



Education in Post-Conflict Areas: Reforming the Education System and Building Social Peace

A Vision for Educational Reform and the Construction of Social Peace¹

“Spread Peace among You”²

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Abstract

This paper is premised on the idea that education is not a neutral instrument; in societies emerging from wars and conflicts, it can be used either as a weapon or, conversely, as a means of repairing the social fabric and promoting social cohesion. Depending on how it is used and the purposes it is intended to serve, education can either deepen divisions and reproduce the underlying causes of conflict or become a vehicle for social peace. The paper examines the conceptual framework of social peace in both its dimensions, drawing on the lessons of educational reform in a number of post-conflict societies. It reviews a range of international experiences—including Rwanda, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iraq, Lebanon, and South Sudan—with markedly different outcomes. It then presents an analytical perspective on the principal dimensions of educational-system reform in Arab societies emerging from conflict, focusing on the curriculum, the teacher, the language of peace and reconciliation, and the broader educational environment. The paper concludes that educational reform cannot be divorced from comprehensive political and economic reform, and that education alone is insufficient to build sustainable social peace unless it forms part of an integrated national project. Keywords: educational reform; curriculum reform.

Keywords: Social peace; education; conflict settings; curriculum reform.

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² A sound hadith narrated from the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings be upon him), as related by Muslim.

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Introduction

It might be assumed that peace and social cohesion would arise naturally once security had been restored, stability had been secured, and violence had subsided. Yet peace, coexistence, acceptance of others, respect for difference, the rejection of violence, the pooling of resources and capabilities, loyalty to the nation, and service to the community are all essential to achieving a high degree of social cohesion. In countries that have endured wars and conflict, however, education can play a pivotal role. Far from necessarily strengthening the social fabric, educational policies may, on the contrary, generate further divisions and deepen existing fractures within society. This is because education is closely connected with the formation of identity and culture and with the ways in which individuals relate to others, both intellectually and psychologically.

This is not merely a theoretical observation. Drawing on the literature on education in conflict-affected settings, Kevin Bush and Diana Saltarelli argue that education has a “two-faced” character: it can have a positive side, broadening opportunities, fostering tolerance and openness, creating inclusive learning environments, dismantling narratives of conflict, and reframing historical narratives; but it can also have a negative side, reinforcing stereotypes and perpetuating ethnic, national, or sectarian grievances. This paper published by UNICEF’s Innocenti Research Centre underscores the point (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000).

Reforming the school textbook system alone, therefore, will not be sufficient. Nor will it be enough simply to introduce a curriculum on peace or the harmful effects of violence, or to issue a decision prohibiting corporal punishment in schools. Such measures cannot, on their own, bring about lasting change.

As is well known, imparting academic knowledge to students is not the sole outcome of the educational process. Equally important is the development of behaviour and a sound system of values—among the most significant outcomes of education, yet ones that are, unfortunately, often overlooked. This paper therefore calls for education to be viewed as a comprehensive and integrated system encompassing scientific, intellectual, cognitive, pedagogical, ethical, and administrative dimensions, rather than being reduced merely to the curricula, materials, and information contained in school textbooks.

1. Conceptual Framework

Social Peace: Between “Negative Peace” and “Positive Peace”

Social peace⁴ is a profound concept. At its simplest, it means living in peace, with mutual affection, respect, and acceptance of others, and wishing for others what one wishes for oneself. It also means freedom from a sense of injustice, exclusion, or marginalisation, and a sense of belonging to the

⁴ Social Peace: the absence of negative manifestations such as violence, wars, genocide and racism, and the presence of positive manifestations such as calm, stability, security, tolerance and development.

(See also Johan Galtung’s distinction between negative peace and positive peace in the first section above.)

wider community in a way that makes it difficult for individuals to engage in behaviour that would directly undermine social cohesion or deliberately create divisions within it.

At its core is the conviction that the individuals and constituent groups of a society are all part of the same vessel: if it sinks, everyone sinks with it. A person becomes a good citizen, committed to the full range of national values and willing to make sacrifices and act in the interests of the nation, when that nation, in turn, is committed to the values of justice and equality, prepared to protect its citizens, safeguard their dignity, and stand up for their rights.

To deepen this understanding, it is useful to recall the distinction drawn by Norwegian peace scholar Johan Galtung between “negative peace” and “positive peace”. Negative peace denotes merely the absence of direct violence and war, whereas positive peace entails the absence of “structural violence” embedded in social, economic and political systems—such as poverty, discrimination and exclusion—and the presence of justice and social integration (Galtung, 1969). A ceasefire or the signing of a peace agreement achieves only the former; achieving the latter—which is the objective this paper seeks to pursue—requires structural reform encompassing education, the economy and governance alike.

The experience of Sierra Leone further underscores this point. A recent study concluded that peace-education programmes there succeeded in reducing direct violence and creating safe spaces for psychosocial interaction, thereby achieving a form of “negative peace”. Yet, in themselves, they failed to overcome structural disparities in the distribution of resources between urban and rural areas, which prevented the attainment of the desired “positive peace” (see Sesay & Bangura, 2025).

Social peace rests on several essential pillars without which it cannot be sustained: social justice; the peaceful and democratic transfer of power; respect for the rule of law and its equal enforcement, without discrimination or exception; the protection of citizens’ rights and dignity; and respect for freedom of dissent and freedom of expression, an independent judiciary; and the independence of systems and institutions, with none interfering in the work of another.

2. Why Is Educational Reform Alone Not Enough?

Educational reform is, first and foremost, a political measure.

Social peace is fundamentally shaped by the policies and approaches adopted by governments. Educational reform aimed at fostering peace and social cohesion is therefore, first and foremost, a political undertaking. There is little point in teaching students about justice and freedom, rejecting injustice, upholding the rule of law and respecting the law, while they live under a government that practises discrimination on the basis of religion, sect or tribe. Such a contradiction leads to a detachment from reality, a loss of trust in political systems, a drift towards violence, or a life marked by oppression, poverty, deprivation and hopelessness. It is therefore extremely dangerous to pursue educational reform solely at the political level, or to make it reflect the political orientation of one particular party or faction while excluding others, without any attempt to engage with the wider range of reforms and policies required.

International evidence underscores the gap between the scale of crises and the political responses to them. The UNESCO Global Monitoring Report 2011, entitled *The Hidden Crisis: Armed Conflict and Education*, documented that approximately 28 million primary-school-age children were out of school in conflict-affected poor countries, representing 42 per cent of all children of

primary-school age who were out of school worldwide at the time. It also found that 21 countries were spending more on their military than on primary education, even though a reduction of just 10 per cent in military expenditure in those countries would have been sufficient to provide school places for an additional 9.5 million children (UNESCO, 2011). Despite their age, these figures remain powerful evidence that reforming curricula, however well designed, will achieve little unless it is accompanied by genuine political will to reorder priorities and place education at the heart of the reconstruction effort, rather than at its margins.

This suggests that education policy and curricula should be placed within a comprehensive plan for reforming all political, social, and economic spheres. This approach is consistent with the INEE Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies, which identifies education policy and its integration with national response and recovery plans as one of its five core domains, alongside community participation, a safe learning environment, teaching and learning, and teachers (INEE, 2024).

3. Lessons from International Experiences: When Reform Works and When It Falters

An appeal for a “comprehensive plan” is hardly convincing unless it is supported by real-world examples that demonstrate the cost of neglecting it. Three contrasting cases are examined below:

Rwanda: From Suppressing Memory to Confronting It

Following the 1994 genocide, Rwanda initially imposed a moratorium on the teaching of history, fearing that it might rekindle resentment among students. Instead, it adopted a cautious approach that avoided delving into the details of the genocide.

This avoidance, however, was not a sustainable solution. Since 2008, the National Curriculum Development Centre has introduced a new approach to the teaching of history, explicitly incorporating the study of the genocide across the different stages of education. It seeks to replace narrow ethnic identities—that of Hutu and Tutsi—with an inclusive national identity centred on Rwandan citizenship, and adopts classroom discussion and the testimony of survivors in place of rote learning and passive instruction (World Education Blog, 2017).

The Rwandan experience has demonstrated that confronting a painful collective memory, rather than suppressing it, is essential to building resilience against the recurrence of conflict. This, in turn, requires teachers to receive specialised training and preparation that enables them to facilitate such sensitive discussions with wisdom and responsibility.

Bosnia and Lebanon: When Education Becomes an Instrument for Perpetuating Division

In contrast to the Rwandan experience, dozens of schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina continue to operate under the “two schools under one roof” system, whereby Bosniak and Croat pupils attend the same school building but follow separate curricula, languages and educational programmes. Introduced in the aftermath of the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement, the system remained in place in around 56 schools as late as 2018, despite a 2014 court ruling declaring such segregation unconstitutional. (OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2018; Balkan Insight, 2014)

In Lebanon, an attempt to produce a unified history textbook for the civil-war period (1975–1990) failed because of the system of reciprocal sectarian vetoes among the country’s political factions. As a result, official history textbooks still stop at 1975—the very year in which the war broke out—leaving generations to absorb competing narratives of the conflict from oral accounts and partisan media platforms rather than through formal education. (LCPS, 2025)

Both cases demonstrate that enforced educational segregation and the freezing of historical memory are not neutral measures. Rather, they represent the darker side of education itself, reproducing divisions from one generation to the next.

Sierra Leone: Between Curtailing Violence and Building Justice

A recent field study examining twelve peace-education initiatives in Sierra Leone following the civil war (1991–2002), ranging from formal school programmes to media and community-based initiatives, found that they succeeded in reducing direct violence, providing psychological and social support to children affected by the war, and facilitating the reintegration of former combatants through sport and vocational training. However, the same study concluded that disparities in resources between urban and rural areas, together with weak state institutions, prevented the achievement of “positive peace” in its deeper sense, grounded in equity, justice and structural transformation (Bangura & Sesay, 2025).

This serves to reaffirm that peace education is necessary, but not sufficient, unless it is accompanied by commensurate economic and administrative reform.

4. The Pillars of Educational System Reform

Building on the foregoing, the principal pillars of reforming the educational system in the aftermath of conflict may be summarised as follows:

Language of instruction: There is no doubt that using a single national language as the medium of instruction can foster a sense of belonging to a shared national identity and culture. On the other hand, completely disregarding indigenous languages, where they exist, particularly in the early stages of education, can contribute to a sense of marginalisation. A balance is therefore essential.

The teacher: The teacher is the most important element in the educational and learning process and a fundamental determinant of its success. Teachers play a crucial role in creating an appropriate learning environment. A teacher’s personality, culture, experience, manner of interaction and the nature of their relationships with students all have a profound impact on students’ behaviour, ethics and conduct. What makes teachers pivotal actors and key agents in promoting social peace and peaceful coexistence is the extent to which they adhere to the ethics of their profession and rise to the weight of their considerable responsibilities. This pivotal role is underscored by the 2024 INEE Minimum Standards, which identify the selection, training and support of teachers as one of the five key pillars. The experience of Rwanda in preparing teachers specifically to facilitate dialogue on the history of the genocide further demonstrates the importance of this approach. Accordingly, priority must be given to teacher preparation, while ensuring that teachers are selected, retained and empowered to carry out the teaching and learning process to the highest possible standard.



Developing the Educational Process and Curriculum in Both Content and Method:

• **The quality, excellence and mastery of education:** Education must equip students with a high level of competitiveness at both the national and global levels, while being closely aligned with the labour market and the country's economic growth. In this way, it can provide students with employment opportunities after graduation and enable them to engage in continuous self-directed learning for career development and nation-building. Many conflicts are linked, in one way or another, to economic conditions, poverty, unemployment and the absence of opportunities — and, more specifically, to what Galtung termed “structural violence”, which he regarded as the underlying source of the fragility of social peace.

• **How education is delivered:** Education should be a way of life, a means of developing thinking skills, and a foundation for building values. It is not merely curricula and textbooks; rather, it is a practice and an experience. How learning takes place is more important than the content of the curriculum and learning itself.

Values for Human Peace: People may differ in religion, ethnicity, colour, language and country, yet they share common human values, which constitute the bond between them. These values are the core concepts upon which school curricula should be based, so that they may be translated into students' everyday conduct, thereby helping to repair fractured relationships and build relationships founded on noble values. Everyone has the right and freedom to follow any religion or belong to any ethnic group, but no one should be permitted to be “inhuman” in their treatment of others. That is the message of values that we wish to pass on to future generations. Our religion and heritage are rich in hundreds of noble values that call upon people to know them and embody them in both faith and conduct.

Role Models and Professional Ethics: Teachers and university professors must serve as positive role models for their students. Schools and educational institutions must not tolerate favouritism, cronyism, racism or discrimination on grounds unrelated to objective criteria; nor should they resort to verbal or physical violence to resolve problems, reject discussion and listening to opposing views, turn differences of opinion into personal disputes, or encourage selfish competition based on restricting others' opportunities rather than working with them in a spirit of cooperation. Students must be taught these ethical principles through practice and lived experience, rather than through texts and printed materials that are merely memorised to pass an examination and then promptly disregarded.

Opening the Door to Dialogue: Schools must open the door to dialogue and establish round-table discussions among students and between students and teachers. Applied and experiential learning should be encouraged, with a strong emphasis on freedom of thought and critical thinking, creative thinking and collaborative work.

5. The Specificities of the Arab Region: Sectarian and Inter-Denominational Conflicts

These are some aspects of the broader vision, but the specific context must not be overlooked. Every conflict or dispute has its own causes and circumstances, and these must therefore be taken into account when planning the educational process in each region. Since we live in a region that has recently experienced a great deal of sectarian and denominational conflict, it is important to devote a part of this vision to addressing this issue — while emphasising that what follows is an

analytical reading and an intellectual endeavour, rather than the findings of a rigorous field study. It may therefore require further specialist scrutiny by scholars of political sociology and researchers in the contemporary history of the region.

From the perspective of this paper, many of the conflicts currently afflicting our countries — and, indeed, countries with an Arab-Islamic civilisational heritage — are fuelled by an underlying fragility in the social fabric, arising from ignorance, poverty, injustice, and a departure from Islamic values. In many cases, groups and actors exploit this fragility and seek to inflame such divisions in pursuit of their own interests. The result is deep-seated wounds in the collective psyche which, if left unhealed, may become time bombs whose destructive effects persist for generations. Accordingly:

- There is a need to heal the collective psyche and strengthen people's sense of belonging to the nation and homeland, with greater emphasis on a shared cultural identity. What unites us is far greater than what divides us. The experience of Rwanda, where a shared national identity was supplanted by competing and conflicting sub-identities, provides further evidence of this. This requires teaching students the rich history of this civilisation and the common heritage shared by all its constituent communities, across different religions and ethnicities.
- There have been instances of injustice perpetrated against certain groups within our societies, which some have exploited to kindle the fires of discord. Such injustices must therefore be addressed and remedied, while their underlying causes must be tackled through education that promotes respect for human rights, respect for others, and the ability to live alongside them in security and peace.
- Many of the conflicts that persist between different groups within society stem from ignorance of religion. It is therefore essential to teach a sound and authentic understanding of Islam, grounded in the Book of God and the Sunnah of His Messenger, peace and blessings be upon him. This will help protect young people from falling prey to sedition and misconceptions, and strengthen their resilience against the messages propagated by those who exploit and trade upon religion, taking advantage of people's ignorance of it.
- The wars and tragedies that have accompanied them have inflicted profound psychological harm upon the Arab and Muslim psyche. There is therefore an urgent need to restore self-confidence and a sense of self-worth, in which educational institutions have a crucial role to play.
- The continuing wars in a number of Arab countries have resulted in economic collapse and the destruction of cities and infrastructure. The responsibility for helping these countries emerge from this tragic state of affairs therefore rests with all of us, as members of the Arab nation. We must work together in a spirit of solidarity and as one team, for the sake of peoples who continue to suffer.
- The consequences of war have created an urgent need for developmental action and social responsibility. Educational curricula must therefore be infused with and promote these values.

6. Objectives of Educational Curricula in the Post-Conflict Phase

The objectives of educational curricula at this stage may be summarised as follows:



1. Restoring self-confidence and self-esteem, and fostering education based on noble human values.
2. Promoting love, peace and tolerance among different groups within society, and strengthening a culture of collective endeavour through active participation.
3. Preparing highly qualified and capable professionals across all scientific, academic and vocational disciplines.
4. Striving for quality, excellence and the highest standards of professional performance.
5. Promoting freedom and the principles of human dignity and equality.
6. Strengthening social responsibility and encouraging developmental and productive work.

7. Proposed Means and Mechanisms for Implementation

- Selecting teachers and educators carefully, providing them with appropriate training, and continuously renewing and enhancing their professional qualifications, including training in how to conduct discussions about a painful past and collective memory with wisdom and sensitivity, along the lines of the Rwandan experience.
- Revising and reformulating scientific curricula and courses, particularly their practical components, in order to contribute to rebuilding the national economy and essential infrastructure.
- Reformulating the humanities curricula to strengthen self-confidence and self-esteem, and to promote love and respect for human dignity.
- Establishing high-quality centres for training and professional development, committed to excellence and to cultivating precision and high standards of performance in the workplace.
- Giving due attention to curricula covering the shared Arab and Islamic history, while taking particular care not to leave periods of conflict as blank spaces in the official historical record, as occurred in the Lebanese experience. Silence about such periods does not amount to neutrality; rather, it leaves them open to competing narratives that are passed down from one generation to the next without critical scrutiny. Instead, it would be preferable to adopt the methodology of “multiperspectivity”, as recommended in the Council of Europe’s Teaching History guide, and put it into practice through the Shared Histories Project in the Balkans, which produced historical sources reflecting multiple perspectives and trained students to analyse and discuss them critically, rather than imposing a single narrative (Council of Europe, 2018; CDRSEE, 2017).
- Promoting and putting noble human values and ethics into practice through their actual application in schools, rather than limiting them to theoretical instruction.
- Linking any educational reform to a comprehensive national plan for recovery, encompassing the economy, governance and transitional justice, so as to avoid repeating the limited impact experienced in the case of Sierra Leone.
- Establishing mechanisms for monitoring and periodically evaluating the real-world impact of these reforms, in accordance with the international standards for education in emergencies and recovery.



Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper concludes that education in the post-conflict phase carries a dual responsibility. On the one hand, it offers a genuine opportunity to break the cycle of violence and repair the social fabric; on the other, it poses a genuine risk if managed haphazardly or exploited to serve narrow interests. The difference between these two outcomes lies not merely in intentions, but in our ability to place educational reform within a comprehensive national project that brings together curriculum reform, teacher training, social, economic and political justice, and the safeguarding of freedom and human dignity: “And We have certainly honoured the children of Adam.”⁵

Just as the Rwandan experience, in contrast to those of Bosnia and Lebanon, demonstrates, confronting painful memory in a deliberate and wise manner is more productive than suppressing or freezing it. And, as the experience of Sierra Leone demonstrates, negative peace (the absence of violence) is a necessary but insufficient step towards achieving positive peace (the presence of justice).

The paper therefore makes the following recommendations:

Firstly, education should be integrated into the core of national recovery and transitional justice plans, rather than treated as a separate policy file.

Secondly, investment should be made in teacher preparation and in equipping teachers to facilitate dialogue on sensitive and divisive issues.

Thirdly, a balanced approach to language and identity should be adopted — one that safeguards national unity without excluding local particularities.

Fourthly, the quality of education and its practical applications should be linked to economic and employment opportunities, as this constitutes one of the most important safeguards against the recurrence of conflict.

Fifthly, comparative Arab field studies should be conducted to assess the impact of peace-education programmes actually implemented in our societies. This would strengthen the analytical perspective advanced in this paper with locally grounded quantitative and qualitative evidence.

And God guides to the right path.

⁵ Surah Al-Isra', verse 70.



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