

Integrating Peace Education in the Sri Lankan Education System through “Life World” Oriented Teaching

A.C. Imesha Kinkini

Faculty of Education, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the potential for integrating peace education within the Sri Lankan education system through the lens of the "Life World Reference" approach. The life-world approach emphasizes connecting the curriculum with students lived experiences, thereby making learning a meaningful and transformative process. In the context of peace education, this method emphasizes the importance of linking students' personal and social realities with the content they engage with in school. By embedding practical, real-life contexts into the curriculum, educators can help students make sense of their experiences, foster critical thinking, and develop a deeper understanding of concepts such as mutual respect, empathy, and cultural awareness. The study examines examples from diverse educational settings where life-world-oriented teaching strategies such as storytelling, debates, and collaborative projects have been successfully employed to enhance student engagement and promote peaceful coexistence. The sample of the research consisted of 10 teachers, 45 principals, and 30 students. The study employs a qualitative design combining documentary analysis and interviews. Case studies from Kenya, Lebanon, and Europe provide insights into effective peace education models, while a comparative analysis highlights gaps and opportunities within Sri Lanka's curriculum. The findings emphasize the need for lifeworld-oriented teaching strategies to foster sustainable peace and national unity. The paper argues that the adoption of such inclusive, student-centered approaches in Sri Lanka's educational framework can support peacebuilding efforts, particularly in a society shaped by a history of conflict and diversity. In conclusion, integrating life-world reference in peace education not only enriches the curriculum but also nurtures a holistic and contextually sensitive pedagogy. This approach can play a vital role in preparing students to navigate social complexities, promote intercultural dialogue, and contribute to sustainable peace. By grounding educational practices in students' life experiences, the Sri Lankan education system can better address the needs of its diverse student population and foster a culture of harmony and understanding.

Keywords: Peace Education, Life World Reference Approach, Student-Centered Learning, Curriculum Integration

INTRODUCTION

The concept of the "lifeworld," as articulated by Edmund Husserl, refers to the natural, everyday world as it is uniquely experienced by individuals. Each child perceives and interprets the world in distinctive ways shaped by their socio-cultural environment, and these perceptions form the foundation for understanding knowledge (Hummel et al., n.d.). In this regard, learners do not enter the classroom as empty vessels but rather bring with them a wealth of life experiences. Student-centered teaching and learning approaches, therefore, emphasize the importance of drawing upon these lived experiences to facilitate meaningful knowledge construction and to foster peace-oriented mindsets. Lifeworld-oriented education highlights the social influence of learning processes, asserting that education is both shaped by and contributes to societal experiences. Thus, the present research seeks to explore how peace education can be integrated into the general education system of Sri Lanka through the lens of the lifeworld reference.

Sri Lanka, often referred to as the "Pearl of the Indian Ocean," is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country with a complex socio-political history. The island's population comprises Sinhalese (approximately 75%), Sri Lankan Tamils (12%), Indian Tamils (4%), and Moors or Muslims (9%), among other groups (Wedikandage, 2021).

Religious affiliations are equally diverse, with Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity all playing significant roles in shaping cultural identity, education, and social life (Population and Housing Data, 2012). Linguistically, Sinhala and Tamil are the official national languages, while English functions as the link language (Perera et al., 2004).

Despite its cultural richness, Sri Lanka has endured a prolonged civil war, spanning nearly three decades, between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The conflict, which ended in 2009, resulted in severe human and social costs, including the deaths of up to 40,000 civilians and the displacement of more than 250,000 individuals (Wedikandage, 2021). Children were among the most vulnerable populations during this period, with UNICEF (1998) estimating that nearly one million children across the island were directly or indirectly affected by the war, enduring displacement, loss of family, disrupted education, and the trauma of violence. For many children in the North and East, war became the defining feature of their childhood, shaping their identities around fear, prejudice, and conflict (Perera et al., 2004).

Recognizing the urgent need for reconciliation, the Sri Lankan government, in collaboration with national and international stakeholders, has implemented various educational reforms to promote peace and social cohesion. Notably, the Ministry of Education established a Peace Education Unit and, in 2008, introduced a National Policy and Comprehensive Framework of Educational Actions for Social Cohesion and Peace. Furthermore, peace education was incorporated into the curriculum under Life Competencies and Citizenship Education (Wedikandage, 2021). These initiatives underscore the central role of education in rebuilding trust and promoting interethnic understanding in a post-war society.

Within this context, lifeworld-oriented education offers a distinctive framework for peacebuilding. It acknowledges that every student enters the classroom with a unique set of lived experiences, which can serve as valuable resources for promoting mutual understanding and tolerance in a multicultural society. Rather than imposing rigid structures of learning, this approach encourages teachers and students to co-construct knowledge in ways that are personally and socially meaningful (Hummel et al., n.d.). Importantly, it goes beyond teaching peace as abstract content by embedding peace-building skills within the lived realities of students, thereby equipping them to navigate diversity and conflict in their everyday lives.

Contemporary educational discourse increasingly emphasizes student-centered learning, where the teacher acts as a facilitator rather than a transmitter of knowledge. In this context, peace education programs can bridge the gap between teaching and learning by fostering critical reflection, dialogue, and collaboration among students. By engaging with peace education initiatives, learners develop the competencies required to live peacefully in multi-ethnic and multicultural communities. Moreover, such programs dispel misconceptions, reduce prejudice, and connect classroom learning with self-determined living beyond school boundaries.

Against this backdrop, this research seeks to examine the integration of peace education into Sri Lanka's general education system through a lifeworld-oriented perspective. Specifically, it explores how students' lived experiences can be leveraged as meaningful entry points for peace education, thereby contributing to long-term reconciliation and social cohesion in the country.

Aim of Research

The primary aim of this study is to explore how peace education can be effectively integrated into the Sri Lankan education system through a lifeworld-oriented teaching approach. Specifically, the research seeks to examine the potential of drawing upon students' lived experiences as a foundation for fostering meaningful learning, promoting mutual understanding, and cultivating peace within a multi-ethnic and multicultural society.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative, multi-method research design that integrated documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews. The sample consisted of ten teachers and four principals representing four schools within the Colombo District. Data were gathered from relevant educational documents and in-depth interviews, and subsequently analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and interpret underlying meanings within the context of peace education implementation.

DISCUSSION

Relation to the Learners' Lifeworld in Peace Education

In contemporary education, it is increasingly important for teachers to adopt modern pedagogical approaches that not only engage learners but also respond to their lived realities. Lifeworld-oriented education emphasizes a student-centered approach that recognizes learners' experiences as the foundation for developing peacebuilding skills. By drawing upon these experiences, teachers can employ a variety of methods, including expository, application-based, collaborative, problem-based, and game-based learning to promote peace in ways that are both meaningful and contextually relevant.

According to Alfred Schütz and Thomas Luckmann (2003), the lifeworld is central to teaching and learning in two ways: first, as the space of everyday action where learners apply their existing knowledge and skills, and second, as the reservoir of biographical experiences that shape present and future learning (Hummel et al., n.d.). This theoretical grounding illustrates how peace education can be most effective when it builds upon learners' personal and collective histories.

Case studies from other contexts further highlight this relevance. In Eldoret, Kenya, peace education programs aimed to raise awareness of conflict causes and foster constructive conflict resolution in daily life, thereby prioritizing immediate, practical peacebuilding over distant goals of harmony (Prisca et al., 2012). Similarly, in Lebanon, structured debates and classroom discussions on sensitive issues such as secularism, civil marriage, conflict resolution, and religious freedom enabled learners to develop critical perspectives, challenge misconceptions, and build tolerance (Chrabieh, 2016). These approaches reflect constructivist and transformative learning principles, as they encourage students to critically examine assumptions, engage in dialogue, and practice tolerance.

Another Lebanese initiative, the *Culinary Project*, involved students preparing traditional cultural and religious dishes, sharing meals, and subsequently engaging in debates about cultural and spiritual values. This initiative illustrates how experiential, culturally grounded learning can foster respect for diversity while simultaneously embedding peace education within everyday practices (Chrabieh, 2016).

Lifeworld Dimensions in Peace Education

The lifeworld framework identifies several fundamental dimensions of spatial reality, temporal structures, social relationships, situation-relatedness, and biographical experiences that influence learning (Hummel et al., n.d.). Programs in Europe that emphasize personal and interpersonal skills, such as anger management, emotional regulation, teamwork, and self-esteem, demonstrate how equipping students with psychosocial competencies can strengthen peaceful relationships at home, in schools, and within communities. For Sri Lanka, such programs hold particular relevance, as students often lack structured opportunities to develop emotional management and self-awareness skills essential for sustaining peace in a post-conflict society.

Lifeworld-Oriented Didactics

Effective lifeworld-oriented didactics require linking individual learners' experiences with real-world contexts. Egger and Hummel (2016) argue that children learn meaningfully when they connect new content to their own interests, emotions, and experiences. In Sri Lanka, initiatives such as the "School of Affection" seek to bring together students from diverse ethnic backgrounds for shared residential experiences. Similar to Kenya's *Tuelewane Peace Exchange Program* and Rwanda's *peace camps*, these initiatives create opportunities for dialogue, empathy, and enduring interethnic friendships, thereby addressing key challenges of reconciliation in post-conflict societies (Wallensteen, 2015).

Furthermore, real-life connections can be reinforced through integrated schools, which provide opportunities for students of different ethnicities to learn together. In contrast, segregated schools perpetuate limited awareness of other cultures and religions. As children carry their parents' attitudes and cultural narratives into the classroom, shared learning environments become vital for dispelling myths and fostering interethnic respect.

Methods for Enhancing Lifeworld-Oriented Peace Education

Several practical strategies can strengthen lifeworld-oriented peace education in Sri Lanka:

- **Narrative and Storytelling:** Storytelling, a culturally embedded practice in Sri Lanka, can be integrated into classrooms to transmit values of peace, tolerance, and reconciliation. Retired teachers and community members could contribute by sharing stories, thereby bridging intergenerational wisdom with contemporary peacebuilding needs.
- **Language and Literature:** Drawing from UNICEF initiatives (Sung & Wong, 2000), activities such as children's magazines, theatre, puppetry, and creative writing can foster critical reflection and self-expression. Literature, folklore, and proverbs can be powerful tools for uniting ethnic groups and transmitting traditional wisdom on peace and harmony.
- **Curriculum and Co-Curricular Activities:** Civic education and history provide natural entry points for peace-related content, while co-curricular programs such as student parliaments, multicultural celebrations, and cultural exchanges create experiential opportunities to practice coexistence. The European model of using national history to reflect on civil conflict (Paris, 2004) offers lessons for Sri Lanka, where teaching about the civil war from multiple perspectives could help learners critically understand its causes and consequences.

Towards Coherence in Lifeworld-Oriented Education

Antonovsky's (1987) concept of coherence comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness provides a useful framework for integrating peace education with learners' lived experiences. Lifeworld-oriented education thus aims to bridge the gap between learners' personal biographies and societal realities, enabling them to view themselves not as passive recipients of fate but as active participants in shaping peaceful futures. In this sense, peace education becomes more than a curricular subject; it becomes a process of equipping students with the knowledge, attitudes, and competencies required for sustainable coexistence in a multicultural society.

Peace programs in Sri Lanka

There are different types of program initiatives developed by the Government of Sri Lanka with Non-Government Organizations to improve the peace education of Sri Lanka. However, most of the children who were born after the 1980s do not have any experience with the other ethnic groups that live in Sri Lanka. Therefore, the National Institute of Education and the Ministry of Education started a peace education unit with the help of foreign funds. The Social Cohesion and Peace Unit of the Ministry of Education created a National Policy and a Comprehensive Framework of Actions on Education for Social Cohesion and Peace in 2008. In 2007, a new curriculum was introduced for Life Competences and Citizenship Education and Citizenship Education and Governance (Wedikandage 2021).

ONUR (Office for National Unity and Reconciliation) was established, under the authority of the President of Sri Lanka, in terms of the Cabinet Decision 2015 No. 1945/41. Affairs about national reconciliation have been entrusted to the ONUR, under the Ministry of National Integration and Reconciliation. This program aims to create a society where every person respects the fundamental rights, freedom, and equality of all communities. The primary goal of promote harmony and unity among people in Sri Lanka while celebrating diversity.

The National Institute of Education and UNICEF introduced a peace education program called "Education for Conflict Resolution" for primary education (1991). Their purpose was to build consciousness and strengthen belief and morals in non-violent conflict resolution.

In 2000, English medium instruction was first introduced for GCE (A/L) Science students, and by 2002 it was extended to the junior secondary level, beginning with Science and Mathematics at Grade Six and later including subjects such as Social Studies and Health and Physical Education. Responding to growing demands for English medium instruction across more areas of the curriculum, the government formally adopted bilingual education as policy in 2008 through the New Educational Act for General Education (2009). However, by 2025, only limited progress had been achieved.

This situation highlights the perception of the second language as a vital tool for fostering intercultural understanding among Sri Lankan students. The teaching and learning of the second national language play a central role in promoting national integration and social cohesion, in line with the first goal of national education (NER, 2003).

The subject of *History* holds particular significance in fostering social cohesion, as it provides opportunities to highlight the contributions of diverse ethnic and religious communities to the continued development of the nation. Research suggests that historical narratives and events, when taught inclusively, can enable students to recognize the long-standing coexistence and collaboration among core ethnic groups in Sri Lanka (Little, 2010; Wickramasinghe, 2012). Sri Lanka has historically been a multicultural and multi-ethnic society, where interaction between Sinhalese and Sri Lankan Tamils reflects deep-rooted cultural and social interconnections (De Silva, 2005). The compulsory inclusion of history in the GCE (O/L) curriculum, therefore, has the potential to strengthen students' appreciation of shared heritage and collective identity, thereby contributing to peacebuilding and the construction of a unified national consciousness.

Nevertheless, contemporary reconciliation efforts have often sidelined the role of history education. Certain policymakers argue that the teaching of history may reignite past divisions rather than promote national harmony (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000; Lopes Cardozo, 2008). This tension underscores the need for a balanced and carefully framed history curriculum, one that acknowledges contested pasts while simultaneously fostering intercultural understanding and national unity.

There is a program called 'Pals of Two Cities.' It was planned by the SCPEU of the Ministry of Education and sponsored by GTZ. This program aims to prepare a student to live in peace and responsible co-existence in a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic society. By participating in this program, students are learning to respect other cultures and to accept different languages. In these programs, there are so many activities that students can participate in. They are peer mediation, education tours, workshops, goodwill tours, personality building, leadership programs, and intellectual dialogues. Along with them, students can participate in sports events and aesthetic activities also. Teachers emphasized that lifeworld-oriented activities—such as storytelling circles and peer mediation games—helped students express emotions and connect beyond ethnic lines. One teacher noted, *"When children share personal stories, they see that pain and joy exist in every community."* However, limited time, teacher training, and curricular rigidity were cited as major barriers. Further, the **teacher interviews** explored pedagogical approaches, classroom management strategies, and challenges in integrating peace education within the existing curriculum. Participants included both primary and secondary school teachers with professional experience ranging from 5 to 25 years.

Interviews with teachers and principals revealed that school-based cultural celebrations, particularly the Sinhala and Hindu New Year festivals, play a significant role in fostering peace-oriented values among students. Teachers described how these events create opportunities for students from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds to collaborate in traditional games, music, and art activities, promoting teamwork, mutual respect, and intercultural understanding. They noted that participation in such activities encourages learners to appreciate different cultural practices while developing creativity, empathy, and social sensitivity.

Principals further emphasized that organizing inclusive cultural events enhances the overall school climate by building a sense of belonging and unity among students. They observed that these celebrations help break down ethnic and linguistic barriers, allowing students to experience diversity as a shared source of pride rather than division. According to one principal, *"When children play together during the New Year celebrations, they learn that cooperation and friendship go beyond ethnicity or religion."*

Both teachers and principals agreed that integrating such experiential, lifeworld-oriented activities into the school calendar strengthens the objectives of peace education by transforming cultural diversity into a lived practice of harmony and respect.

According to the *UNICEF Annual Report* (2016), Sri Lanka's commissioned *Education for Social Cohesion Policy Review* was endorsed by the inter-ministerial steering committee in November 2016, with its

recommendations forming the foundation for policy reforms aimed at strengthening peace, reconciliation, and child development nationwide. Furthermore, UNICEF piloted a set of innovative teaching and learning approaches in primary schools located in conflict-affected areas of the Eastern Province. Preliminary results indicated notable improvements in student motivation and engagement, particularly among those previously labeled as ‘slow learners.’ The report also noted that several provincial governments expressed interest in scaling up these initiatives within their jurisdictions (UNICEF, 2016).

This aligns with Colenso’s (2005) argument that education must play a central role in fostering a culture of peace and national solidarity. Colenso emphasizes that building social cohesion and recognizing cultural diversity are integral to Sri Lanka’s plural society, noting that while recent policy reforms represent a positive step, they must be followed by meaningful action to ensure that all ethnic and religious communities feel a sense of belonging.

Sri Lanka’s education system has long been recognized for its achievements, particularly in meeting international development benchmarks. The country successfully achieved Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 2 by attaining universal primary education by 2015, with some of the strongest primary school indicators in South Asia (United Nations, 2015). However, persistent challenges remain, such as the equitable deployment of qualified teachers to remote and war-affected regions. The extensive network of approximately 9,662 primary and secondary schools in Sri Lanka continues to reflect ethnic and linguistic divisions, limiting opportunities for children of different backgrounds to interact and learn together (World Bank, 2018).

Evaluations have highlighted that this structural separation undermines the potential of the education sector to contribute effectively to conflict transformation, social cohesion, and peacebuilding (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000; Lopes Cardozo, 2008). While Sri Lanka’s education sector is aligned with key national frameworks such as the *Education Sector Development Framework and Program* (ESDFP) and the *National Mental Health Policy*, the lack of integration across ethnic and linguistic groups continues to hinder its capacity to function as a transformative space for sustainable peace.

Synthesis: Implications for Sri Lanka

The international experiences reviewed in this discussion highlight that peace education is most effective when it is situated within learners’ lived realities, engages them through dialogue, and equips them with emotional, social, and critical thinking skills. For Sri Lanka, a society emerging from decades of ethnic conflict, these lessons are particularly relevant. The Kenyan model illustrates the value of focusing on immediate, everyday peacebuilding practices; the Lebanese initiatives demonstrate the power of debate, cultural exchange, and experiential learning in addressing sensitive and divisive issues; and European approaches underscore the importance of psychosocial competencies for sustaining peaceful relationships. Integrating these insights into the Sri Lankan education system requires a deliberate effort to move beyond abstract curricular content towards lifeworld-oriented teaching strategies that are rooted in local culture, history, and student experiences. By adopting such an approach, peace education in Sri Lanka can contribute not only to reconciliation among ethnic groups but also to the creation of a generation of learners who view themselves as active agents of peace in their families, schools, and communities.

CONCLUSION

The lifeworld approach underscores the importance of connecting students’ lived experiences with the teaching and learning process, thereby advancing a holistic, student-centered pedagogy that is essential for peacebuilding. Embedding real-life contexts into the curriculum enables learners to draw upon their past, engage meaningfully with their present realities, and prepare constructively for the future. International experiences demonstrate that diverse pedagogical strategies—such as debates, storytelling, and collaborative projects—can effectively cultivate mutual respect, intercultural understanding, and critical reflection. Lifeworld-oriented education, therefore, not only promotes active participation and personal meaning-making but also transforms learning into a socially relevant and responsive endeavor. For Sri Lanka, adopting such inclusive and context-sensitive practices holds significant potential to strengthen social cohesion, nurture reconciliation, and contribute to the long-term goal of sustainable peace.

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