

Community Building Through Peace Education: Sierra Leone

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Abstract

This paper describes the development of a peace education project, including a Peace Education Kit, in schools in Sierra Leone. The project, 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. Importantly, the project design and implementation relies heavily on building capacity at the school and community level through the development of culturally specific and relevant curriculum materials, with attendant built-in teacher training elements, a mentor training program and an ongoing teacher support strategy. There are early indications that the approach encourages positive community building in a sustainable and flexible manner, and that schools can play a vibrant and ongoing role in community peace-building in post-conflict settings.

Keywords

Peace education, community building, Sierra Leone, curriculum development, capacity building

Background

Sierra Leone is located in Western Africa and was the lowest ranked of 177 nations surveyed in the recent United Nation's (UN) *Human Development Report 2004*. The country has the third-lowest per capita GDP and life expectancy, and highest infant mortality rate. While the people are extremely poor, Sierra Leone is a source of valuable diamonds.

Sierra Leone was a British colony until independence in 1961. The languages spoken are English and Krio, a mixture of English, pidgin and indigenous African. There are approximately equal numbers of Muslims and Christians in the population and a number of animistic indigenous beliefs are also widespread.

In 1991, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) began attacks against the government, and many young people were forced to take part in the armed struggle. A signature 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 ended in 2000, thanks to UN intervention. Post-conflict Sierra Leone has had to deal with major loss of life, population displacement, trauma and severely damaged government infrastructure. More than 20,000 people have died as a direct result of the conflict, and the UNHCR estimates that more than 500,000 people (ten per cent 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 in a wide range of fields. In education, over 80 per cent of all schools in Sierra Leone are managed by non-government organisations (NGOs). Since 1992, organisations such as UNICEF, Plan Sierra Leone, the Norwegian Refugee Council and others have implemented non-formal primary education programs (World Bank 2002, p. 11), as 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 themselves has been severely compromised by the war and resulting loss of communications and infrastructure.

What is peace education?

Following the views of peace theorists such as Boulding (1996) and Galtung (1996), the United Nations promotes a holistic view of peace as more than simply an absence of war. A culture of peace includes the idea of shared values linking 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, and communities working in partnership with government institutions.

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* ensures the ending of hostilities and implementation of peace accords, and is signalled by the resumption, in the short term, of everyday life — the re-opening of schools and shops, the restoration of transport services and the provision of work opportunities. However, in the long term, to simply rebuild the infrastructure of a war-torn society is not enough. To encourage long-lasting peace, it is essential to lay down the foundations for a civil society and remove the policies and practices which led to the war in the first place. This 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, community building and peace education in post-conflict societies.

Peace education can be defined as “the process of promoting the knowledge, skills attitudes and values needed to bring about behaviour 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). The peace educator’s role is paramount in peace education. The peace educator 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.

Why a peace education kit?

Young people played an important role, both as combatants and as victims, in the civil conflict in Sierra Leone. The World Bank, in collaboration with the Sierra Leone Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MOEST), decided to ensure that peace education was included in the new curriculum which was part of its Rehabilitation of Basic Education project. While there were already other peace education available, such as the UNHCR’s excellent *Peace Education Programme* kit (2000), none specifically addressed the issues relevant to Sierra Leone.

In 2001, the World Bank contracted Curriculum Corporation, a leading Australian education publisher and project management company, to assist them in this goal. Curriculum Corporation began by developing peace education teaching materials (the *Sierra Leone Peace Education Kit*) on behalf of MOEST for delivery by teachers across a range of school subject areas for years 1 to 9. This was followed in 2003 by an implementation and evaluation program, supported by a World Bank Post-Conflict Fund (PCF) grant. This evaluation work is incomplete at time of writing; however, selected anecdotal outcomes are referred to in this paper.

Developing the *Sierra Leone Peace Education Kit*

Curriculum Corporation began the project by gathering information about the various peace education materials and approaches being used at the time in Sierra Leone. Project staff travelled to Freetown in January 2002 to meet with MOEST and subsequently plan and conduct a three-day workshop with over 50 participants from both formal and non-formal education settings. This element of the project design proved to be of key importance, as it demonstrated the intention of project staff to work closely with community and education providers to develop curriculum materials that would be appropriate to Sierra Leone’s cultural, historical and educational context, rather than impose a one-size-fits-all approach.

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 project consultants with copies of materials being used in a variety of formal and non-formal education settings in Sierra Leone. They also pointed out that approximately 50 per cent of the children in Sierra Leone were not attending school, 50 per cent of teachers were not trained or qualified, and there was also a serious shortage of current curriculum materials.

Importantly, the consultants were alerted to a range of relevant education and community issues including poverty, trauma, fear, dislocation, and problems associated with the return of ex-combatants and victims (sometimes amputees) to communities. 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, Fuentes (2004, p. 491) states: "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 between students. In a situation where all the children were victims of the poverty, educational chaos and lack of security caused by the war, and many bear terrible physical scars, such as stumps where their hands have been cut off, 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 issue 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, using an indirect approach, including stories about the experiences of other people, and acknowledging that teachers as well as their students have been exposed to trauma.

As would have been the case in a similar exercise anywhere in the world regarding curriculum development, there was vigorous and healthy debate about where to locate the curriculum and who should teach it. Views included those who believed that peace education ought be a separate subject taught by a special peace education teacher, to those who preferred that the messages be infused across the curriculum and taught by generalist classroom teachers within nominated subjects. This discussion proved to be an important one in the design and structure of the kit, as it demonstrated the need to build the pedagogy or the 'how to' into the content of the materials. Project staff were also able to have the important discussion with workshop participants about peaceful teaching approaches being just as important as the peace messages themselves.

Finally, 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. Due to the severe damage to school buildings and an absence of other education resources, it was also obvious that the kit needed to contain all the materials to be used by teachers and not rely on resources such as blackboards, photocopiers or pre-existing stories or reading materials.

The advice from the workshop was clear. The materials should be:

- inclusive of local input and cultural content
- be both able to stand alone and be integrated into the Sierra Leone syllabus
- be flexible and suitable for use in non-formal as well as school settings
- be sensitive to Krio and indigenous languages
- be written for community workers as well as teachers
- have student activities integrated into teacher training modules
- be owned by the stakeholders.

Following the workshop, project staff returned to Australia where the first draft of the *Sierra Leone Peace Education Kit* was written. A secure consultation website helped colleagues in Sierra Leone to view the materials as they were developed. A project officer based in Sierra Leone was contracted to undertake an initial feedback workshop prior to the consultants returning to Freetown to further refine the kit.

Content of the *Sierra Leone Peace Education Kit*

The *Sierra Leone Peace Education Kit* consists of four main sections:

- The introduction sets out the philosophy of peace education
- A set of cross-curriculum units covers broad issues which teachers may need to take up in their efforts to strengthen peace in Sierra Leone
- Curriculum units 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
- 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:

- the time required
- the objectives of the lesson
- how the teacher will need to prepare to teach it

- the resources they will need, such as chalk or a story to read out
- the way the lesson should be introduced
- how to teach the lesson and the sorts of things that students might do
- how to end the lesson and suggested further activities for students
- any assessment that might be useful
- other lessons or activities that teachers might want to do next.

The inclusion of a specific section on engaging community was important in a country emerging from the traumas of war. As enunciated in the kit, "...More peaceful schools require and contribute to more peaceful communities. There is, therefore, a lot to be gained from connecting your school to your community and your community to your school" (p. W-9).

A number of strategies are suggested, including 'Peace times', 'Peace spaces', 'Peace forums', 'Peace projects' and 'Peace messages'. The following checklist was also included to help guide schools and communities to make links between what is learned at school and broader social outcomes and behaviours.

How well do you engage your community?

Teacher, parent and community checklist

- Does the school have a policy for promoting school–community relations?
- How does the school strengthen its relations with parents? With other community members?
- What opportunities exist for parents and other community members to visit the school? To participate in school activities?
- What opportunities exist for students to participate in community activities? To present their work to parents and the community?
- How are parents informed of the work of the school? Of the performance of their children?
- What changes are required to strengthen school and community relations?

The *Sierra Leone 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, thereby 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.

In June 2002, project staff returned to Freetown with a complete set of draft materials. A second two-day workshop brought together a group drawn from both the initial consultation and from teacher training institutions from 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 within their pre-service 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 a 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 education and community settings. The MOEST reproduced a number of kits for use in a teacher pre-service training program, where it was well received. A World Bank Post-conflict Fund (PCF) grant provided the next opportunity to both trial the kit in selected schools and implement a formal quantitative and qualitative evaluation of the materials.

Trial implementation of the *Peace Education Kit*

With this phase of the work, Curriculum Corporation worked in partnership with Plan Sierra Leone (PSL), a local agency with a mission to improve the lives of children and communities in Sierra Leone. PSL had already participated in the initial consultation phase of the development of the *Sierra Leone Peace Education Kit*, and a strong and trusting relationship was built between Curriculum Corporation and PSL staff. PSL 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, project staff conducted a training program for these mentors. Only nine mentors were actually required for the program, but the others acted as 'backups'. This strategy proved valuable later on in the project when, sadly, one of the original nine mentors died. He was able to be replaced by a backup mentor.

Each of the nine mentors was then assigned one of three regions — Moyamba, Kailahun and Bombali — where he/she distributed copies of the *Sierra Leone Peace Education Kit* and conducted teacher training with ten teachers from each of ten trial schools (100 teachers). Altogether, mentors reached 90 schools, 900 classroom teachers and an estimated 4000 children. Sixty per cent 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 inputs) were chosen in these same districts. Every effort was made to match key variables between the target schools and the comparison schools, such as geographic location, total enrolment, gender divisions and socio-economic standing.

The teacher training replicated the training the mentors had received from project staff and was designed to improve overall classroom teaching skills and help students and teachers build peaceful environments. This train-the-trainer model was a powerful approach in setting up small professional learning communities within trial schools. It was also an essential means to deliver the kit directly to the teachers, as infrastructure difficulties might otherwise have delayed or prevented teachers from obtaining copies of the materials. Indeed, the dissemination strategy proved so successful, that the biggest problem encountered by many of the mentors was constant approaches from non-trial schools trying to obtain copies of the kit.

Since the initial training, the mentors have continued to visit their ten schools, observing teachers and holding post-observation conferences and a variety of other support activities that encourage teachers to reflect on their current practice and uncover ways for them to improve their skills. As each of the project schools involves at least ten teachers across the subject areas articulated earlier, an important critical mass for change has been introduced within these schools. Mentors are also providing guidance on the use of various resources described in the kit to make the lessons more effective and are 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 an ordinary classroom subject, but a teaching approach that results in a child-friendly environment and promotes psychosocial adjustment. Monitored behaviours, 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, focussing on:

- the number and variety of learner-centred teaching methods used by teachers 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
- the ability of students to formulate and articulate questions during the presentation of lessons.

Evaluation of the project

A baseline survey, developed by an independent researcher from the University of Melbourne on behalf of Curriculum Corporation, was conducted for both sets of schools (that is, those using the kit and those with no intervention) at the outset of the program in November 2003, with follow-up conducted in January/February 2005. The questionnaires were tested and revised with the help of the 15 mentors during the October 2003 training session to ensure they were both culturally appropriate and easy for teachers to complete. The first survey provided baseline measures of a variety of indicators, from the teachers' sense of efficacy to the school culture. In addition, the trial teachers completed questions aimed at evaluating both the *Sierra Leone Peace Education Kit* training and the usefulness of the kit in their teaching.

When the survey was repeated in early 2005, the data was supplemented with qualitative data gathered at workshops and focus groups of teachers, students and others. At the time of writing this paper, 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 resorting 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.

Some preliminary feedback

In November 2004 and March 2005, Australia-based project staff visited Freetown to work with PSL in preparing for the second survey administration; monitoring project activities; and conducting focus groups with key stakeholders, including parents, students, teachers, mentors and community members.

There is strong preliminary evidence that the *Sierra Leone Peace Education Kit*, together with the mentor support provided, has contributed significantly to improved teacher pedagogy and increased student involvement and engagement in classrooms in post-conflict Sierra Leone. Classrooms are, according to one teacher:

“...more child-centred. Teachers have stopped doing all of the talking because of the activities in the kit and they are seeking to involve the children more. They also are trying to integrate the concept of peace into other subjects they teach.”

In addition, these developments appear to have spilled over into the community. A Kailahun chief 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.”

The kit recommends the formation of drama clubs and, as a result, a school in Moyamba district has started a drama club which has had a number of broader community outcomes. The plays performed have been written by school students, drawing from student experiences of conflict and demonstrating peaceful methods of settling disputes. As students gained in confidence, the teachers in the school arranged performances in the community as a community-building activity. The school staff have also gained much from increased contact with the community and the perception that important issues are being addressed as part of the school curriculum.

Echoing comments by children and community members, one respondent explained that bullying and violence in schools has been a particular problem. The kit has been particularly important in this regard. One teacher explained how:

“I have focussed on children’s fundamental rights and responsibilities so they now know the rights they are entitled to. This has raised the issue of corporal punishment which still sometimes happens in our schools, but is no good for the child. This is a case where we do have to involve parents more so it goes into the community.”

Students have also reported taking their learning home and applying it actively in family life. Children in Bombali described instances of fighting at home, and how doing peace education had empowered them to intervene in positive ways:

“My mother and father were always fighting. I took the time to talk to my mother about fighting not being good, as I have been taught. I instead advised my mother to seek the help of an elder to avoid the fighting. She welcomed my idea and now, when she expects something bad is going to happen, she finds a neighbour who is respected in our community to intervene. Their fighting has now stopped, which not only solves the problem, but also means I don’t feel so embarrassed anymore.

I came home from school one day and my two younger brothers were fighting. My mother let them fight and said they should keep fighting until they are exhausted and will want to fight no more. I told her this was very wrong because you can’t know what will happen and one of them could have an accident and be seriously hurt or maybe even die. At first my mother was very angry at my talking in this way, but after a while she realised I was right and she appreciated what I had done.”

This preliminary feedback suggests that the *Peace Education Kit* and related implementation strategies have not only been useful at a classroom level, but have had an impact across entire schools and beyond to broader community life. The anecdotal comments collected indicate that teachers are adopting new and more student-centred teaching methodologies, thereby allowing students to explore concepts in new ways and reflect on personal experiences and learn new skills and understandings. Teachers report sharing successful practice with one another and looking to include techniques learned into other curriculum areas.

The feedback also demonstrates that students are taking these new skills and understandings back to their families and playing a role in modelling conflict resolution skills. The growth in drama clubs and other public performance activities shows that this learning is being taken into communities and that schools are playing an important peace-building function. Such outcomes are very encouraging signs in a country desperately needing to rebuild civil society.

Some features of a peace-building approach

The peace-building approach used in the various stages of the Sierra Leone peace education initiative is evident at a number of levels and coordinates a top-down and bottom-up approach to peace education in schools. At the top level is the sponsorship and direction provided by a global body, the World Bank, and the bank's commitment to work with the MOEST at a policy level. At the grassroots level is the direct experiential knowledge of the teachers and NGO workers which was acknowledged and drawn upon in the development of the kit. This knowledge was also enhanced by the consultation workshops, which provided the participants with 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 peace-building approach is the cooperation of formal and informal education agencies. A common criticism of education kits in general is that they sit unused on shelves, but this *Sierra Leone 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 imprimatur on the materials, teachers are more willing to take up the materials.

Another important feature of the peace-building approach is cooperation across cultures. There was initially some resistance, even incredulity, on the part of the first workshop participants when they met the two Australian women consultants. It was not long, however, before the participants found themselves engrossed in stories told by project staff 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.

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 produce a productive, co-operative result that is appreciated by the recipients. Rather than peace education being marginal to the curriculum in Sierra Leone, the *Sierra Leone 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 further information about the questions 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 amongst boys and girls who before did not really play together.” (Mentor working in Bombali district, Sierra Leone, March 2005)

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