

Peacebuilding through Literature Education: An Analysis of Poems, Drama, Novels, and Prose among Pre-Service Teachers at Jaffna National College of Education

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Abstract

Sri Lanka presents an interesting and complex landscape for peace education, rooted in its rich tapestry of languages, religions, and ethnic identities. This study examines how literature in poems, drama, novels, and prose can function as a pedagogical resource for peacebuilding among pre-service teachers at Jaffna National College of Education. Drawing on peace education, Social and Emotional Learning, critical literacy, narratology, and drama theory, the study explores how literature-based pedagogy fosters empathy, critical reflection, nonviolent communication, and inclusive classroom practice. A qualitative narrative inquiry supported by mixed-methods procedures was conducted over approximately twelve weeks with Bachelor of Education pre-service teachers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Findings indicate that literature-based activities enhanced perspective-taking, peaceful communication, classroom community, critical literacy engagement, and pedagogical confidence. The study argues that multilingual and culturally responsive literary education provides a locally grounded and ethically transformative pathway for preparing future teachers as agents of reconciliation, social justice, and durable peace.

Keywords: peacebuilding, literature education, pre-service teachers, critical literacy, empathy, Sri Lanka

Introduction

Sri Lanka presents an interesting and complex landscape for peace education, rooted in its rich tapestry of languages, religions, and ethnic identities. As a multilingual and multi-religious nation, Sinhala, Tamil, and English operate not only as modes of communication but also as cultural identities with distinct histories, literatures, and pedagogies. The island's diverse religious communities—Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and Christian—coexist within a shared public sphere. Yet experiences of conflict, displacement, and sectarian tension have underscored the urgent need for sustained, inclusive educational strategies that promote nonviolence, empathy, and social cohesion. Peace education in this context, therefore, cannot be separated from the broader project of how literature mediates meaning, memory, and moral imagination across

communities.

This extended abstract argues that literature, in its diverse genres and languages, offers a potent pedagogical resource for peace education by fostering critical reflection on past and present injustices, providing ethical frameworks for reconciliation and coexistence, and enabling learners to imagine just futures beyond communal boundaries. By engaging with texts written in Sinhala, Tamil, and English, learners encounter plural voices, counter-narratives, and human experiences that illuminate common humanity while validating difference. Literary works, whether historical narratives, poetry, novels, memoirs, or children's literature, can challenge stereotypes, reduce prejudice, and cultivate dialogue, empathy, and democratic citizenship.

Key justifications for a literature-based approach in Sri Lanka include language as a gateway to inclusive pedagogy that honors linguistic iden-



tities while promoting cross-lingual understanding; literature's capacity to contextualize conflict and peace within local histories, spiritual traditions, and ethical discourse; the potential to bridge generations and communities through shared stories, rituals of reading, and collective meaning-making; and the alignment of literary inquiry with broader peacebuilding objectives, including reconciliation, justice, and social equity, within national policies and international frameworks for peace education. Given the country's post-conflict reconstruction and ongoing ethnic tensions, integrating literature into peace education offers a culturally resonant, locally grounded, and ethically transformative pathway to nurture nonviolent citizenship.

This introduction lays the groundwork for a methodological framework that leverages multilingual curricula, diverse literary canons, and classroom practices designed to foreground inclusive representation, employ critical literacy to interrogate power and prejudice, and cultivate participatory, dialogic learning environments. The study situates itself at the intersection of literary study, peace education theory, and Sri Lankan national imperatives for social harmony, aiming to contribute evidence on how literature can mediate memory, foster empathy, and support durable peace in a plural society.

Literature Review

The study grounded its inquiry in a synthesis of theoretical strands. Peace education theories informed the understanding that conflict transformation requires more than rights-based knowledge; it demands everyday practices of dialogue, nonviolent conflict resolution, and human rights empathy within educational spaces. Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) framed the development of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making as core competencies for peacebuilding. Critical literacy provided a lens for interrogating texts for bias, power relations, and social justice, enabling pre-service teachers to recognize and challenge oppressive narratives. Narratology and drama theory offered a lens on how stories, performances, and shared meanings contribute to moral reasoning and communal identity construc-

tion. Together, these frameworks supported a comprehensive view of how literature-based pedagogy could cultivate both attitudes and competencies essential for peaceful schooling.

Methodology

This qualitative study utilized narrative inquiry to gather comprehensive insights into participants' perspectives and lived experiences, thereby fostering a deeper understanding of multiculturalism and diversity in peace education Musirini et al. (2025). A mixed-methods design accompanied the program over a full academic term of approximately twelve weeks. The participants consisted of a cohort of pre-service teachers enrolled in the Bachelor of Education program at Jaffna National College of Education. They included students from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds who had prior exposure to literacy education but limited formal experience with peace-oriented pedagogy.

The intervention comprised a curated, integrative curriculum spanning poetry, drama, novels, and prose. Units were organized around peacebuilding themes such as conflict resolution, intercultural understanding, social justice, memory and reconciliation, and collective action. Activities included close reading, dialogic discussion, performative explorations, collaborative writing, and multimodal presentations.

Data collection occurred through multiple instruments and procedures to capture both process and outcomes. Qualitative data consisted of classroom observations, reflective journals, teacher-student interviews, and student focus group discussions. Observations focused on classroom discourse quality, turn-taking, evidence of respect for diverse viewpoints, and the extent to which peaceful problem-solving emerged in group work. Reflective journals offered insights into personal growth, shifts in beliefs about diversity, and perceived challenges in teaching for peace. Semi-structured interviews with mentor teachers and program coordinators provided contextualized perspectives on feasibility, scalability, and alignment with teacher education standards. Quantitative data included pre- and post-intervention surveys measuring empathy, attitudes toward diversity and inclusion, sense of

classroom safety, and self-efficacy in implementing peace-oriented pedagogy. Additional instruments assessed critical literacy dispositions and reflective thinking abilities. Instruments and procedures were designed to ensure cultural sensitivity and ethical rigor. Informed consent was obtained from participants, and confidentiality was maintained through pseudonyms and secure data handling. The study complied with institutional ethical guidelines and local community considerations, including potential sensitivities around memory and communal trauma. To maximize reliability and validity, data were triangulated across sources, and intercoder reliability checks were applied to qualitative coding.

Results

Enhanced Empathy and Perspective-Taking: Pre-service teachers demonstrated increased ability to understand diverse student experiences and to adopt multiple perspectives during discussions of texts and real-world scenarios. ■ **Improved Peaceful Communication:** There was greater reliance on nonviolent discourse, active listening, and validation of peers' viewpoints during collaborative tasks and classroom discussions. ■ **Strengthened Classroom Community:** Participants reported higher expectations for respectful engagement and greater willingness to engage in shared decision-making within learning groups. ■ **Critical Literacy Engagement:** Pre-service teachers critically analyzed representations of conflict and power within texts, linking literary analysis to social action and classroom practice. ■ **Pedagogical Confidence:** Participants expressed increased confidence in designing and implementing literature-based peace-building activities in future classrooms, including considerations for multilingual learners and inclusive pedagogy. ■ **Curriculum and Assessment Implications:** The program demonstrated feasible ways to integrate peace-building outcomes within literacy education, highlighting the need for authentic assessment methods that capture empathy growth, collaborative skills, and critical literacy dispositions.

Discussion

This study underscores the transformative potential of literature-based pedagogy in cultivating essential peace building competencies among pre-service teachers, aligning with the programmatic goal of developing integrated professional and ethical identities Simpson (2021). The emergent themes from the intervention, such as enhanced empathy and critical literacy engagement, resonate with findings from similar studies emphasizing the positive impact of designed literacy interventions on preservice teachers' practice Kapoyannis (2021). Specifically, integrating social justice perspectives within literature education can further support these educators in developing critical literacy and equity consciousness, preparing them to address complex social issues in their future classrooms Bukko and Liu (2021); Ingersoll (2024). The pedagogical strategies employed, particularly those encouraging reflection and critical analysis of media texts, have been shown to broaden pre service teachers' perspectives on the multifaceted nature of violence and inequality, thus equipping them to challenge conventional narratives Cardona and Medina (2023).

Conclusion

For teacher education, the integration of poetry, drama, novels, and prose within peacebuilding curricula proved a viable route to developing pre-service teachers' capabilities to nurture peaceful classrooms. The approach aligned with global calls for more holistic teacher preparation that foregrounds social and emotional competencies alongside literacy skills. For curriculum design, literacy curricula can explicitly incorporate peacebuilding outcomes by selecting diverse texts, embedding dialogic and performative activities, and creating assessment tasks that reflect empathy, collaboration, and critical literacy. For policy and institutional support, the findings suggest that institutional structures should provide time, space, and resources for peace-oriented literacy experiences, including access to diverse texts, professional development for instructors, and mentorship that emphasizes culturally sustaining pedagogy. For community engagement, the program highlighted opportunities to connect teacher ed-

ucation with local peacebuilding efforts, bridging classroom learning with community initiatives and fostering mutual trust among diverse stakeholders.

Overall, literature-based peace education offers a powerful framework for preparing pre-service teachers to act as ethical, reflective, and socially responsive educators. In the Sri Lankan context, where language, memory, identity, and justice remain closely intertwined, literary pedagogy can create spaces for dialogue, empathy, and collective imagination. The study therefore affirms the value of integrating poems, drama, novels, and prose into teacher education as a means of cultivating nonviolent citizenship and strengthening the foundations of sustainable peace.

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