

The Impact of Peace Education in Northeast Asia: Educating for Transformation and Learning to Live Together

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1. Introduction

Peace in Northeast Asia may depend upon developing relationships among nations based on mutual respect and trust; this relationship building may be especially important as scars of historical past have not been fully healed since the end of World War II. Japan also faces territorial issues with the neighboring nations. Tensions in Northeast Asia also concern increase in military spending. There is a need to identify peaceful methods for establishing a foundation for reconciliation and diplomatic relations. Peace education is crucial in establishing a peaceful community in Northeast Asia and, peacebuilding is a grave concern of the civil society as it cannot be achieved exclusively by governments and international organizations.

The presentation introduces the significance of peace education in transforming the culture of violence and military to a culture of peace, the civil society activities and efforts in seeking common grounds to overcome regional tension, and the evidence of how peace education training can change attitudes for a better future.

2. Significance of Peace Education

Education for peace includes not only basic literacy but teaching of nonviolent conflict resolution and critical thinking. Betty Reardon, former director of Center for Peace Education at Columbia University in New York, also known as the mother of peace education said that peace education is an education of transformation that aims at profound global cultural change that affects ways of thinking, world views, values, behaviors, relationships, and the structures that make up our public order. This implies great change in the human consciousness and in human society.

Peace Education can help to provide the inspiration and direction to move beyond the culture of violence to envisioning and working toward a culture of peace. Reardon (1988) asserts that peace education is education for transformation. This means “profound global cultural change that affects ways of thinking, world views, values, behaviors, relationships, and the structures that make up our public order. It implies great change in the human consciousness and in human society.” To encourage students and citizens to take action, peace education need to offer programs that are cognitive to raise students’ awareness and understanding of the issue, and affective to help students to respond and feel concerned. (Castro & Galace, 2008)

3. Seeking for Common Ground (CSO Activities)

Since 2003, various efforts by civil society organizations have been made to bring about a better relation in Northeast Asia. To name a few, there is Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC), International Peace Corps of Religions (IPCR) and Northeast Asia Regional Peacebuilding Institute (NARPI). These three organizations have focused on the importance of peace education to search for common grounds to co-work and build a collaborative community that respects and values lives of individuals in the region, to develop non-military and non-violent engagement to prevent conflict and to promote a culture of prevention (not preemption).

4. A Transformational Experience with Northeast Asia Regional Peacebuilding Institute

The Northeast Asia Regional Peacebuilding Institute (NARPI hereon) began in 2009 to strengthen and empower people in Northeast Asia through providing peacebuilding training and building cross-cultural networks (NARPI website). Past venues of NARPI were Seoul and Inje (2011), Hiroshima (2012), Inje (2013), and Nanjing (2014). NARPI 2015 will be held in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. Over 130 people from the region have participated in NARPI trainings and have shared a common vision to transform this region to a culture of peace. Participants are NGO workers, university students, professors, teachers, religious workers and community leaders.

The preamble of the United Nations states that one of the purposes of its establishment is ‘to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.’ There’s a similar part in the preamble of the Japanese Constitution that says, “We, the Japanese people, ..., determined that we shall secure for ourselves and our posterity the fruits of peaceful cooperation with all nations ...and resolved that never again shall we be visited with the horrors of war ... “

And the horrors of war were what the NARPI participants witnessed in Nanjing, China, where they have just experienced the first week of peacebuilding training program. Peace education has helped the peacebuilding participants process this terrible incident and envisioned a positive way forward to propose what they can do to change this cycle of violence and hatred.

The Nanjing Massacre was an incident that happened in 1937 in Nanjing, China where the Japanese military has committed genocide, according to scholarly research, the lowest estimate is 50,000 and the highest estimate is 300,000 given by the Chinese government). This gruesome history was recorded in the museum.

After having taken peacebuilding courses and visited the museum, the participants of the NARPI peacebuilding training, Chinese, Koreans, Mongolians and Japanese, all thought deeply and came up with some questions:

One Mongolian participant explained: “Every horrifying photograph and artifact had an explanation, which said “The Japanese Military did this” or “the Japanese government did that.” Can’t we change the subject of the sentences to “War did this” or “War brought about this horrifying situation? War changed the normal people into beasts and heartless beings?”

One Korean participant said: “No matter what ethnic background we come from, don’t we need to know and predict the possibility that in times of war, we ourselves might build that evil in us and do beastly things that were done in Nanjing?”

One Chinese participant said: “Don’t we have to think what we can do from here? What can we do to make this world a better and safer place to live? What can we do to learn from history and prevent any inhumane activities from happening again?”

One Japanese participant said. “Such horrifying events still happen to this day. We still hear in the news of one country killing people of another country, of one ethnic group killing another ethnic group.”

The Northeast Asian Participants posed such questions and they all responded in solidarity: “What we need to do is to design peace education programs that would enable present and future generations to find nonviolent ways to resolve conflict and change the structure of the world from the culture of war to the culture of peace, just as we have taken the peace building and education sessions, they feel that their attitudes have changed.” Some Chinese participants said that they were brought up to hate the Japanese, but through the five-day training they have completely changed their mindset to more cooperative and accepting attitude. They have eased their ill feelings as they worked together with the Japanese and learned about peace building. They realized that they all were aiming toward a common objective, a peaceful world.

Their change of attitude is a sign of hope, that the participants from various ethnic background and walks of life can learn how to make decisions and find positive ways to go forward.

5. Conclusion

Peace education focuses on the learning of values, attitudes and behaviors to learn to live together in a world of diversity and pluralism.

As a peace educator, we all have a role in this project to educate our future generation and “to save them from the scourges of war.” Peace education begins from the home. Peace education could be taught in schools within any subject, history, language or art. Peace education can be used for citizenship education and adults’ continuing education. I propose that we all call out to the community we live and lead a peace education program, as Eleanor Roosevelt once said: “It isn’t enough to talk about peace, one must believe in it and it isn’t enough to believe in it, one must work at it.”

References

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