

Peace education in Rwandan secondary schools: Coping with contradictory messages

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About the author

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Executive Summary

After the Genocide against the Tutsi in 1994, Rwanda developed and implemented programmes in order to move the country towards a sustainable peaceful future. However, Rwanda still faces challenges presented by the persistence of hatred, ethnical divisions and genocide ideology. To address these challenges, peace and values education (PVE) was explicitly included in the Competence-Based Curriculum in 2015. The existence of messages contradictory to the school content and that children come across outside the school environment is one of the major problems hindering the efforts to successfully promote peace and values education in Rwanda.

The current research explores the realities of the messages contradictory to the peace and values education curriculum in Rwandan secondary schools. It was concerned with how students responded to messages contradictory to the curriculum content taught at school. This policy brief summarises the results of the research and highlights the challenges which persist. Based on the findings, the policy brief formulates a number of recommendations to actors intervening in the Rwandan education sector in order to effectively address the discord created by contradictory messages and its negative effects on peace and values education in Rwanda.

Introduction

The turbulent and violent past of Rwanda indisputably requires investment in promoting peace and values education in the country. Though a number of initiatives aimed at moving towards unity and reconciliation have been undertaken, there is still a long way to go. The Rwanda Reconciliation Barometer (RRB) published the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (2015, 120) indicates that 25.8% of Rwandans still sow divisions and genocide ideology in others. One of recommendations proposed by the RRB 2015 in order to respond to this problem consists of putting a strong emphasis on programmes for reconciliation, with the purpose of instilling reconciliatory values and principles in a preventive and sustainable way, impacting positively on future generations. In this regard, peace and values education programmes and models have been developed and implemented in order to equip school children with knowledge, skills and tools to challenge and respond to the legacy of the recent deplorable Rwandan history. In addition, youth have been identified as the most sensitive part of the population and effective agents of change. This has partly motivated the integration of peace and values education as a cross-cutting subject in the Competence-Based Curriculum operational in Rwandan schools since 2016.

The persistence of hatred, divisions and genocide ideology in the country suggests that peace education may face challenges limiting its success. Among other challenges, contradictory messages to the content of the CBC that students receive are understood as inhibiting factors in the peace education process. This research was conducted with the aim of examining the problem of information and messages contradictory to the school curriculum peace content conveyed to students in their living and working environment, their impact on the peace education content taught at school, and effective ways to respond to them.

The data were collected in five secondary schools conveniently and purposively selected in five districts of Rwanda, one per province and one in the City of Kigali. The research participants included 150 Senior 3 students, their teachers and school administrators. Instruments used were the questionnaire completed by the student respondents, and group interviews held with teachers and school administrators. This study sought to critically examine the status of messages contradictory to the curriculum content of peace education in Rwandan secondary schools. Though quantitative data were presented to illustrate some general trends, the study mostly used a qualitative approach in order to understand the meaning and impact of the contradictory content and to then identify the mechanisms adopted to respond to them.

Research Findings

The following are some of the highlights of the research findings:

Findings related to PVE content and methods

Peace and values education (PVE) is a cross-cutting subject. It aims at developing competences that promote social cohesion and positive values, including pluralism and personal responsibility, empathy, critical thinking and action in order to build a more peaceful society. The competences are supposed to be taught across all the remaining core and cross-cutting subjects. Apart from two subjects in the curriculum, history and citizenship, and religious education, teachers are not sufficiently aware of the integration of PEV education in the curriculum.

Teaching peace and values as an integrated cross-cutting subject in the Rwandan context is a strong basis to work from but can be further enhanced. All of the group interviewees suggested that, for effective implementation, PVE should be a stand-alone subject as additional complement in the CBC.

Politics and PVE in Rwanda: the CBC is inspired by the political orientation of the country. Competences such as fighting dangerous ideologies and beliefs with a focus on genocide ideology, promoting unity and reconciliation, respect of oneself and others, and conflict transformation were stated by 83.3% of the student respondents as the most recurrent peace-related subjects in their classes. The second category of peace values not often taught includes striving for justice, empathy, critical thinking and personal responsibility. 36% of the students stated that they rarely had lessons about pluralism in their classes.

Methodological approaches used to teach peace values and competences: Teachers acknowledged that cooperative learning and participatory methods are better than any other teaching approach for peace and values education. However, the first users (teachers) indicated that their capacity to apply the methods needed to be enhanced. In addition, they noted that the time allotted to peace-related lessons, as proposed by the curriculum plan, is not sufficient to allow them to apply the participatory methods recommended by the CBC. Practically speaking, the expository (magisterial) method generally remains their dominant approach given the content proposed by the CBC.

Insufficiency of teaching materials: teachers expressed their frustration, as there is insufficient material designed for teaching peace and values. In the curriculum, different methodological approaches are proposed, but the availability of teaching aids or resources is not taken into consideration. In addition, in some lessons, the curriculum suggests teaching peace content through case studies or field visits to the identified sites (for instance the genocide memorial sites). These are judged very useful because they corroborate and support the content taught in class by evidence and hands-on experience. However, the resources required in order to organise the field study trips are not easily available.

Findings related to teaching environment

Participants confirmed that most of the teachers and school administrators are exemplary in terms of good conduct, and their behaviour conforms to peace values and competences provided for by the CBC and taught in classroom. A total of 84.6% of the students stated that their teachers' practices were good to imitate, which supports the curriculum peace content. A very small proportion of the teachers and school administrators (15%) were alleged to discourage the practice of peace values because of their behaviour being contrary to what they teach: they do not walk the talk.

Mistrust between the stakeholders: Teachers and school administrators stated that they doubled their efforts to repeat peace values to the students, especially when they came back from their homes (that is, from holidays).

They regretted that students “are coming back with other ideas,” meaning information from their parents, which may be contrary to the content already imparted to the learners in class.

Teachers expressed their uncertainty about the content delivered by parents to students when they are at home. Referring to other information they had received from other sources, students then criticised their teachers and school administrators of not adequately answering their questions about some parts of the peace content taught to them in class, especially some sensitive topics like those related to the history of Rwanda. There were cases of students who did not trust information from their teachers, and the evidence was given by a teacher where some students laughed at what they heard from their teachers in the classroom.

Additional tools used by some schools for peace education included clubs such as the Anti-violence Club, quarterly special peace addresses with the aim of making students cautious about the messages they may receive from different people outside the school and during holidays, and weekly *Itorero* forums where students and the school management discuss peace-related issues, amongst others. However, there is a problem of trust between the parents and other stakeholders: participants revealed that some stakeholders consider the *Itorero* as an ideological instrument for indoctrinating young people for political purposes.

Categories of contradictory messages

While in the process of acquisition of the competences for peace and values education, students have been encountering other content and messages contradictory to the peace-oriented content already set by the curriculum. The contradictory content is grouped into four main categories, namely, misinterpretation of the violent conflicts that took place in the history of Rwanda, genocide denial, divisionism, and hatred and violence in the community. For example, teaching about unity and reconciliation by referring to the pre-colonial era seems to leave students with many unanswered questions: participants indicated that there are messages that are contradictory to the curriculum content. The taught content emphasises good cohabitation between Rwandans before colonisation and effective administrative organisation and governance of the country under the kings’ regime. In addition, there were a number of contradictory messages related to the liberation war of 1990, and a large number of contradictory messages were found to be linked with the Genocide against the Tutsi of 1994.

Contradictions related to the meaning and achievements in terms of unity and reconciliation: the inter-personal dimension of unity and reconciliation involves the acceptance of the reality of the tragic past and the aim of the restoration of broken relations. Unfortunately, students gave examples of contradictory messages conveyed to them purporting that “Good cohabitation of ethnicities, unity and reconciliation are not possible in Rwanda” or “Unity and reconciliation remain only political speeches.” They further stated evidence they see in their villages where neighbours do not visit, talk to, or lend home equipment and materials to one another; people are imprisoned because of violence against one another, or people do not apologise for their mistakes to their neighbours. At school, they are taught that they are all Rwandans. The messages are against the policy of the *Ndi Umunyarwanda* program which has been promoted in schools since 2014.

Though it is not widely propagated, religious extremism was pointed out as a contradictory message and, to some extent, a notoriously divisive reality in schools. Data revealed that there were people who, inspired by their sects, transmitted to the children contradictions which nurture stereotypes, discrimination and exclusion of others.

In many circumstances, students observed the contradictions between what they are taught at school and the realities they live in. As an example, corruption and abuse of power were given as instances showing the lack of empathy among people. 21 students argued that “There are some people who are unfairly denied their rights,” “Some local leaders use their powers to abuse those they are in charge of governing, which is contrary to what we learnt at school.”

Channels where the contradictory messages pass through:

The research found that most of the messages contradictory to the CBC (56%) were conveyed from the home setting (parents, brothers and other family members), 24.7% were conveyed from school mates and 19.4% from other community members without any specified relationship with the school children. The contradictory messages were conveyed through different channels, such as open face-to-face conversation (44%), private face-to-face conversation (34%) and interpersonal chats through electronic and social media networks (22%).

Conclusions

The research indicated the existence of messages contradictory to the peace content embodied in the CBC, and which come from parents, family members, and friends.

Their content is susceptible to hinder the peace foundation already constructed at school through the curriculum designed and implemented for that purpose.

The challenges raised by the research relate to the curriculum itself, its implementation and the environment where it is implemented. In fact, peace values and competences face difficulties and are only partially integrated in core subjects, and where the integration is done, the use of appropriate teaching methodology, here, participatory methods, is surpassed by the expository approach. In addition, the existence and effects of the contradictory messages divides the efforts of key stakeholders in education, namely, teachers, school administrators, learners, and parents, as well as the curriculum and the entire teaching/learning environment.

Even though the research indicated that some of the participants have found ways to handle the messages contradictory to the peace and values curriculum, the study showed that many of them still experience a sense of confusion. It is necessary to take into consideration the fact that, as long as peace education programs in secondary schools have not yet reached the expected results, the ideal of building a peaceful society for Rwanda may be compromised.

The research findings showed that these contradictory messages (i) are real and dynamic, (ii) have the potential to alter the curriculum or slow down efforts made by the Rwandan school system, (iii) are molded in families and/or among peers outside the school and in some cases within schools, and (iv) are mainly related to the divergent narratives on the history of Rwanda and its aftermath. With this reality, the research revealed that the students and teachers are living in a challenging context, marked by dilemmas, contradictions and confusion. Thus, it is necessary to design and implement a holistic and more practicable approach to peace education that is capable of effectively responding to the problem of contradictory messages, helping the students and teachers to find a way out of the confusion.

Policy recommendations

Based on the research findings, this policy brief proposes the following recommendations to the Rwandan education sector:

- i. Enhance the capacity of teachers and school administrative staff to offer peace and values education: schools need trained and well-prepared teachers to facilitate PVE. This will increase the awareness of teachers on the integration of PEV education in the curriculum, improve their knowledge on peace and values content, and strengthen the application of participatory approaches.
Enhancing the capacity of school personnel could enable school actors to positively handle the problem of contradictions;
- ii. Include PVE in the CBC as a stand-alone subject. This could offer more advantages than keeping PVE as a cross-cutting subject as proposed by the curriculum;
- iii. Revisit the education policy and school orientation: School should not be a place of ideology indoctrination. A school should be a place of learning and confronting ideas with reality and should not prepare ideologists: the school's orientation should prepare people who will serve society for the welfare of every human being, people ready to strive for justice, empathy, critical thinking and personal responsibility. It is necessary to create dialogue spaces where this noble school orientation is continually observed and monitored;
- iv. Revise the curriculum and propose time proportions which are conveniently appropriate to the lessons and subjects;
- v. Make available the teaching materials and resources required in order to enable teachers to implement the peace curriculum following the content and teaching methods proposed by the CBC;
- vi. Create open and permanent dialogue spaces where community members (especially parents) and schools could jointly work on the divergences. Such dialogue spaces could help respond to the problem of mistrust between education stakeholders pointed out by the research;
- vii. Practically develop peace clubs and allocate the means required for their effective functioning;
- viii. Take advantage of the extra-curricular or out-of-school activities, work hand-in-hand with students, plan and organise them, appropriately use them as additional and practical teaching occasions;
- ix. Allow open spaces at schools, where students and teachers can freely interact. This could help transform the learning environment. Ensure that students have the freedom to ask "sensitive questions" and to receive information, and are encouraged to critically think and ask for further explanations, etc. If there are some realities and experiences that are made unspeakable, the problem of contradictory messages and their effects on PVE will remain unresolved;
- x. Include lessons on understanding and positively countering violent extremism in the Competency-Based Curriculum with practical tips adapted to the local contexts;
- xi. Improve or maintain teachers and administration staff's discipline in order for them to be models for their students. Their code of conduct should be known by the school community, and establishing a discipline committee for school staff could help make them exemplary.
- xii. Keep reminding students about the negative effects of hatred messages, calling them to critically assess and resist the messages, distance themselves from destructive ideologies, and use the modern ICT for the advancement of their positive life ambitions.
- xiii. Establish a monitoring strategy to ensure that the Competence-Based Curriculum (with a particular check on the PVE integration) is effectively implemented, and set up peer review mechanisms (between schools from the same district) to follow up the recommendations of the open school-community dialogue.