

The UK should 'include the subject of peace education and human rights as a fundamental subject in the education system' and 'intensify its efforts to tackle bullying and violence in schools, including by teaching human rights, building the capacities of students and staff members to respect diversity at school, [and] improving students' conflict-resolution skills...'

UN Committee on the Rights of the Child

Of particular concern to parents/carers, teachers, policymakers, and especially students themselves, are the corrosive influence of bullying and sexual harassment on wellbeing and learning. Fights are also common in many schools, as are exclusive cliques and identity-based prejudice. A pedagogy for peace persistently encourages peer relationships of kindness and mutual appreciation. Facilitated learning in circles, for example, can cultivate more respectful patterns of relating while enhancing capacities for complex thinking, self-expression, active listening, self-discipline, and leadership, according to research.

When conflict arises, students are challenged and supported to handle it well, thus developing their emotional self-awareness and regulation, social skills, and accountability before others. Peer mediation schemes, in which students are trained to mediate their own conflicts safely, have been shown to be highly effective and popular among staff and students alike. The fairer relationships that result bring multiple benefits to young people, not least in stronger academic attainment.

'Peace among us': Coming together

In peace education, the school is assumed to be a community, rather than merely an institution, with the potential to inspire and support learning in all its members – teachers included – and to develop democratically.

A genuinely peaceful community fosters belonging, facilitates meaningful democratic participation, encourages its members to be themselves, challenges patterns of 'othering' and exclusion, and values dissent as potentially productive. A genuinely peaceful school becomes somewhere students and staff feel valued and believe they can flourish – it becomes somewhere they want to be. Indeed, research shows that students who enjoy school a lot tend to point to strong friendships, a sense of belonging, and the confidence that teachers believe in them.

In response to student disaffection and staff stress, many schools have turned to strict disciplinary regimes to condition student behaviour towards engagement with the curriculum. As commonly practised, these regimes violate children's rights enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child that provide for children's best interests, education, non-discrimination, and dignity in school. They can prove particularly harmful to some students, notably those of minority status. In English schools, the proliferation of punitive responses to student disaffection has coincided with a steep rise in permanent exclusions, degrading the life-chances of many young people and exacting multiple secondary costs on society at large.

Some schools, particularly in Scotland and in Wales, take an alternative approach, striving for a productive discipline of learning through the persistent cultivation of good relationships. The evidence shows that a commitment to the rights and interests of every student, held against a background of ongoing social and emotional learning and a communitarian ethos and combined with 'restorative' responses to conflict, can be powerfully supportive of a disciplined and fair learning community. In Scotland, where an inclusive approach to discipline is officially encouraged, permanent exclusions have fallen over the last decade to nearly zero.

'Carr Manor Community School is committed to a relational approach to a child's education and building resource and capacity to develop their character and skills for life.'
Simon Flowers, headteacher

'Peace in the world': Taking a stand

As children learn about their wider world, they soon appreciate that its future lies in the balance. Schools share a responsibility with the adult generation in general to support young people to navigate a complex society, but also to discern what is at stake in it and to develop as critically thoughtful, actively engaged citizens.

Surveys show that young people expect to be unhappier than their parents' generation and are losing faith in formal democracy, but they are far from apathetic. In general, young people want to learn how to relate to their world with care and are more likely than adults to get involved in social action such as protests and boycotts.

'Children need the opportunity to practise and potentially fail and recover in relationships. When there is time to practise and the structures are there to support them to do so, they will thrive.'

Richard Simcox, headteacher,
John of Rolleston Primary School

Peace education believes that young people are fully capable of discerning what matters to them and views the social challenges that engage their hopes as valuable opportunities for personal and civic development. Common pedagogical practices include 'open enquiry' into social questions that arise from students' own life experiences. As participants explore the issues intellectually, emotionally, and ethically, they discern their own perspectives, what they stand for, why, and what this might mean for the way they relate to their world. Participants practise critical thinking and speaking up for themselves, while learning to understand and respect alternative perspectives.

Frequent input from external partners helps to ground students' learning in real-world experience, while avoiding interventions from the many, often well-resourced organisations that seek engagement with young people to serve ulterior agendas. Schools still lack adequate guidance to ensure that external input is pedagogically valuable, in young people's interests, not exploitative.

Research finds that students whose education draws on their own hopes and life experience tend to be more engaged in the classroom, whereas those who cannot relate personally to what they are taught gradually lose interest and underachieve. Young people who develop their social awareness and agency also tend to be more resilient to politics that trade on falsehood and prejudice, and are more likely to engage critically with social issues into their adulthood.

What can schools and educators do? Towards a whole-school culture of peace

Peace education practices may be used ad hoc, but are most effective when they express a school's common commitment to a healthy ecology of relationships across 'school life' as a whole. The guiding intention is to bring all the school's tasks – teaching, holding discipline, building community, and so on – under a single, overarching commitment to relationships at every level. Various complementary educational models, already present in many schools, may also extend a peace pedagogy, such as social and emotional learning, restorative practice, and human rights and global citizenship education.

As a school culture of peacebuilding grows, the principles and practices of good relationships become the norm. Over time, the aim is to model a flourishing community of learning and growth. With peace – the integrity of relationships – at the heart of school community, education may come to support and challenge young people to grow in wisdom, vitality, and agency at school, into adulthood, and for their whole lives.

We recognise the many pressures that face students, teachers, and school leaders, but we argue that schools are still places of asset and opportunity. The vocational drive of staff, the ingenuity and empathy of students, the de facto community of the playground, and all corners of the curriculum already suggest the promise of schools as flourishing learning communities committed to all relationships that constitute them.

‘Upon stepping into the school, the atmosphere of warmth and discovery was immediately apparent. Singing, dancing, laughter, fairy lights and parasols, chickens in the courtyard. The enthusiasm and enjoyment of adults and children was infectious.’
Peace educator's visit to St Mary's CE Primary School

What can policymakers do? Developing peace education in Britain

Britain's growing network of peace education providers has already supported many schools to take up the approach. Some teacher-training institutions are now integrating the concepts and practices into their programmes also. Nonetheless, this field of practitioners, though well-established globally with a strong United Nations mandate, operates in Britain without statutory support and with geographically limited reach, despite strong demand. The following recommendations aim at greater access for British schools to the many benefits of effective peace education.

‘Through prioritising relationships using restorative practice, both student-student and adult-student, and focusing on hope, happiness and social justice, our school has not only increased its achievements, but also over the last two years shows a two-thirds reduction in fixed-term exclusions’

Les Hall, headteacher, Mounts Bay Academy.

Recommendations

- 1. Mandate.** The governments of England, Scotland and Wales explicitly recognise a duty to educate for peace, requiring schools to develop whole-school strategies for the cultivation of healthy, engaged, fair relationships across the learning community and beyond.
- 2. Teacher training.** Training institutions are supported to embed peace education as a dedicated study stream for the initial training and continuous professional development of school and college teachers.
- 3. Funding.** A fund is established for work to enhance school communities and peer and student-staff relationships, and to facilitate the strategic development of existing training providers while seeding new ones.
- 4. Research.** Governments commit resources for independent research and evaluation of work in schools to enhance peaceful relationships, particularly restorative practices.
- 5. External input.** Governments strengthen guidance on the involvement of external agencies to screen out those that either fail to enhance learning and critical thinking significantly, or compromise schools' duty to consider students' best interests and safeguard them from exploitation.

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Most of all, thank you to the children, teachers and every member of the school communities that have welcomed and educated us about peace building.

Quakers and peace education

As Quakers, we are encouraged through faith to hold a commitment to peace and nonviolence, in witness to the unique worth of each person, every culture, and the fullness of life on earth. Through our lives and work, we hope to contribute to the health and integrity of all our relationships, from the individual and local to the social and global.

At the heart of our concern is the healthy development of children and young people. We believe in the potential of education to invest in the promise of each child to flourish, and to support the common hopes of young people to shape a more just, more inclusive world.

Quakers around the globe join with others in work towards this vision, particularly in the practices of peace education. This is an approach to learning and growth which, by cultivating healthier ways of relating to one another and to society, aims to enhance wellbeing, promote inclusion, and encourage conscientious engagement in the social challenges of our times.

As the field has grown, advocates of peace education have begun to argue for wider take-up by education ministries. In 2020, the Quaker Council for European Affairs outlined a policy case at the European level in *Peace education: Making the case*. The present document makes the same case in the British context.

Cover photograph: Students at Elizabeth Garrett Anderson School create peace graffiti using *Razor Wire & Olive Branches* resource from Quakers in Britain. **Photo:** Michael Preston

Find lesson plans, videos and more ideas for how to build peace at your school at [quaker.org.uk/peace-education](https://www.quaker.org.uk/peace-education)

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