

Peace at the heart of education

Education can impart the skills and values needed to prevent potential conflicts

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On October 2 every year, everyone gathers to celebrate the ideals of peace by marking the birthday of Mahatma Gandhi and the International Day of Non-Violence. The day presents an opportunity to explore the causes of violence and reassert a commitment to building a culture of dialogue through education.

The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced new forces of division globally. Levels of hate speech and fear of the 'other' have grown, as people have assigned blame for the virus. Forms of structural violence - the economic, racial and gendered forms of injustice built into social systems - have been exacerbated as marginalised groups, including displaced persons and racialised groups, have been disproportionately affected. Around the world, the consequential surge in inequality is driving instability and tension, fuelling potential social unrest.

In order to rebuild in solidarity, we must understand the root causes of human animosity and make peace with one another. We must think about the structures, attitudes and skills that create and sustain peace.

In 'Pathways for peace', a flagship 2018 report by the World Bank and the United Nations, it was shown that many of the world's conflicts arise from exclusion and feelings of injustice. The question therefore is: how can ignorance and fear of the unknown be overcome through understanding and dialogue?

A policy to strengthen equity

For UNESCO, education is a significant part of the answer because it can impart the skills and values necessary to recognise and prevent potential conflicts and promote tolerance. As the educator Maria Montessori put it: "Preventing war is the work of politicians, establishing peace is the work of educationists".

Education for peace has a rich history in India. The philosophies of various religions, cultures and of Gandhi have non-violence, syncretism and tolerance at their core.

The National Education Policy (NEP) of 2020 also presents a unique opportunity to contribute to strengthening equity, justice and social co-

hesion. The policy has a broad focus on value-based and experiential education, including promoting critical thinking, cultural exchanges, teaching in regional languages, and a commitment to education for all.

This landmark document also advocates for reforms in curricula and pedagogy. As schools reopen, we believe that peace education can be even more integrated within national curricula and the broader learning environment to promote non-violence, conflict resolution and compassion. Equipping children from a young age with the skills to respect the dignity of others is key to building resilient and peaceful societies. Teachers and educators also need to be equipped with skills to promote peace through experiential and interactive methods. Intercultural competencies, like empathy and critical thinking, are best learned through intercultural exchanges and scenario-based learning and not rote learning.

A way forward

Global best practices, promoted through UNESCO, can offer a way forward. Our organisation's approaches to global citizenship, education and intercultural dialogue reinforce the idea that peaceful societies are those that embrace diversity and difference. UNESCO's work to promote media and information literacy and sports for peace equips youth with skills to eradicate harmful stereotypes and stand up against injustice.

Focusing on inclusion, UNESCO highlights the need to recognise and improve opportunities for disadvantaged groups, like women and girls and persons with disabilities. UNESCO also promotes schools as safe and non-violent spaces.

One year into the NEP 2020 and almost two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to assess priorities in education. Beyond discussions around innovation, technology and smart future schools, we need to understand the potential of education systems and schools in building peaceful societies. In times of crisis, education has the ability to provide hope and confidence.

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