

“Conflict Avoidance” As a Structural Power Realization: Dialogic Pedagogy and Peacebuilding Capabilities in Peace Education

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ABSTRACT

Traditional paradigms in communication studies frequently operationalize "conflict avoidance" as an individual psychological deficit, a manifestation of personal shyness, or an ineffective conflict management style that stalls interpersonal resolution. This study challenges this mainstream framework by analyzing qualitative empirical data from student reflections upon completing a peace education course. This study utilizes a qualitative empirical design. Dialogic pedagogies—such as the Johari Window, open forums, and role-playing simulations—were applied to foster structural discernment. Using a qualitative thematic analysis approach, this research systematically categorizes and analyzes textual data to unpack core insights regarding student experiences

This paper uncovers a conceptual shift articulated by students: the re-conceptualization of conflict avoidance not as a personal failure, but as a rational, protective calculation in response to perceived structural power imbalances. Students developed structural discernment, realizing that silence and withdrawal often map directly onto hidden power dynamics within institutional, cultural, and interpersonal spaces. This paper highlights the main patterns in how students view conflict, explains how this affects professional work and suggests that peace education should transform communicative environments. Rather than forcing marginalized individuals to speak up, we should fix the systems and spaces where conversations happen.

Keywords: conflict avoidance, power dynamics, dialogic pedagogy, peace education, peacebuilding

INTRODUCTION

Literature within organizational communication and conflict resolution has operated for decades under an implicit normative bias: the prioritization of vocal expression as the primary, if not exclusive, vehicle for genuine reconciliation and peacebuilding. Within traditional conflict style taxonomies—most notably the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI)—conflict styles are mapped along two behavioral dimensions: assertiveness and cooperativeness (Deepwater, 2025). Within this classic matrix, avoidance is routinely positioned in the bottom-left quadrant, categorized as both unassertive and uncooperative. It is frequently depicted as a passive, dysfunctional mechanism—a flight response that leaves tensions unaddressed, bottles up toxic emotions and allows conflicts to simmer beneath the surface until an inevitable, destructive explosion occurs.

This conventional framing assumes a level playing field. It operates on the liberal-humanist assumption that all actors within a communicative space possess equal communicative agency, equal social capital, and equal safety to articulate their needs. However, in reality, strategic silence often functions as a structural power realization that maintains the status quo by silencing marginalized voices and delegitimizing dissent (Bickmore & Parker, 2014; McDermott et al., 2022). By interrogating this dynamic, this paper argues that dialogic pedagogy must transcend the mere encouragement of verbal deliberation to instead cultivate the sophisticated peacebuilding capabilities necessary for navigating such exclusionary spaces (Hao, 2011; Nugent, 2025). By fostering critical reflection and humanizing dialogue, this research examines how dialogic frameworks can dismantle the institutional constraints that normalize silence as a default peace strategy (Gill & Niens, 2014). Through treating avoidance as an individual psychological deficit or a personal communication flaw, standard

frameworks inadvertently engage in a form of victim-blaming. They task the marginalized, the minority, or the less powerful actor with the psychological and emotional burden of "overcoming their shyness" or "learning to be assertive," while leaving the underlying structures of domination completely unexamined.

By reconceptualizing this silence as a mechanism of power rather than a passive deficit, peace education can instead leverage dialogic pedagogy to transform these latent structural dynamics into active peacebuilding capabilities. This transition necessitates research into how Freirean dialogue can disrupt such entrenched power imbalances, shifting the focus from passive avoidance to critical engagement with structural violence (Gürsel-Bilgin, 2020). In this context, the study poses the question how dialogic pedagogy moves beyond normative voice-centric models to equip students with the capabilities required to transform silence from a tool of institutional exclusion into a site of active, critical engagement (Agyare, 2025). Furthermore, this study investigates the significance of re-evaluating silence as a "refusal stance" or a form of mindful agency that challenges the systemic prioritization of vocal expression as the sole authentic mode of conflict resolution. By shifting the pedagogical focus from mandatory verbalization to the cultivation of "democratic listening", this underscores the necessity of decolonizing classroom discourse to foster genuine peacebuilding capabilities (Su et al., 2023).

Research Objectives

The objective of this study is to investigate how structured dialogic pedagogy can transform students' understanding of conflict, power, and peacebuilding capabilities. This posits that the act of avoiding conflict is not necessarily an evasion of reality or a lack of peacebuilding capacity; rather, it can represent a profound, acute awakening to structural power dynamics. When a student recognizes that their silence is dictated by an imbalance of power, the avoidance transitions from an unconscious psychological defense mechanism to a conscious and structurally literate realization.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative design and phenomenological inquiry. It was conducted within an undergraduate peace education course at a higher education institution in Mindanao, comprising a sample of 80 student-participants. Rather than treating student reflections as mere metrics of course satisfaction, this research views them as deeply situated narratives of cognitive and moral transformation. To capture the depth of these transformations, the study utilizes a qualitative thematic analysis design, which allows for the systematic identification, organization, and generation of insights from textual data.

The data corpus consists of comprehensive, open-ended narrative responses from students. The sample includes reflections from a diverse group of young adults, a significant portion of whom identify as student nurses preparing for entry into the clinical workforce. The course was explicitly structured around active learning, discarding traditional rote memorization in favor of experiential workshops, dialogic case analyses, and collaborative, non-verbal and verbal community mapping exercises. Data were collected via anonymized digital reflection instruments administered at the conclusion of the term. The raw reflections contained personal disclosures regarding family dynamics, cultural identities as Meranaw or Christian individuals in Mindanao, institutional anxieties, and vivid accounts of internal psychological breakthroughs.

The analysis followed the classical six-phase thematic analysis framework established by Braun and Clarke (2013), infusing it with a critical theoretical lens to capture power dynamics. The step-by-step process was executed as follows:

1. **Familiarization with the Data:** The complete dataset was transcribed and read repeatedly to absorb the tone, energy, and emotional nuances of the students' prose.
2. **Initial Code Generation:** Line-by-line open coding was conducted on the text. Phrases such as "tension stays beneath the surface," "imbalance of power," "withdrawing defensively," and "safe enough to speak up" were extracted into an initial codebook.

3. **Searching for Themes:** Codes were clustered into broader candidate themes. Codes mapping individual communication struggles were cross-referenced with codes addressing structural, institutional, or historical contexts.
4. **Reviewing Themes:** Candidate themes were checked against the raw extracts to ensure absolute interpretive fidelity. It was during this phase that the central paradox—avoidance as a structural realization rather than a behavioral deficit—emerged as a core thematic architecture across multiple independent student narratives.
5. **Defining and Naming Themes:** Themes were conceptualized into a structural hierarchy, ensuring a clear progression from interpersonal breakthroughs to systemic realizations and professional applications.
6. **Producing the Report:** The final narrative analysis was constructed, weaving direct student quotations together with critical theory to illustrate the empirical insights.

To ensure absolute academic rigor and ethical compliance, all student identifiers were removed from the text. Trustworthiness was maintained through thick description, reflexivity regarding the researcher's dual role as an educator-analyst, and peer debriefing to mitigate interpretive bias. The focus remained squarely on capturing the true intent and authentic voice of the participants without imposing rigid pre-existing matrices onto their organic insights.

RESULTS

The thematic analysis yielded a framework demonstrating how structured classroom dialogue can alter a student's cognitive map of conflict and peacebuilding. Rather than viewing peace as a static, passive state, students articulated a dynamic, systemic understanding of human relationships. The data was organized by four (4) interconnected themes.

Theme 1: Conflict Avoidance as a Structural Power Realization

The most theoretically striking result is the radical cognitive shifts experienced by students regarding why people choose to avoid confrontation. In classical paradigms, avoidance is viewed as a personal failure to communicate (Dymond & Roche, 2017). However, the data collected from this cohort explicitly challenges this assumption. Students noted that a deep dive into conflict management styles and the analysis of different types of power completely transformed their understanding of silence. Rather than interpreting silence as a lack of confidence, participants recognized it as a deliberate "facework" strategy used to navigate asymmetric hierarchies where open contestation could trigger retaliatory institutional or social harm (Anjum et al., 2025). They realized that the absence of open argument does not equate to the presence of genuine peace; rather, unaddressed tension frequently stays beneath the surface because of an underlying imbalance of power. One student articulated this structural realization with exceptional clarity:

"Prior to these discussions, I often viewed conflict avoidance as a positive strategy, equating the absence of open argument with the presence of peace. However, breaking down these dynamics revealed that unaddressed tension simply stays beneath the surface often because of an underlying imbalance of power. Learning how different powers influence whether a person feels safe enough to speak up completely changed my perspective. It gave me a precise vocabulary to analyze past conflicts in my own life and helped me realize that true resolution requires addressing these hidden power structures rather than sweeping issues under the rug."

This narrative reveals that the student did not simply learn to be more assertive; they developed a vocabulary to diagnose why they or others defaulted to withdrawal. Avoidance is repositioned as a diagnostic reaction to an asymmetric environment. When an individual chooses to stay silent, it is frequently a direct response to how power is distributed in the room. Another student confirmed this shift in self-awareness, stating:

"Recognizing my own natural tendency to default to avoidance forced me to confront the reality that skipping difficult conversations often stalls personal and collective growth. Furthermore, it heightened my empathy by altering how I interpret other people's behavior during disagreements. I now understand that when someone withdraws or reacts defensively it is often a direct response to how power is being distributed in the room. This awareness has made me far more patient and deliberate in looking for the underlying needs of others rather than judging their immediate reactions."

It shows that realization functions dialectically. It elevates the student's self-awareness of their own survival mechanisms while simultaneously generating structural empathy for the silence of others. The individual is no longer judged as "weak" or "shy"; rather, their silence is read as a socio-political signal that the communicative space is unsafe or heavily unequal. Wamsler (2025) suggests that this transition is facilitated by the adoption of empathic listening and intentional vulnerability, which enable students to navigate previously intimidating environmental or personal disputes.

Theme 2: Breaking Interpersonal Barriers and Cultivating Radical Empathy

The second theme was the transformation of empathy from an abstract concept into an interactive skill. Participants moved beyond mere perspective-taking, utilizing intergroup dialogue to dismantle unconscious biases that previously hindered authentic communication (Hartwell et al., 2017). Students frequently refer to specific pedagogic interventions—most notably small-group discussions, personal open forums, and the Johari Window activity—as mechanisms that broke down superficial social barriers. Students noted that sharing personal problems, internal conflicts, and hidden anxieties allowed them to see their peers in an entirely different light. For instance, a student reflected:

"The group activity where we shared our personal problems stood out to me the most. It helped me understand my classmates on a deeper level and reminded me that everyone has their own silent struggles. It resonated with me because hearing their stories taught me the importance of listening without judgment... This experience strengthened my empathy, which I believe is an important quality to have as a future nurse."

True dialogue required students to actively suppress their internal impulses to judge or defend. A student described this process as a strict intellectual and emotional discipline:

"Active listening proved to be an intentional discipline, requiring me to completely silence the urge to formulate a counterargument while another person was still speaking, focusing instead entirely on their perspective."

This empathy was not merely interpersonal; it directly expanded into the socio-political realm. In a region deeply impacted by historical friction, a Christian student explicitly detailed how dialogue and historical analysis shattered long-standing prejudices regarding Muslim communities in Mindanao:

"Growing up in a Christian household, especially in the province, my perspective towards Muslims was primarily formed from the opinions of my parents toward them. Having little to no good interactions with Muslims, I was led to believe... that they were aggressive, violent and war hunger individuals. Especially after having heard news like the Marawi Siege, it cemented my belief that Muslims really have no place in my heart. But after hearing our lesson, I learned that they did what they had to do, especially the creation of resistance groups because someone had to step up for them... It really made me realize that when people are oppressed they are not gonna settle with that state forever and that time will come that they will learn to fight for themselves to break the shackles of oppression."

This remarkable transformation proves that dialogic peace education provides the contextual scaffolding necessary for students to unpack inherited, generational traumas and replace them with structural solidarity.

Theme 3: Reframing Conflict from Destructive to Constructive

The third theme centers on how students define conflict. Before entering the course, the dominant consensus among the student body was that conflict was inherently negative, a destructive force to be feared, suppressed,

or swept away. The data demonstrates a profound ideological migration toward a positive framework of conflict. Students discovered the concept of the "benefits of conflict," realizing that disagreements, when handled with mutual respect and proper communication, serve as crucial engines for relational clarity, structural reform, and personal maturation. As one student noted:

"As a person who always tries to avoid conflict as much as possible, I used to think that conflict was always negative and should be prevented. However, the discussion helped me realize that conflict can also lead to personal growth, better communication, and stronger relationships when handled in a respectful and constructive way."

Students shifted from a naive expectation of uniform agreement to an acceptance of human diversity. A student shared:

"Conflict is just something you cannot avoid if you want to live in a space among other people. I think this gives me the assurance that there isn't anything inherently wrong when people don't see eye to eye. No one is made or raised the same... so conflict is always bound to happen when individuality among a group happens."

The shift allowed students to distinguish between a superficial absence of war (negative peace) and the presence of proactive justice, systemic fairness, and open communication channels (positive peace). This realization empowered them to embrace the discomfort of difficult conversations as a necessary phase of authentic peacebuilding.

Theme 4: Professional Application in Hierarchical Healthcare Environments

Because the vast majority of the participants are nursing students, the ultimate value of their peacebuilding training was measured by its immediate, practical utility within the highly stressful, strictly regulated clinical domain. The fourth theme highlights the integration of dialogue, active listening, and power literacy into their evolving professional identities as healthcare providers. This resembles the study of Lee et al. (2018), which found out that beyond interpersonal dynamics, students identified that acknowledging one's specific conflict management style informs purposeful action when navigating hierarchical discourse with colleagues, patients, and families. Students repeatedly linked class dialogue activities to their clinical capacity to build immediate rapport and trust with patients across diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. One student observed:

"As a student nurse, I believe that these skills are very relevant and helpful to me considering healthcare professionals work closely with patients and other members of the healthcare team... therapeutic communication allows for better collaboration."

Moving far beyond generic soft skills, students framed their peace education as a tool for profound professional discernment. A student beautifully articulated this fusion of clinical judgment and emotional restraint:

"Although communication, active listening, and mediation were undoubtedly valuable, I found myself developing a different skill that I believe is just as essential—discernment. More specifically, the ability to examine situations before reacting to them. This course taught me that not every conflict demands immediate intervention, just as not every silence signifies peace. It requires the patience to understand what is truly at stake, whose needs are being overlooked, and whether my response would genuinely improve the situation or merely satisfy an emotional impulse... Professionally, I hope to carry this way of thinking into nursing practice. Clinical environments demand more than technical competence. They require sound judgment, emotional discipline, and the ability to respond thoughtfully rather than react impulsively."

Students recognized that understanding hidden power structures directly equips them to manage workplace bullying, navigate friction within interprofessional healthcare teams, and protect patient autonomy without escalating minor arguments into systemic clinical failures. This strategic restraint often manifests as a deliberate "avoidance-as-power," where students recognize that disengaging from non-productive hostility preserves their professional integrity and protects the emotional safety of vulnerable patients (Morenon, 2024).

Such reflective practice enables students to move beyond the reflexive desire to intervene, fostering a deeper, more empathetic engagement with the complex realities of those in their care (Liu et al., 2022). Furthermore, these practices align with broader institutional imperatives for interdisciplinary collaboration, where mindfulness-based engagement serves to temper stress and enhance the quality of patient-centered care (Şengül et al., 2025). The peace education curriculum transformed these future healthcare workers from passive rule-followers into active, self-aware mediators of institutional peace.

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DISCUSSION

The empirical core of this study lies in the deconstruction of the avoidance. The realization articulated by students that conflict avoidance is frequently a sophisticated, hyper-aware reading of structural power dynamics rather than an individual behavioral deficit. By reframing silence as a strategic choice rather than mere hesitation, students cultivate the discernment necessary to navigate hierarchical pressures, such as workplace bullying, where non-confrontational responses may serve to de-escalate volatile interactions (Simpson et al., 2025; Ulrich et al., 2017).

This finding challenges the classical individualist assumptions that saturate mainstream conflict management literature. For generations, text-book conflict models—such as those popularized by the Thomas-Kilmann frameworks—have operated under an individualist bias, treating an actor's choice to avoid, accommodate, compete, or compromise as an isolated psychological preference or an internal trait. By contrast, the students' accounts suggest that these styles are, in practice, contingent responses to the "hidden curriculum" of power inherent in medical and nursing hierarchies (Hart et al., 2026). Consequently, pedagogical interventions that foster peacebuilding capabilities must move beyond static skill-acquisition models, instead emphasizing the critical assessment of clinical environments as sites of stratified agency (Barry et al., 2025; Preti et al., 2026).

The result strongly suggests that in real-world spaces characterized by deep asymmetry, avoidance is often an acute diagnostic act. The student understands, either intuitively or explicitly, that entering a confrontational dialogue in an environment where power is radically unequal is not only futile but potentially hazardous to their professional, psychological, or social well-being. Silence, in this light, is a rational defense mechanism deployed to protect one's autonomy and peace in a landscape where the structural rules favor the powerful.

This theoretical realignment demands a drastic shift in how critical peace education is designed and executed. If avoidance is a structural realization, then pedagogical interventions that focus solely on training marginalized individuals to be more assertive, vocal, or confrontational are fundamentally insufficient, and potentially counterproductive. Teaching minority students to simply "speak truth to power" without transforming the underlying power matrix puts that individual at risk. Peace education must pivot away from trying to modify the behavior of the disempowered actor, focusing instead on dismantling the oppressive structures that make silence the only safe option available.

The profound capacity of dialogic pedagogy to reframe structural realities is vividly illustrated by how students processed large-scale, historical, and regional conflicts. Within the specific context of Mindanao, the peace process and the historical marginalization of the Bangsamoro people served as an external mirror for students' internal psychological breakthroughs. The data shows that students did not analyze the 17-year peace process simply as an archive of dates and political treaties; they processed it as a macro-level manifestation of the very power dynamics they experienced in their personal lives. The remarkable admission by a Christian student regarding their inherited, deeply conditioned stereotypes about Muslims showcases the power of dialogic education in deconstructing structural violence. The student's recognition that "when people are oppressed they are not gonna settle with that state forever" demonstrates a jump from a standard moral condemnation of violence to a structural understanding of structural violence and systemic resistance. By analyzing the macro-dynamics of regional colonizations and historical biases, students achieved an ontological breakthrough: they realized that true peacebuilding requires addressing root causes, restoring justice, and

validating the rights and dignity of all communities, rather than demanding compliance under the guise of an artificial, superficial stability.

CONCLUSION

This thematic analysis demonstrates that structured dialogue acts as a powerful catalyst for students' peacebuilding capabilities. In clinical settings, unreflective, emotional reactivity can lead to communication breakdowns that actively jeopardize patient care. For instance, unreflective compliance driven by fear of authority can cause a junior nurse to remain silent even when they detect a fatal medical error made by a senior physician. By training students to recognize avoidance as a power dynamic, peace education equips them with the structural literacy to choose their battles wisely, advocate effectively for patient autonomy, and de-escalate workplace bullying without sacrificing their moral compass or their professional survival.

The core conclusion is that when students are provided a safe communicative space, they organically move past surface-level definitions of peace as "the simple absence of war" and develop a highly sophisticated matrix for diagnosing human relationships. The emergence of avoidance proves that our students are acutely aware of how power operates in their daily lives and future workplaces. They recognize that silence is frequently a structural diagnosis, an analytical shield deployed when an environment lacks the equity, mutual respect, and systemic safety required for authentic expression.

By enacting structural changes, we can transform peace education from a set of abstract theories into a living, reflective practice. We can move closer to cultivating a new generation of professionals who do not merely seek a quiet, passive compliance, but who possess the structural discernment, moral resilience, and collaborative empathy required to actively build a lasting positive peace.

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