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Zahid Shahab Ahmed

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Idealism Versus Pragmatism in Teaching Peace in Pakistan

ZAHID SHAHAB AHMED

At the start of the “War on Terror” in 2001, Pakistan’s education systems came under the international spotlight. Particular attention was paid to the quality of curricula and teaching styles in madrassas (Islamic seminaries) and public schools. Initially, focus and implementation of peace education programs were limited to madrassas, for example, through early initiatives of the Washington-based International Center for Religion and Diplomacy in 2004. While “teaching peace” programs have been going on now for over a decade, little is known about their impact and the realities in which they operate. Peace education in Pakistan demonstrates a perfect case to understand the struggle of implementing organizations to maintain a balance between idealism and pragmatism. The context in which the education of wars is in the mainstream, for example, through the glorification of wars and war heroes in public school textbooks, teaching peace is merely limited to the realm of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), mainly funded by Western donors. The limited scope of teaching peace programs is further constrained by the limited capacity of peace education, implementation on an ad hoc basis, irrelevant contents, the shortage of quality teachers, domination of Western values, the absence of NGOs’ network, and the hostility of the government and extremist groups.

Western approaches of peace and conflict are dominantly applied in teaching peace programs in Pakistan. The exported models largely focus on the implementation/development/teaching of individual skills, such as interpersonal conflict management, mediation, and conflict resolution. Pakistan, however, requires a collective approach rather than an individualistic Western approach. Another issue in teaching peace programs is the placement of teaching about wars in connection to peacemaking. None of the peace education programs examined by the author
included topics relevant to wars, such as, for instance, economic and human costs of wars. An overwhelming majority of teachers interviewed by the author stressed the need of curriculum reforms to ensure sustainability of teaching peace. Idealistic thinking, however, dominates the design and application of many of the peace education programs.

Unfortunately, idealistic thinking prevails in the design and application of projects for teaching peace. The Community World Service has produced several books in Urdu to teach peace but it has not made any effort to promote those books for inclusion in mainstream education. Similar is the case of books produced by the United Nations Children’s Fund. The disconnect between efforts at the grassroots level and policymaking level is based on a range of factors, such as the limited financial and human resources, and the opposition from Islamists to educational reforms.

Most of the short-term projects lack proper research, and this leads to many teaching peace projects having little or no relevance to the target communities. A major hurdle is to counter the influence of school textbooks promoting stereotyping and intolerance. There is, however, no NGO that addresses this aspect. From Kursheed Kamal Aziz’s Murder of History to Zahid Shahab Ahmed and Michelle Baxter’s Attitudes of Teachers in India and Pakistan: Texts and Contexts, there is evidence of textbooks in Pakistan containing factual errors, bias, and hate toward a number of non-Muslims and nations. It is thus vital for the ongoing teaching peace programs to deliver knowledge and alternatives in order to build resilience among children to counter extremist ideologies that have now gone beyond the school textbooks to social media. Another challenge is to ensure that students retain the knowledge acquired from such programs and apply this knowledge to their lives. This can only happen if such initiatives are long term and involve parents and community members. Unfortunately, a lot of teaching peace projects are designed to have minimal or no impact from the beginning; for instance, at the stage of project conceptualization when the program staff of an NGO grapples with the puzzle of idealism versus pragmatism.

While there is no harm in aiming for an ideal society that is free from violence of any kind, there is a need to be realistic and practical. Here the focus is again on the application of the knowledge that students gain through peace education programs. The Charter for Compassion works in mainly private sector schools in Karachi, the biggest city of Pakistan, to teach compassionate skills as per the philosophy of Karen Armstrong. Despite being a very innovative and creative program, which is implemented by a young passionate team of trainers, the project does not engage the participants in discussion on the following questions: Are
there times when showing compassion can get you into danger? How can students apply their compassionate skills, such as courage, if a place is attacked by a suicide bomber? Without answering questions such as these, the program runs the risk of being ineffective in offering needed skills to the students. This issue raises more questions: Are we giving students what they need? Do we do need assessment in classrooms before and during our training programs? Do we identify future peace leaders and stay engaged with them? Unfortunately, the answer to such questions is “no.” This is mainly because the majority of peace education projects in Pakistan are donor-driven, meaning not designed based on a long-term engagement with either a theme or a target community.

Rising violent religious extremism and widespread insecurity are main concerns for the local NGOs and their international partners working on preventing violent extremism through education. For example, there are numerous examples of NGO offices and workers being attacked by terrorists. Threats of rampant religious extremism and terrorism compel the NGOs and their international partners to apply conflict-sensitive approaches to their projects. This pragmatic approach limits the scope of development projects in general and peace education in particular as, for example, this approach restricts the programs to areas that are relatively peaceful. There is another major limitation of teaching peace programs failing to target relevant groups, such as the ones under direct risk of extremist ideologies.

Beyond approaching relevant communities is the need to address pertinent issues at hand. An examination of the program run by Jamia Naeemia, a madrassa based in Lahore, demonstrated a visible pragmatic approach in which the institute’s administration decided to avoid the addition of a sectarian (Shi’ite versus Sunni) fissure in the subjects covered during the training. Here it is important to underline the fact that madrasas are divided based on sectarian lines, therefore, a Sunni madrassa cannot easily talk about the sectarian divide without facing a conflict with Shi’ite madrassas. Jamia Naeemia or its current leadership is extra cautious because the institute’s founding father, Mufti Sarfraz Ahmed Naeemi, was killed inside the madrassa by the Tehrik-i-Taliban terrorists in 2009. Thus, threats to personal life are real for groups countering violent extremism in Pakistan.

The limited scope of teaching peace programs is reflected in their contents. NGOs find it problematic to work with madrassas that openly declare peace education a Western project by considering issues, such as tolerance, religious harmony, and human rights, as Western values. Due to these limitations, peace education programs have reached a minor
fraction of the country’s 35,000 madrassas. Pragmatism has compelled NGOs to approach madrassas as per convenience. Many teaching peace programs have been implemented in urban area madrassas that are easy to work with in terms of accessibility and communication. NGOs have not approached madrassas where traditional clerics tend to criticize modern technologies such as, for instance, the Internet, as a Western instrument responsible for weakening Muslim cultures and values.

As it happens, thousands of madrassas do not teach modern science and technology. Considering limited funding for peace, NGOs should focus on institutions, communities, and groups that do not just need an intervention, but where they could introduce desired social/behavioral changes more effectively to build resilience against violent extremism. Without focusing on this aspect, many of the examined programs in Pakistan have been converting the converted due to the lack of relevance to the local settings.

In addition to madrassas avoiding the sectarian divide in Pakistan, peace education programs across the board have not moved beyond issues such as interfaith harmony, a basic understanding of conflict resolution, human rights and peace, and the concept of peace in Islam. None of the examined projects focused on disarmament, environmental security, and structural violence. This cannot be labeled as being pragmatic because various NGOs lack the capacity to produce, based on solid research, relevant peace education contents. Due to the availability of foreign aid, several NGOs claim to have expertise in peace education, but in reality, they lack the capacity to do full justice to the teaching of peace. Without mentioning the name of the organization for ethical considerations, the author would like to share an interesting case when an NGO claiming to have substantial experience in peace education decided to outsource the development of teaching peace material to a third party. It is no surprise that the outcome was a disaster.

On the other hand, besides working to avoid contentious issues, NGOs have also been practical and creative in their selection of project titles. Unfortunately, the word “peace” carries negative connotations in Pakistan. There is a widespread perception that such programs are based on Western propaganda against Islam and Pakistan. To counter this perception, many NGOs have developed peace education material based on Islamic teachings. The prominent examples are of the books produced on Islam and conflict resolution/peace by the United States Institute of Peace and the Peace and Education Foundation. An important aspect of the methodology behind the mentioned books was the involvement and endorsement of prominent Muslim scholars from Pakistan. This strategy has worked for many groups who continue to work with a range of actors,
especially madrassas teachers. Prominent examples are that of Jamia Naeemi and the Peace and Education Development (PEAD) Foundation, which have developed peace education programs with the key principle that peace and conflict resolution should be presented as inherently Islamic values. This has definitely helped the organizations working this way to develop a good rapport with the local communities. Another issue is that NGOs have been hesitant to use the word “peace” in the titles of their programs. For example, a teaching peace project of PEAD Foundation is entitled “Strengthening Social Cohesion and Resilience through Education Initiative.” This particular concern about negative perceptions of “peace” is more prevalent in madrassas.

The success of any educational project rests on the quality of its teachers. As explored in the author’s research, most of the teaching peace programs lacked quality teachers. The teachers of many programs were not trained and therefore were incapable of imparting key skills like critical thinking, particularly to students in madrassas and public schools. In addition, teachers’ training programs had limited success because of a limited capacity of trainers and the short-term nature of interventions. Considering teachers in madrassas and public schools are not well educated and trained, there is a need for long-term interventions to introduce teachers to theories and practices relevant to teaching in general and teaching peace in particular.

Bearing in mind the sensitivities linked with working in Pakistan, non-state actors have to be extra cautious. There is an unwritten agreement between donors and local organizations to refrain from publicizing the names of donors, often from Western countries, in their project material. Considering the presence of violent religious extremism and anti-Western sentiments, this is a pragmatic approach. Organizations in conflict-affected areas, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, did not advertise that their work was funded by foreign organizations because that revelation could have had severe security repercussions. In the region of Swat, which was under the control of the Taliban during 2007–09, Swat Youth Front did not disclose the name of its London-based donor. This also means that members of the donors also did not visit the project site, which on one hand raises concerns about monitoring and evaluations, but on the other hand, it was also not feasible due to security reasons. It is important to highlight that often the visits of Western staff to project areas in rural Pakistan have created difficulties for local NGOs. NGOs with larger canvas, however, could share the information about their well-established or reputable donors from, for example, the United Nations, and the European Union.

In practice, peace education is heavily dependent on pedagogies to promote critical thinking and the transfer of knowledge to equip students
with conflict resolution skills. In the context of Pakistan, peace education is needed to provide students and teachers with knowledge and thinking to counter extremist ideologies. Here it is important to talk about the work of Swat Youth Front, which is based in the region that was once under the control of local Taliban. Through the organization’s program, students were encouraged to write on issues of human rights, women’s rights in Islam, post-conflict reconstruction, and contemporary sociopolitical issues in a magazine called *Naveed-e-Sahar*. This initiative helped develop students’ knowledge on critical issues and writing as well as on information-sharing skills.

Excluding the cases in which peace education has been localized as per the realities of Pakistan, there are examples of initiatives being inspired by global approaches on the subject. The Grammar School Rawalpindi is a private school that has modeled its peace education curricula on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s guidelines. Teachers of the school have been discussing the progressive phase of Muslims, including times when Muslims were scientifically advanced. A teacher from the school shared that it is difficult to teach peace when the realities outside the classroom do not match up with the topics studied as this counters peace education taught on an ad hoc basis for about an hour every week. The teachers also said that the new media, especially social media, exposes students to negative ideologies that the school’s limited teaching peace model does not address.

Among the successful cases is the initiative of Paiman Alumni Trust, (henceforth Paiman). The organization runs peace education projects in Peshawar to train teachers and students at two local private schools through an integrated approach. In this model, teaching peace is included in regular primary- and secondary-level curriculum. Students were interviewed from a participating school and they reflected a clear understanding of the concepts of peace and conflict by linking key features of learning to the notions of justice, development, and security.

This level of understanding of peace and security was not observed in students of other projects that were implemented on an ad hoc basis, meaning not integrated into regular education like the case of Paiman’s project. Paiman has an idealistic approach to present this project as a model for mainstream peace education in other schools, but it is unlikely to happen unless the government authorities are convinced to mainstream peace education contents and pedagogies as part of a long-term measure to prevent/counter violent extremism through education in Pakistan. That would require inclusion of peace education contents in textbooks and trainings for teachers in teacher training centers.
Despite the remarkable growth of the peacebuilding sector in Pakistan since 2001, there is the absence of a forum and/or a network that could bring various groups teaching peace together. This is due to several reasons, such as the competition among NGOs for funding. The lack of networking among NGOs poses a serious threat to their own survival when there is an ongoing governmental crackdown on the NGOs. Also, this leads to wasting energy and resources due to the absence of mechanisms through which knowledge and expertise could be shared instead of everyone reinventing the wheel in the form of replicating peace education material. Working jointly will help in strengthening advocacy for the inclusion of peace education in the public education system.

Unlike the mainstream education of wars, the field of peace education is under-developed in Pakistan. The case of NGOs teaching peace in Pakistan is a mixed bag of successes and failures, and demonstrates their struggle to maintain a balance between idealism and pragmatism. While some aim for the stars in terms of teaching for an ideal peaceful society, others miss the mark by teaching irrelevant contents. Many NGOs studied by the author lacked the capacity to produce contextually relevant contents. This limitation was reflected in the poor implementation of several programs.

The organizations teaching peace navigate in a highly sensitive territory in which a slight mistake can lead to disastrous consequences (e.g., through direct attacks of violent extremist groups). This phenomenon is aggravated by the government’s protection of extremist groups and the crackdown on NGOs. Thus, local NGOs work very carefully and avoid the risk of working where they should ideally work and with contents that they should ideally promote. Despite all these challenges, teaching peace is important to prevent/counter violent extremist ideologies in Pakistan. One of the constraints of teaching peace in Pakistan is the three-tier system of education in which each system—madrassas, public schools, and private schools—has limited or no interaction with the other. This ultimately demands customized programs to address the needs of each system.

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RECOMMENDED READINGS


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Zahid Shahab Ahmed holds a Ph.D. in Politics and International Studies and M.A. in Peace Education. Currently, he is a Research Fellow at Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalization, Deakin University, Australia. E-mail: zahid.ahmed@deakin.edu.au