

Integrating Peace Education and Sustainable Development: A Case Study on Building Social Cohesion among University Students in Post-Conflict Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The post conflict environment in Sri Lanka remains to face problems of reconciliation, social cohesion and sustainable development. Peace education has been introduced in the higher education context, but there is limited research on the impact of peace education in changing students' perceptions and in promoting inclusive practices. Thus, this study fills the gap by exploring the impact of peace education on social cohesion and sustainable development among the students of the peace studies field of study at Kelaniya University with the primary aim of investigating the impact of peace education on the understanding of social inclusion and sustainable development among peace studies students of Kelaniya University. In addition, the research had two specific aims: to find out what has worked and what has not in embedding peace education in wider development pursuits; and to discover the stories of peace students about reconciliation and community involvement. Qualitative case study design was used in this study, and the peace studies programme of Kelaniya University was used as a case study. Primary and secondary data was gathered, where primary data was collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and secondary data was collected from different literary sources. To this end, a narrative analysis was employed to learn about personal stories and personal experiences, and highlight how students make sense of peace, sustainability and social cohesion. Results indicated that through peace education, critical awareness of reconciliation and inclusive and sustainable development is created. Students demonstrated their ability to describe transformation, using language and focusing on empathy, intercultural dialogue, and community responsibility. But there were challenges regarding the inadequate institutional support for peace education translation to community-based activities, and the conflict post context between theory and practice in Sri Lanka. Moreover, the study reveals that peace education is one of the major components that can contribute to social cohesion and the sustainable development in Sri Lanka's post conflict situation. Stories of empathetic and inclusive understanding can help universities to become catalysts for reconciliation. Strengthening of the institution and integration with community-based development project is recommended to improve the effect of peace education.

Keywords: Peace Education; Post-Conflict; Social Cohesion; Sustainable Development

Introduction

The post-conflict environment in Sri Lanka presents a unique opportunity and challenge for rebuilding trust, reconciliation and sustainable development. Social cohesion is an important question in the country's future, as old social divisions have been created, stemming from ethnic tensions and civil war which had been present for many years. In this context, HEIs have the poten-

tial to be a catalyst in the process of molding the young minds, building values of peace, and introducing sustainable practices that reach beyond the classroom. As a result, the universities have a special role to play in catalyzing the change and training young people with knowledge, skills and dispositions to contribute to a more inclusive and resilient society. In this context, dialogue, empathy and non-violent conflict resolution are



areas of significant contribution of peace education. Sustainable development, however, focuses on the social, economic and environmental aspects that need to balance to achieve stability in the long-term. These are embedded in the Social Sciences and provide a holistic perspective on addressing the problems of post conflict recovery.

The University of Kelaniya has a long academic history and a multi-cultural student body which makes it an interesting case study for the discussion of how these can be incorporated into the curricula and students' experiences to contribute to social cohesion. Peace and Conflict Resolution Bachelor of Arts (Honours) programme at the University of Kelaniya is a special undergraduate programme in South Asia. It was introduced by the Department of Philosophy and is a pioneering effort that reflects the pressing need for a structured academic training on peace and conflict management in the region.

In contrast, though, South Asia has historically not had dedicated degree courses that incorporate theoretical underpinning and practical reconciliation approaches. However, in South Asia, there are no dedicated degree courses that integrate theory with practice in the field of reconciliation. The University of Kelaniya has pioneered the development of this four-year programme to ensure that students receive both academic knowledge and skills and values to positively contribute to post-conflict recovery and sustainable peace in Sri Lanka and internationally. Thus, the main objective of this study was to understand the issues of the intersection of peace education and sustainable development in the context of the Social Sciences at the University of Kelaniya and to understand how these contribute to the development of social cohesion among the undergraduates. Also, the following specific objectives has been addressed:

- To examine the level of integration of principles of peace education in the teaching and learning process of Social Sciences.
- To explore the ways in which sustainable development ideas are encouraged in academic and extracurricular activities.
- To determine students' perceptions and experiences about the role of these frameworks

in building intercultural understanding and cooperation.

- To assess the potential of higher education in promoting reconciliation and sustainable social change in post-conflict Sri Lanka.

The study has proved to be of great importance since there is a great urgency to promote social cohesion in the post-conflict Sri Lanka. National policies and community initiatives have been working to heal reconciliation, but the university has been a space largely neglected for developing peace and sustainability at the same time. The emphasis on the University of Kelaniya in this research points to the interplay between education, reconciliation, and sustainable development, and how universities can play a role in sustainable long term peace building. The results will not only contribute towards policymaking but also towards practice as it will highlight the potential of higher education to produce socio responsible citizens who can contribute to the harmony and resilience of Sri Lanka.

Methodology/Design/Approach

The investigation of the impact of peace education on sustainable development and social cohesion among university students in post conflict Sri Lanka particularly among peace studies students of the Kelaniya University has been carried out using the qualitative approach of case study. The conceptual framework adopted for the research included the theory of positive peace of Galtung and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4.7 and SDG 16), which placed peace education in two parts: pedagogical and developmental. One main research question was concerned with the impact of peace education on students' awareness of social inclusion and sustainable development and two specific objectives focused on the achievements and dilemmas in embedding peace education in the broader objective of development, and students' narratives of reconciliation and community involvement. This design was selected to enable the data collection of student experiences and perceptions in their institutional and socio-cultural context to be explored in depth.

The purposive sampling method was used to identify individuals who could have more exten-

sive knowledge about the phenomenon such as undergraduates from the peace studies program, faculty and administration. The main data collection method employed was in-depth interview and focus group discussions which enabled the participants to voice their experience and perceptions about peace education and its linkages with sustainable development. To triangulate the findings, and to provide background information, secondary data was obtained from academic journals, policy documents and institutional reports. The interviews and discussions were conducted in both Sinhala and English, audiotaped with the consent of the interviewees and transcribed for analysis. A primary/secondary source mix that gave a comprehensive knowledge of the content area and a lived experience perspective as well as an institutional perspective.

The primary analytical approach was narrative analysis that allowed the analysis of personal narratives and experiences to show themes of empathy, intercultural dialogue, inclusiveness and community responsibility. To support the coding and categorisation of the qualitative data, NVivo software was used to support the process and ensure systematic analysis and reliability. Triangulation of multiple data sources and member checking with participants to confirm interpretations was used to enhance the validity.

The analytical approach was based on theme and structure, and the study revealed the students' understanding of the concepts of peace, sustainability and social cohesion. Methodology centred on the selection of participants, data sources and analytical rigour, which would be appropriate for the purpose of the study and would enable it to provide a comprehensive understanding on the contribution of peace education towards sustainable development and social cohesion in Sri Lanka in the post conflict situation.

Results and Discussions

Enrolment and Participation

The results of the analysis showed that the students of peace studies at Kelaniya University were very engaged in peace education modules. 85% of the purposively selected students said that the peace education courses significantly shaped their views on reconciliation and inclusivity. Students were also active in extracurricular peace-related

activities, with 62% participating in community outreach or dialogue programs.

Narratives

Through the narrative approach, it was found that there were reflections of the transformative power of peace education through students' experiences, such as empathy, intercultural communication, inclusion, commitment to the community and institutional support in the post conflict context in Sri Lanka. Pupils frequently referred to their new understanding of the difficulties of reconciliation, as they listened to, and learned from, the voices of others, and some managed to cross the ethnic divide, to think of a more just future. Dialogue was added as a practice and the students were encouraged to appreciate the importance of listening to others' story as well as understanding that reconciliation starts with listening. Also communicated through the narratives was the importance of inclusivity, particularly those of students with disabilities who also highlighted the empowering aspect of peace education and challenges of integrating inclusive values into the wider society. Community responsibility was also a strong theme, with students emphasizing the importance of peace education in promoting sustainable development, through shared projects which built trust and cooperation between communities. In the meantime some problems emerged relating to the lack of institutional support to make classroom courses a reality, thus reflecting the gap between theory and practice. What emerges from the narratives as a whole is that peace education can contribute to a critical awareness and personal transformation, but its impact is more profound with the support of institutional mechanisms that can assist in the translation from theory to practice, from recognition to reconciliation and from university to society.

Narrative 1

"Peace education helped me see beyond ethnic divisions and imagine a Sri Lanka where development is shared fairly."

The story highlights how peace education can help to challenge established and deep-rooted discrimination and injustice in order to promote reconciliation. The reflections reflect the othering

Table 1: Student Engagement in Peace Education Activities

Indicator	Percentage (%)
Reported influence of peace education on reconciliation	85
Participation in community outreach/dialogue programs	62
Expressed interest in linking peace education to SDGs	74
<i>Source: Author originated source</i>	

of a society that has long been divided along ethnic lines, in that exposure to a variety of visions within the classroom can foster empathy and change the way students imagine their national identity. The student's focus on fairness and shared development aligns with Galtung's (1996) positive peace definition of peace which goes beyond the lack of violence to include justice and equity. This story shows that reconciliation and equitable development go hand in hand and that peace education helps to develop not only emotional growth but also civic responsibility, putting students at the service of social cohesion in a post conflict Sri Lanka.

Narrative 2

"In our peace education classes, I learned that listening to others' stories is as important as telling my own. Dialogue opened my eyes to how reconciliation begins with understanding."

This account emphasises the interdependence of dialogue and that listening and sharing is valued and respected. In situations of post conflict where there is mistrust and suspicion, dialogue is one of the key factors that can bring communities together on a regular basis. The student's reflection provides a model for a positive environment for intercultural exchange in the classroom and critical examination of discourses about conflict and the dismantling of stereotypes. This is in accordance with Lopes Cardozo (2008) which has been discovered that a good peace education process creates interconnection and cohesion because it is able to create dialogue among disagreements. The importance of dialogue as one of the most powerful elements of peace education's transformative capability is highlighted, together with the need for two-sided narratives and not one-sided.

Narrative 3

"When we worked together to restore a local water tank, I realized peace ed-

ucation is not just about theory. It is about taking responsibility for shared resources and building trust across communities."

This story exhibits an illustration of how peace education is not merely a theoretical construct, but a real way of living a community responsibility. Collective action is an approach that students use to handover lessons learnt in the classroom to the real-world, giving them the first-hand opportunity to appreciate the value of cooperation and shared management. The rehabilitation of the water tank was one of the highlights in the community that was sustained by peace education, and in turn to fostering confidence among the groups. The story is relevant to the themes of UNESCO (2021): Education for Resilience and Education for Sustainable Development and provides an example of the values of peace education for civic engagement and environmental awareness. It shows how there is a link between reconciliation and development and how peace education connects to the two.

Narrative 4

"Peace education gave me the courage to speak about exclusion. My classmates began to see how inclusivity is essential for both peace and sustainability. Still, I feel society outside the university is slow to change."

It is a story that not only reinforces the empowering role of peace education but also takes into account the difficulties associated with the task of integrating an inclusive value into other social contexts. In the classroom, marginalized voices were heard, calling attention to the importance of inclusiveness. But the frustration of the students has exposed the conflict between ideals and reality. The inclusive values are still relatively undeveloped and unmaintained in the wider society. The study reinforces the warning of Millaw-

ithanachchi (2020) that policy frameworks would have no impact if there was no meaningful participation. The narrative highlights the need to take peace education beyond awareness raising to actively challenge inequalities in systems and ensure that inclusivity is in the institutional culture and community engagement.

Narrative 5

“Kelaniya University became more than a place of study—it became a space of dialogue and action. Through workshops and community engagement, I saw how universities can lead reconciliation efforts. But without stronger institutional support, these initiatives remain small.”

This emphasis is on the university as an educational and social change organisation. Students had a good understanding of how universities can work as mediators by means of dialogue and community interaction to assist in reconciliation. A significant challenge in such activities is the lack of institutional support which affects the adaptability, flexibility and sustainability of such activities. This is not a peculiar issue of this research, but rather it has been found in other settings around the world, including Rwanda and Bosnia, where peace education efforts in awareness-raising have been unsuccessful at institutionalizing change within the community. The story emphasizes the importance of improving framework and resources at universities to fully support reconciliation and sustainable development.

Success and dilemmas

Peace education was a recurring theme by the students, which they reported having fostered them to make them aware of the concepts of reconciliation and inclusiveness as a new change in their thinking about Sri Lanka’s post conflict realities. In class they brainstormed their thoughts and shared their opinions and had activities to make them think about their own cultural and ethnic divisions and to show empathy for students from other backgrounds. It also helped to build a greater understanding of the other person, and to look at a broader picture such as Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Many students

related their lessons to SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions) noting that peace education plays a role in the construction of resilient societies with justice and inclusiveness. Students’ achievements further highlight the value of peace education in higher education in relation to the connection with the personal transformation and global development agendas.

The results for empathy, the dialogue and understanding of sustainable development were reiterated and students’ peace education could be interpreted as pedagogical instrument and as an instrument for supporting social cohesion.

These advances, however, came along with specific tensions, as students voiced in their own words their challenges to the transformative power of peace education. One constant problem was the lack of institutional support in terms of converting theory into practice. In the classroom, the emphasis was on inclusiveness and reconciliation, but not much was done about these values in the community. This was a mismatch between theory and practice that led to a mismatch of awareness and motivation and structural mechanisms to sustain action post-university. The dilemmas are indicative of a wider set of issues in post conflict settings, where schools might be teaching ideals of peace but don’t have the resources, structures or networks needed to integrate ideals into everyday life within the community. Students’ stories show that peace education is unlikely to make much headway toward reconciliation and sustainable development unless it is better supported by institutions.

The findings showed that students cherished inclusiveness, but the structural barriers still remained. Participants with disabilities, or from marginalized groups, said they felt marginalized in any peace education work. The theory of inclusive work was discussed in 20% of the activities that were observed.

The results reflect the importance of peace education within the context of Kelaniya University and its impact on the attitudes of its students towards reconciliation, inclusivity and sustainable development. Results indicate that there is a high level of reported influence and participation are indicative of the effectiveness of peace education in building social cohesion among young adults in post conflict Sri Lanka. The findings

Table 2: Successes and Dilemmas Identified by Students

Theme	Key Insights
Successes	Enhanced empathy, intercultural dialogue, awareness of SDGs
Dilemmas	Limited institutional support, tension between theory and practice
<i>Source: Author originated source</i>	

are consistent with the research of Lopes Cardozo (2008) who argued that peace education can contribute to the building of social cohesion if it is well designed and well implemented and with the caution of Millawithanachchi (2020) that policy implementation without community engagement will not achieve this goal.

The narratives of transformation highlight the relevance and impact of relating peace education to lived experiences, which is also a key point of Kinkini (2025) in the discussion of the importance of “life world-oriented teaching”. But the problems pointed out, especially the lack of institutional support to community projects, indicate a kind of contradiction between theory and practice. This is similar to the worldwide results obtained in Rwanda and Bosnia where awareness has been created but peace education has been weak in effecting lasting peaceful change unless institutional support is provided.

There is also a lack of focus on inclusiveness, which further reinforces the need to make changes. Students were enthusiastic about the inclusive values, however, the lack of mechanisms for participation of marginalized groups diminishes the transformative power of peace education. This study adds to the existing literature by presenting evidence that inclusiveness needs to be deeply integrated into curricula, but also in institutional practices and community connections.

Conclusion

Results from this study verified that peace education is a key component in promoting university students' empathy, intercultural dialogue and sustainable development awareness in the post-conflict environment of Sri Lanka. The evidence here shows that students can transcend inherited ethnic divisions and see futures that are more inclusive when they are exposed to diverse perspectives and narratives. This result makes it clear that the transformative power of peace educa-

tion as pedagogical intervention. However, there is also a continuing conflict of interest in the analysis which shows that although there is emotional and moral development, the limitations of the institutions and the structures hinder the process of applying the theoretical learning to their practical work in the community. The disconnect between the academic realm and everyday practice here points to the vulnerability of peace education when no systemic change and policy integration is in place.

This tension is apparent in the themes observed on a closer examination. The result was a sense of empathy – pupils' attitude of compassion tore down deeply entrenched divisions. But empathy can easily be just a concept if its application is not seen in experiencing things beyond the classroom. Likewise, intercultural dialogue contributed to mutual understanding and to the breaking of conflict narratives; however, it must be institutionalized in curricula in order to be sustained and not just implemented on an ad hoc basis. Inclusivity was a theme that showed some progress, albeit from a small number of voices in a way that was marginalized, and there was a continued lack of structural change to ensure a true level of participation, including the access to resources. Community responsibility, which is related to peace education, is found to be promising in the collective projects, albeit not consistent and with a lack of institutional support in the attempt. Lastly, the catalyst role of universities was identified, but their absence of mechanisms of practical application shows one of their main weaknesses which is the gap between theory and practice.

The contributions of this research fall into several important areas. First, it offers empirical evidence from the higher education sector, a subject that has not been studied extensively like interventions at the school level. The study highlights the role of universities in peace and reconciliation processes and the need for expanding the scope of peace education research by concentrating on

students from the universities of peace studies. Second, qualitative narrative analysis adds colour to the literature by foregrounding students' voices and lived experiences, giving us nuanced insights into the ways in which peace education impacts on identity, empathy and community responsibility. Third, it offers insights for policies and practice by pinpointing achievements and challenges that arose in the process of embedding peace education into SDGs, highlighting the need for inclusiveness and institutional arrangements. At last, the research puts Sri Lanka in the global conversation on peacebuilding and sustainable development, highlighting how experiences and lessons from the local can contribute to the international conversation on education for peace and sustainable development.

Overall, the study emphasizes that peace education is not a purely academic activity. But it is an important aspect of post conflict reconstruction and sustainable development. The results indicate that individual transformation is possible with empathy and dialogue, but a systemic change is possible at an institutional level with the commitment of an institution and structural reform. It is essential to continue to develop policies that are inclusive, to link academic with community-based programs, and to integrate university programs with national policy priorities to enhance the contribution of peace education.

The long-term impact of peace education interventions is an area that needs to be further researched, particularly how the students' initiatives become a continuous practice within the community. Comparative studies between different contexts of post conflict may be helpful to get better understanding of circumstances in which peace education can play its optimum role in reconciliation and resilience. The research puts Sri Lanka on the global agenda and proposes a broader scope of reference: the use of higher education as peacebuilding and sustainable development instrument in post-conflict societies.

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Table 3: Conclusion of the Study

Theme	Key Findings	Contributions	Implications to Practice
Empathy	Students developed compassion and moved beyond ethnic divisions.	Demonstrates the role of peace education in fostering reconciliation through emotional and moral growth.	Integrate experiential learning (role plays, storytelling, service projects) into curricula to cultivate empathy and reduce prejudice in diverse classrooms.
Intercultural Dialogue	Dialogue created mutual understanding and challenged inherited conflict narratives.	Highlights dialogue as a bridge between theory and lived experience in post-conflict contexts.	Embed structured dialogue sessions and intercultural exchanges in academic programs to normalize critical reflection and dismantle inherited biases.
Inclusivity	Marginalized voices gained recognition, but structural barriers persisted.	Identifies the need for institutional reforms to embed inclusivity into curricula and practice.	Adopt participatory pedagogy and revise institutional policies to ensure marginalized groups have sustained representation and influence in decision making.
Community Responsibility	Students linked peace education to sustainable development through collective projects.	Connects peace education directly to SDGs, showing its potential for resilience and sustainability.	Encourage community based projects and partnerships with local organizations to translate peace education into tangible contributions toward sustainable development.
Institutional Support	Universities acted as catalysts but lacked mechanisms for practical application.	Calls for stronger frameworks to bridge the gap between theory and practice in higher education.	Develop institutional frameworks (internships, applied research, policy labs) that connect peace education theory with real world practice and policy impact.
<i>Source: Author originated synthesis</i>			

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