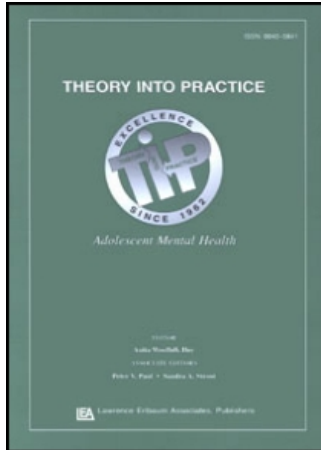


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### School-Based Peace Building in Sierra Leone

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*Diane Bretherton*  
*Jane Weston*  
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## School-Based Peace Building in Sierra Leone

*This article describes the development of a peace education project, including the Peace Education Kit, in schools in Sierra Leone. The program, initiated by the World Bank, has involved working partnerships between local and international agencies and provides a case study of how schools can work with the community to contribute to a national peace-building effort. The project is based in peace theory and the materials developed are integrated into the school curriculum. The approach taken is one of capacity building—working with teachers, workers from nongovernment organizations (NGOs), and mentors. Some of the issues that affect peace education in a postconflict situation, including trauma and religion, are discussed.*

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I was ordered to kill an old woman. When I refused I was tied up and beaten. They threatened to shoot me instead. Then I did something to her. (Saidu, 11 years cited in Pesonen, 2002)

We had peace and then we had war and, God willing, we will have peace again. (Participant in first Sierra Leone *Peace Education Kit* workshop, January 2002)

I use lots of drama and dance because the children really enjoy it. I also use physical games and sports, in part to get the children to accept defeat as much as victory. One they have really enjoyed is the tug of peace rather than tug of war. (Teacher from Bombali District, Sierra Leone, on using the *Peace Education Kit*, March 2005)

**S**ITUATED IN WESTERN AFRICA, Sierra Leone comes up on a number of indexes as the most disadvantaged of nations. The United Nations Human Development Report 2004 noted that Sierra Leone was the lowest ranked of 177 nations surveyed, including having the third-lowest per capita gross domestic product and life expectancy, and having the highest infant mortality rate.

Sierra Leone was a British colony until independence in 1961. The languages spoken are English and Krio, a creole admixture of English, pidgin, and indigenous African. The number of Muslims and Christians in the population is equally divided and a number of animistic indigenous beliefs still hold sway. Though the people are extremely poor, Sierra Leone is a source of valuable diamonds.

In 1991, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) began attacks against the government and kidnapping, brutality, and terrorism were used to force young people into the armed struggle. A hallmark of the RUF's tactics was the use of amputation—when President Kabbah called for the people to join hands for peace, the RUF delivered bundles of cut-off hands to the steps of parliament house. The war finally ceased in 2000, thanks to UN intervention. Postconflict Sierra Leone is characterized by loss of life, displacement, trauma, and severely damaged government infrastructure. More than 20,000 lives have been lost as a direct result of the conflict, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that more than 500,000 people (10% of the population) are refugees, asylum seekers, or internally displaced people (World Bank, 2002, p. 9).

The international aid community has responded with the provision of technical expertise across a range of social domains. In education, over 80% of all schools in Sierra Leone are managed by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Organizations such as UNICEF, Plan Sierra Leone, the Norwegian Refugee Council, and others have implemented nonformal primary education programs since 1992, and in some instances since prior to the war (World Bank, 2002). The capacity of the Sierra Leone Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MOEST) and others to monitor and coordinate the delivery of these education services has been severely compromised by the war and resulting loss of communications and infrastructure.

“Violence affects schools at multiple levels; attacking individuals, communities and systems and weakening their sense of agency” (Williams, 2004, p. 471). Some of the main education issues for Sierra Leone include the destruction of the

school system; the trauma suffered by children and the wider community; the need to reintegrate former combatants, who are themselves children; and the challenge of understanding the past and rebuilding a secure society.

### Peace Building

Following the views of peace theorists such as Boulding (1996) and Galtung (1996), the UN promotes a holistic view of peace as more than simply an absence of war. The idea of a culture of peace introduces the notion of shared values linking its member nations and the diverse peoples of the world. It is not so much a peace that is kept by authorities using force, but a peace that is created or built by civil society working in partnership with institutions of the state.

Within this broad view of peace, three main approaches can be discerned. Peacekeeping involves deploying armed forces to ensure there is an absence of hostilities. Peacemaking entails ensuring the cessation of hostilities and the implementation of peace accords. Peacemaking is signaled by the resumption, in the short term, of everyday life—the reopening of schools and shops, the restoration of transport services, and the existence of work opportunities. However, in the long term, to simply rebuild a war-torn society is not enough. A commitment to laying down the foundations for a more peaceful society and removing the policies and practices that led to the war in the first place is known as peace building. This approach needs not only buildings but also builders, hence the current commitment in the international community to capacity building and peace education in post-conflict societies.

### The Sierra Leone Peace Education Kit Project

Peace education can be defined as

the process of promoting the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values needed to bring about behavior changes that will enable children, youth, and adults to prevent conflict and violence, both overt and

structural; to resolve conflict peacefully; and to create the conditions conducive to peace whether at an intrapersonal, interpersonal, inter-group, national or international level. (Fountain, 1999, p. 6)

Peace pedagogy emphasizes the role of the peace educator as one who works with students to develop a more positive and elaborate concept of peace, leading them from the most obvious manifestation, the absence of war, through an appreciation of less-visible forms of violence—such as structural inequalities—towards an understanding of the conditions which build positive peace.

Young people played an important role, as combatants and as victims, in the civil conflict in Sierra Leone. As part of its Rehabilitation of Basic Education project, the World Bank decided to ensure that peace education was included in the new curriculum. Though there were already other peace education resources available, most notably the UNHCR's excellent Peace Education Programme kit (2000), none had been developed to specifically address the issues relevant to Sierra Leone.

In 2001, the Bank contracted Curriculum Corporation, a leading Australian education publisher and project management company, to assist them in this goal. Curriculum Corporation's task was initially to develop peace education teaching materials that could be delivered by teachers across a range of school subject areas from years 1 to 9. This was followed in 2003 by an implementation and evaluation program, supported by a World Bank Post-Conflict Fund grant. The project staff include the project manager, Jane Weston, Curriculum Corporation; peace education consultant, Diane Bretherton, University of Melbourne; and education writer and consultant, Vic Zbar. In the first stage of the project, MOEST provided local support; in the second stage, staff from Plan Sierra Leone provided training and assistance to local teachers, as well as other organizational support for the project.

### Developing the Curriculum

The first step in the program was to gather information about the various peace education materials and approaches being used in Sierra Leone.

Weston and Bretherton traveled to Freetown in January 2002 to meet with MOEST and subsequently plan and conduct a 3-day workshop with more than 50 participants from formal and nonformal education settings. It was clear from the workshop that there were admirable examples of best practice that could provide a starting point for a wider and more systematic peace education program in schools. Participants provided the consultants with copies of materials being used in a variety of formal and nonformal education settings in Sierra Leone. They also alerted the consultants to a range of relevant education and community issues including poverty, trauma, fear, dislocation, and problems associated with the return of excombatants and victims (sometimes amputees) to communities. In addition, approximately 50% of the children in Sierra Leone were not attending school, 50% of teachers were not trained or qualified, and there was a serious shortage of current curriculum materials.

The instructions from the stakeholders were clear. The materials should be inclusive of local input and cultural content, be able to stand alone and be integrated into the Sierra Leone syllabus, flexible and suitable for use in nonformal as well as school settings, be sensitive to Krio and indigenous languages, be written for community workers as well as teachers, be owned by the stakeholders, and have student activities integrated into teacher training modules. Any names, traditions, and so on that were to be included needed to be drawn from Sierra Leone and not other countries or regions, whether African or not.

Back in Australia, the three consultants met to work out a framework to ensure consistency of approach and content. Using this framework, Zbar, assisted by three Australian subject area specialists, wrote the first draft of the Sierra Leone *Peace Education Kit*. A secure consultation Web site was created to allow colleagues in Sierra Leone to view the materials as they were developed. A Sierra Leone-based project officer was contracted to undertake an initial feedback workshop prior to the consultants returning to Freetown to further refine the kit.

The kit consists of four main sections. The introduction sets out the philosophy of peace educa-

tion. Second, a set of cross-curriculum units covers broad issues teachers may need to take up in their efforts to strengthen peace in Sierra Leone. Third, curriculum units are divided into the areas of English, social studies, health and physical education, and the arts, for students in years 1–2, 3–4, 5–6, 7–8, and 9. Finally, there are whole-school and community activities designed to build a more peaceful school and community in general. Each of the lessons provided in the kit includes specific advice on time required; objectives of the lesson; how teachers should prepare to teach it; required resources, such as chalk or a story to read; the way the lesson should be introduced; instruction on how to teach the lesson and things that students might do; how to end the lesson; suggested further activities for students; assessments that might be useful; and other lessons or activities that teachers might want to do next.

In June 2002, Weston and Zbar returned to Freetown with a complete set of draft materials. A second 2-day workshop brought together a group drawn from the initial consultation and teacher training institutions across the country. As well as collecting feedback on the materials, the aim of this workshop was to model some of the values-clarification activities underpinning the kit and elicit from participants how they might use the materials in their various domains and roles. For example, teacher training colleges might plan to use the materials in their preservice teacher training courses, the MOEST might implement the kit in the context of broader teacher training initiatives, and teachers might plan how to use the materials at the school or faculty level. At the conclusion of this visit, it was clear that the material, after some amendment, would be a useful resource in a range of educational settings.

### Working With Teachers

The implementation phase focused on building the capacity of teachers to use the kit for peace building. Our approach to peace education emphasizes process as well as content and the primary and active role played by teachers. The pedagogy—the way in which peace education is done—is as important as the material that is taught.

Schools can teach a great deal about peace and conflict through their approach to knowing. Tidwell (2004) pointed out that children learn very different lessons when knowledge is presented as fixed, authoritative, and unquestionable, as compared to presenting knowledge as interpreted and interpretable, inquiry-based, democratic, and critical. Our aim was to move the educational approach from what Freire (1993) called the banking theory of education, where deposits of knowledge were placed in learners' heads, to a more dynamic education that raises critical consciousness.

The *Peace Education Kit* promotes a variety of alternatives to the use of violence in resolving conflict and places strong emphasis on the use of child-centered pedagogy, offering teachers fresh insights into participative methodologies. Importantly, the kit combines pedagogy with curriculum content, creating a teacher resource that is easy to use and written in plain language. The consultative process ensured that the materials conformed with the Sierra Leone curriculum and were culturally sensitive and appropriate.

Working in partnership with Curriculum Corporation in Australia, Plan Sierra Leone selected 15 mentors who could train teachers in the use of the kit and also support and monitor the teachers' subsequent work in classrooms. In October 2003, Weston and Zbar went to Sierra Leone and conducted a training program for these mentors. Only nine mentors were actually required for the program, but the others acted as backups. The nine mentors were then assigned one of three regions within one of three districts—Moyamba, Kailahun, and Bombali—where they distributed copies of the *Peace Education Kit* and conducted teacher training. Altogether the mentors reached 90 schools, 900 classroom teachers, and an estimated 4,000 children. Sixty percent of the selected schools were located in urban locations, with the remainder in rural locations. To allow assessment of the impact of the project, 15 comparison schools (receiving no mentor support or input) were chosen in the same districts. Every effort was made to match key variables between the target schools and the comparison schools, including geographic location, total enrollment, gender divisions, and socioeconomic standing.

The training was designed to improve overall classroom teaching skills and help students and teachers build peaceful environments. It was also an essential means to deliver the kit directly to the teachers, as infrastructural difficulties might otherwise have delayed or prevented teachers from obtaining copies of the materials.

Following the training, the mentors have been observing teachers and holding postobservation conferences that encourage teachers to reflect on their current methodologies and uncover ways to improve their skills. Mentors are also providing guidance on the use of various resources described in the kit to make the lessons more effective and suggesting ways to make the overall school climate more conducive for teaching and learning. In addition, mentors are monitoring the use of skills in responding to disciplinary issues and how they are addressed. Mentors repeatedly stress that peace education is not merely a typical classroom subject, but an approach that results in a child-friendly environment that promotes psychosocial adjustment. Monitored behaviors, for example, showing the elimination of corporal punishment by teachers, or an increased ability of students to raise questions in class, are indicative of healthy psychological and social adjustments.

The mentors are looking for a range of key observation points identified in their initial training, such as peace-building initiatives at the school level, that produce an impact in the surrounding school communities. They are taking note of the skills gained by teachers and students participating in the program, focusing on the number and variety of learner-centered teaching methods used in relation to ideas introduced by the kit, the use of outside resources, the development of aids by teachers that enhance principles supported by the kit and the training, and the ability of students to formulate and articulate questions during the presentation of lessons.

## Evaluation

The program uses an action research methodology, which involves cycles of planning, implementing, observing, and evaluating at each phase of the project. The cycles of action and reflection

are consistent with peace education and allow for constant checking back with partners. The use of this methodology models and reinforces the idea that knowledge is constructed collectively, rather than imposed by a powerful expert.

A baseline survey, developed by Jean Russell of The University of Melbourne on behalf of Curriculum Corporation, was conducted for both sets of schools (those using the kit and those with no intervention) at the outset of the program, with follow-up conducted in January/February 2005. The questionnaires were tested and revised with the help of the mentors during the October 2003 training session to ensure they were culturally appropriate and easy for teachers to complete.

The first survey provided baseline measures of the teachers' sense of efficacy (capacity to make a difference to students' well-being and learning in relation to peace education themes), the degree of implementation by individual teachers of the peace education curriculum and pedagogy (attitudes and actions), and the perceived leadership and school-level support for peace education initiatives. It further measured the perceived impact of peace education teaching and learning on the teachers themselves (e.g., empathic perspective taking, conflict resolution, tolerance, pedagogy), on students (e.g., sense of well being, conflict resolution skills, active learning, attitudes about the future), and on the school culture (e.g., staff modeling of values and skills; staff and student involvement in decision making; perceptions of trust, safety, and respect). In addition, the trial teachers completed questions aimed at evaluating the *Peace Education Kit* training and the usefulness of the kit in their teaching.

When the survey was repeated in early 2005, the data were supplemented with material from a survey of head teachers in trial and comparison schools and qualitative data gathered at workshops and focus groups of teachers, students, and others. At the time of writing this article, the second survey results have not yet been fully evaluated, but are expected to examine broader questions, such as the extent to which the communication skills of teachers and students have improved, the types of techniques employed by teachers and students to resolve issues of conflict without re-

sorting to violence, the range of coping mechanisms that teachers and students have developed for dealing with traumatic events, and types of peace-building initiatives that have emerged at the school and community level.

There is preliminary evidence from focus group meetings conducted in February/March 2005 that indicates that the *Peace Education Kit*, together with the mentor support provided, has contributed significantly toward changing teaching practices, student involvement, and even community attitudes. Of the numerous responses gathered, a representative comment from a teacher in Bombali district was that

We had problems with the treatment of trauma children, and the kit's stories and activities are helping us to manage these. Conflict resolution activities also have been important because pupils are now resolving more disputes amongst themselves, without resort to violence.

A Kailahun chief also commented that

Something like this kit is much needed in a community like ours, where it helps to create a more lively community. Seeing peace education being brought here in such a worked-out way is very important, and giving people the tools to work with is already having a positive effect.

Indeed, the most consistent message of the meetings was that demand for the kit exceeded supply, with teachers in nontrial schools wanting to obtain copies.

### Capacity-Building Approach

Our definition of peace education includes working at the intrapersonal, interpersonal, intergroup, national, or international levels. Theoretically, we see these levels as nested within one another in an ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) so that events within one system will have repercussions at the other levels. The *Peace Education Kit* project methodology is also grounded in ideas derived from "structuration" theory as described by Jabri (1996), who sug-

gested the relationship between the structure of a system and the agency of the actors is complex and the process of transformation is a duet. The systems have a tendency to reproduce themselves, but actors have some power to change their circumstances. Some outcomes can be predicted, but there is also the possibility of unforeseen effects, suggesting the need to monitor interventions for unintended as well as intended effects.

These theoretical ideas suggest that, rather than attempting to bring about change by working against existing systems, an intervention should work with the people and systems that are in place. This approach should enhance their capacity to shape their own lives and environment within the framework provided by the values of a culture of peace.

### Features of the Capacity-Building Approach

The capacity-building approach used in the project is evident at a number of levels and coordinates a top-down and bottom-up approach to peace building in schools. At the top level is the sponsorship and direction provided by a global body, the World Bank. At the grassroots level is the direct experiential knowledge of the teachers and NGO workers that was acknowledged and drawn on in the development of the kit. This knowledge was also enhanced by the workshops, which provided opportunities to meet with other workers, discuss issues with international experts, and have access to well-written and systematic materials based on their pooled experience.

Another feature of the capacity-building approach is the cooperation of formal and informal education agencies. A common criticism of education kits is that they sit unused on shelves, but the *Peace Education Kit* has been used widely and appears to be in high demand. This could be attributed, at least in part, to the cooperation of the NGO sector and the MOEST in the development and distribution of the materials. The kit was structured to be an integral part of the MOEST school curriculum, and with the MOEST name on the cover, teachers are more willing to take up the materials.

Another important feature of the capacity-building approach is cooperation across cultures. There was initially some resistance, even incredulity, on the part of the first workshop participants when they met Bretherton and Weston, the two Australian women consultants. It was not long, however, before the participants found themselves engrossed in stories from Bretherton of the struggles and peace-building efforts of people like themselves in distant parts of the world. If local activists, cut off from communication by conflict, can find the opportunity to look at a broader picture, it can lift their feeling of burden and remind them that they are not alone.

Boyden (2003) noted that, in Sierra Leone, rebels employed the strategy of forcing children to commit atrocities to alienate them from their families and communities. This raised the question of the extent to which we need to talk about and understand the past before we can move beyond it. On the one hand, it is accepted practice in the aftermath of conflict to work to some degree with trauma in a psychosocial program. For example, Fuertes (2004, p. 491) stated, "I believe that trauma healing is a vital component of any peace and community building process." On the other hand, a number of those participating in our workshops wanted to omit any reference to trauma from the classroom altogether for fear of causing more hurt and conflict among students. In a situation where all the children were victims of the poverty, educational chaos, lack of security caused by the war, and many bear terrible physical scars, it seemed to the consultants to be unrealistic to pretend that nothing is the matter. In the context of working together across cultural boundaries, this raised the question of who was to make the final decision about this issue. In the end, it was decided to include a carefully written but substantial element on trauma, with an indirect approach, using stories about the experiences of other people, and acknowledgment that teachers as well as students had been exposed to trauma.

### Religion and Peace

One of the most interesting aspects of peace education in Sierra Leone concerns the role played

by religion. There is a high degree of tolerance and cooperation between Christians and Muslims. It is commonplace to say the Lord's prayer in English and a Muslim prayer in Arabic at the start of meetings, and many individuals participate in both devotions with equal familiarity and comfort. The mutual respect and cooperation that exist between Sierra Leone's Christian and Muslim populations is a fine example to other parts of the world.

The strong hold of religion was evident in the workshops we conducted. The curriculum materials, stories, and picture books collected as examples of local use carried the imprint and discourse of earlier missionary endeavors. Even quite shy participants could present their ideas with resounding strength, as if from a pulpit. This provided a strong value base from which to work, but with a more problematic side for us as peace educators. As the quote from a workshop participant that introduces this article shows, peace is conceived of as something that God bestows, which removes a sense of human agency.

We are not the first to comment on this. The first report of the Secretary General of United Nations Mission to Sierra Leone in 1999 called for a change in reasoning methods. It seemed to him that there was a lack of linkage between criminal acts and repercussions, with a detachment of consequences from the human actions that gave rise to them. To what extent this is a cause, and to what extent it is a result of disempowerment by overwhelming social, political, and economic forces, is not clear.

### Conclusion

The development of this project is a continuing story and we are merely at the end of a chapter. Despite the fragile nature of the peace in Sierra Leone, there are some grounds for optimism. The capacity-building approach has worked well to create a productive, cooperative result that is appreciated by the recipients. Rather than peace education being marginal to the curriculum in Sierra Leone, the *Peace Education Kit* is now central to teacher training where it has been introduced. The continuous monitoring and evaluation built into

the program will help to further refine the kit and provide more information about the questions we have raised. Should this trial implementation be successful, it is to be hoped that the kit will be distributed more widely and possibly adapted for use in other contexts.

I just get a feeling of a more peaceful atmosphere in the schools I visit. There is more mingling in the playground, especially among boys and girls who before did not really play together. (Mentor working in Bombali district, Sierra Leone)

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