

Peace Education in Rwandan Secondary Schools: Coping With Contradictory Messages

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Abstract

This study explores how peace education in Rwandan secondary schools has faced challenges linked with the content of the programme, its implementers, and the environment in which it has to evolve. The research focuses on how students take different sources of information and how they respond to messages contradictory to the curriculum peace content taught at school. The research shows how messages contradictory to the curriculum peace content were moulded in families and/or amongst peers outside the school. The students and teachers demonstrated three possible responses: they accepted the contradictory messages, rejected them, or, in a large number of the cases, articulated an inability to make a clear-cut decision between the curriculum content and the other content contradictory to it. This difficulty to handle these contradictory messages may constitute a risk to the achievement of the expected outcomes of the programme.

Keywords

peace and values education, contradictory messages, genocide against the Tutsi

Introduction and Background

Rwanda Reconciliation Barometer 2015 released by the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (NURC) indicates that 25.8% of Rwandans still sow divisions and genocide ideology in others (NURC, 2015, p. 120). Regarding this, it was recommended to put a strong emphasis on developing formal educational programmes for reconciliation with the purpose of instilling reconciliatory values and principles in a preventive and sustainable way, impacting positively on future generations. This should be compulsory and could start with children's formal education from their early school years, to primary, high school, and university levels in both public and private institutions.

This research was conducted with the aim of examining how students and school staff dealt with information and messages contradictory to the school peace curriculum content conveyed to students in their living and working environment, the impact of these messages on the peace education content taught at school, and the potential to identify effective ways to respond to them. The data were

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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 Senior 3 students, their teachers, and school administrators. Instruments used were the questionnaire filled in by the student respondents and group interviews held with teachers and school administrators.

It is argued that the peace curriculum content has faced challenges linked with the content itself, its implementers, and the environment in which it has to evolve. The existence of messages contradictory to the peace curriculum content and the ways in which they are handled within the school community may affect the achievement of the expected outcomes of the peace education programme.

Peace Education in a Formal School Context

With reference to UNICEF's definition, Fountain (1999, p. 1) clarifies that peace education is

the process of promoting the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values needed to bring about behaviour changes that will enable children, youth and adults to prevent conflict and violence, both overt and structural; to resolve conflict peacefully; and to create the conditions conducive to peace, whether at an intra-personal, interpersonal, intergroup, national or international level.

Sathyaparsad and Gray (1998, p. 182) emphasise that peace education is “a form of preventive intervention to combat rising rates of crimes, violence and delinquency,” and this is especially done for and amongst young people. The preventive intervention of peace education is therefore taken as its primary concern in society.

In reflecting on the challenges facing peace-building in the 21st century, Kotite (2012, p. 13) points out three primary aspects of conflict that should be mitigated by peace education. There is the structural aspect where “societal contradictions” are altered through education, the behavioural aspect where education improves “relations and interactions,” and the attitudinal aspect where education encourages “changes in attitudes in ways that can reduce the risk of conflict and help build a sustainable peace.” The formal school system may have the potential to be one of the most suitable channels for the achievement of that mandate of peace education.

The Rwandan post-conflict context implies the understanding of peace education as peace-oriented endeavours with the goal of personal transformation and empowerment as well as nurturing the prevention capacity amongst people. Whilst looking at the historical background of Rwanda, marked by multifaceted violent conflicts, wars, and the Genocide against the Tutsi (Basabose, 2006), an effective peace education programme undertaken in the country should necessarily consider empowering the beneficiaries and equipping them with a pro-peace mindset. Harris (2014) and other scholars specify three components, namely (i) the content, (ii) teaching–learning methods, and (iii) the environment, which interact with one another for that purpose.

Peace education has become a concern for the reconstruction of the Rwandan community, especially during the challenging post-genocide period. As discussed by Musabe (2017, p. 58) during the Colloquium on Building Resilience to Genocide through Peace Education Concepts, Methods, Tools and Impact held in Kigali, the government's educational objective is to “promote social cohesion, positive values, including pluralism and personal responsibility, empathy, critical thinking and to build a more peaceful society starting from the youth.” The argument is emphasised by Smith (2010, p. 2) who reiterates that peace education serves the long-term purpose “to help successive generations understand the violent conflict that took place within their own society and potentially contribute towards future peacebuilding.” Therefore, investing in youth, through formal education, has been regarded as one of the tools to address the issues of violence and conflicts and for the reconstruction of the social fabric.

Despite efforts already made to provide students with a framework to equip them with skills and attitudes to promote peace values, there are still challenges to the Rwandan peace education programme. Musabe (2017, p. 59) pointed out three of them, namely (i) the existence of some content delivered to students but which is contradictory to peace, (ii) peace education being a long process which requires a long time to achieve peace-oriented results and positive attitudes, and (iii) the lack of appropriate teaching and learning materials, connected with the absence of teacher training.

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According to Musabe (2017, p. 59), this “contradictory information” includes negative messages, contradictory to peace values as taught through the school curricula. They may come “from school and from their family or friends who have genocide ideology [. . .] or from different sources.” They probably have an impact on learners, the curriculum content, and learners’ attitudes towards the taught curriculum content. A similar issue was investigated by Buhigiro and Wassermann (2017, pp. 6–8), specifically as regards the teaching of the history of Rwanda in schools. They expressed concerns over “unofficial histories,” considered as the most challenging and controversial to peace education endeavours. They found these unofficial histories mostly applicable to the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi, and based on “vague and limited knowledge,” that was “freer and not censored by official bodies” and coming directly from the communities. The authors contrasted them with the “official history,” conceptualised as “a domain that is approved and produced by the state” (Buhigiro & Wassermann, 2017, p. 11) and consequently the one approved to be delivered to learners via the school curriculum. It was revealed that, in the face of those unofficial messages raised by learners, the teachers’ dominant reaction was avoidance of such issues in order to, in their view, contain the controversies (Buhigiro & Wassermann, 2017, p. 11).

This avoidance strategy may be taken as superficial peace education, which calls for closer and deeper analysis of why teachers adopt this position that they themselves criticise as ineffective for their teaching. The discussion of “official” and “unofficial” content and the simplistic solution to try to hide the unofficial version from the learners should be superseded. This research argues that peace education should be “substantial,” especially in enabling learners to make sense of and navigate their own way through contradictory content they encounter from various sources.

Research Methodology

This study is descriptive, analytical, and qualitative. Kothari (2004, p. 2) specifies the purpose of a descriptive study as “the description of the state of affairs as it exists at present.” The latter is done through an analysis aiming at a critical evaluation of the information already available (Kothari, 2004, p. 3). Therefore, this study sought to critically examine the status of messages contradictory to the curriculum content of peace education in Rwandan secondary schools. Although quantitative data are presented to illustrate some overarching trends, the study mostly draws on a qualitative approach in order to understand the meaning and impact of the contradictory content and identify the mechanisms adopted to respond to them. Last, some quantitative data were recorded in order to support important findings.

Although peace education concerns every member of society, particularly all interveners and beneficiaries in the education sector, the study limited its target population to S3 secondary school students, teachers, and school administration staff; the justification for this is discussed below. Both purposive sampling and convenience sampling were used to select the respondents. Maxwell (1997), quoted by Teddlie and Yu (2007, p. 77), described purposive sampling as where “particular settings, persons, or

events are deliberately selected for the important information they can provide that cannot be gotten as well from other choices.”

With the intention to draw information from across the country, the research was carried out in four provinces and in the City of Kigali. One district was selected from each province and one from the City of Kigali. The motivation for the selection of the five districts was twofold. First, in its report on Rwanda Reconciliation Barometer, the NURC (2015) ranked these districts as having the highest score with regard to the prevalence of Rwandans who still sow divisions and genocide ideology. It suffices to note that the Barometer was referred to as a starting point, despite some of its findings being subject to objections. For instance, Lötscher (2016, p. 11) criticised the “top-down approach” used by the government in reconciliation processes, whilst Wielenga (2014, p. 36) has disapproved of the focus on “national” reconciliation with insufficient emphasis on “interpersonal” reconciliation. Second, at a practical level, each of the districts was easily accessible by road transport.

In each district, one secondary school was identified to serve as a data collection site. Purposive sampling was used to select groups of informants that were judged best to enable answering the research questions and meeting the research objectives (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2012, p. 230). Thus, accessibility of the site was the criteria for the selection of schools to reach out to. The research worked with a total of 150 Senior 3 students and 57 teachers and school administrators. The rationale behind the selection of Senior 3 was that the students had entered secondary school in 2016, when the new competence-based curriculum was introduced. This means that they had been taught the peace content for 3 years. Second, the learners’ level of maturity enabled them to clearly and responsibly express their views on such a sensitive topic as peace education. Names of the respondents, schools, and districts have been anonymised in order to prevent any risk of vulnerability.

A mixed research strategy was used where, according to Tashakkori and Creswell (2007, p. 4), “the investigator collects and analyses data, integrates the findings, and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches or methods in a single study or a programme of enquiry.” In this respect, the questionnaire, focus group interviews, and documentary approach were used for data collection. The questionnaire, made up of a dozen closed-ended questions, was completed by a total of 150 Senior 3 students. The students were both boys and girls randomly selected, and 30 were chosen per each of the selected schools.

As for the group interviews, they were used to collect data from teachers and school administrators. According to Kitzinger (1995, p. 299), the focus group method is particularly useful for exploring people’s knowledge and experiences and can be used to examine not only what people think but how they think and why they think that way. They were conducted orally during interactive sessions where group participants were exposed to open-ended questions, and responses were jotted down in a notebook by the researchers themselves. The number of participants per group varied between 8 and 12 per school.

Data from the questionnaire and group interviews were analysed by means of open coding, which involved data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusions. Thus, data were grouped into the units of analysis; developed in categories, themes, and patterns; and consistently coded and assessed. The themes that emerged were discussed in the light of evidence and examples to draw down conclusions. Emphasis was put on evidence of messages contradictory to the school peace curriculum content and the ways in which they are responded to by the students, together with views from teachers and school administrators.

Presentation of Research Results

Teaching and Learning Peace Competences

Peace and values education (PVE) is presented in Rwandan secondary school curriculum as 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 (Rwanda Education Board [REB], 2015a, p. 5). The competences are supposed to be taught across all the remaining core and cross-cutting subjects. Moreover, two specific core subjects, namely history and citizenship, and religious education share many of the same learning outcomes assigned to PVE. The first aims to promote a culture of peace, tolerance, reconciliation, and patriotism amongst students in order to mould them as good citizens (REB, 2015a, p. 19). As for the second subject, it expects to contribute to students' moral and spiritual development by developing values such as faithfulness, generosity, honesty, goodness, respect, responsibility, self-control, self-esteem, and accountability that will help them to make good decisions and sound judgments about moral and life issues (REB, 2015a, p. 20).

Throughout the research, it was noted that methodologies used to teach peace values and competences may sometimes complicate the achievement of the expected peace learning outcomes. In focus group interviews, all the teachers acknowledged that cooperative learning and participatory methods are better than any other teaching approach for PVE. One experienced teacher confirmed that the methods "develop personal responsibility, help the students to reach collaboration, which is important in peace education, and they help learners to keep peace among themselves." This argument is shared by Falade, Adeyemi, and Olowe (2011, p. 4) in their survey on peace education in Nigeria. For them, the participatory approach helps learners to develop the culture of peace through the acquisition of collaborative interpersonal attitudes and skills, alongside functional and broad team skills.

Nevertheless, the teachers articulated that the implementation of participatory methods is complicated. Discussions in all the five schools raised two issues facing teaching methods such as little time allocated to a large amount of peace content and the scarcity of teaching aids. On the one hand, teachers who managed to integrate PVE into their core subjects always started with the core subject and then the few minutes left, if any, were devoted to the cross-cutting subject, being PVE.

On the other hand, teachers from all the selected schools claimed the lack of teaching aids. They expressed their wish to teach peace content through case studies or field visits to the identified sites, for instance, genocide memorial sites. These are judged as very useful because they corroborate and support the content taught in class by evidence and hands-on experience. A teacher respondent confirmed that students become convinced of what they hear from their teacher when they are exposed to outside evidence or a confirmation from a third party. Nevertheless, opportunities to experience real-life contexts and situations are hampered and blocked by the lack of appropriate resources, such as video and/or audio materials, and transport means.

Environment for the Acquisition of Peace Competences

Teaching always takes place in a specific educational environment, which has implications for its success or failure. The teaching environment of PVE in Rwandan secondary schools is composed

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of a synergy of stakeholders, namely teachers and school administrators, parents, and the school regulatory framework. Teachers and school administrators' conduct vis-à-vis the peace content is therefore

a very important aspect, which may either negatively impact learners or inspire them to rapidly adopt the peace content taught in class.

Students' responses 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 competence-based curriculum (CBC) and taught in the classroom. A total of 84.6% of the students stated that their teachers' practices were morally correct to that extent that they may be imitated,

which supports the peace curriculum contents. A proportion of 15% of the teachers and school administrators were seen to discourage the practice of peace values because of their own behaviour being contrary to peace values. Examples included teachers' corporal and unfair punishments of the students.

The role played by every main stakeholder in PVE, that is, students, parents, and teachers, is an important factor for the successful acquisition of peace competences. A synergy of all the actors for peace is crucial. However, the research pointed out a lack of trust between the stakeholders. In fact, teachers and school administrators at one school stated that they doubled efforts to repeat peace values to the students, especially when they come back from their homes after the holidays. They regretted that students "are coming back with other ideas," referring to information from their parents or other close family members or friends, 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. Yet, it is worth noting that teachers would not always proclaim the curriculum content as sole "truth" that should be believed by all.

On the other hand, evidence from the students revealed that some parents did not trust teachers with regard to their capacity to teach peace competences to their children and the trustworthiness of the content delivered to them. A student reported his parent's caution about the information from the teachers. The argument was formulated as follows: "those who were instructed are those who planned the genocide." This is a reference to the Genocide against the Tutsi that was planned and urged by the former administration, who were in office when the teaching staff were educated. It expresses parents' mistrust of instructed people, including the teachers, and suspicion of the messages they may deliver to their children. Such an example risks raising students' suspicion and scepticism vis-à-vis the peace-related content delivered by teachers. The parents' contestation of teachers' work to impart peace values to students may be influenced by the past history of the country, where educated people played a significant role in instilling hatred and hate ideology amongst ordinary citizens.

Students then criticised their teachers and school administrators for 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. Student respondents at one school complained that their teacher refused to explain to them in detail the origin of ethnic groups that inhabited Rwanda and their respective order of arrival in the country. Regarding this alleged weakness, a teacher of the same school accepted that they sometimes deliberately skip students' questions. The stated reason was that they would not like to make their own comments, but rather, they try to keep to the syllabus content. A similar case is reported by Buhigiro and Wassermann (2017, p. 15), who, in their analysis of the controversial issues about the teaching of the Genocide against the Tutsi, found that teachers preferred to limit their explanations to the official versions contained in official resources.

Last, teachers regretted that students do not put the necessary effort into their learning and acquisition of peace competences. During group interviews, two teachers from different schools complained about the students' lack of participation, especially during practical sessions like group discussions. In fact, some students were not dynamic in expressing their views and concerns in the domain of the promotion of peace values. Moreover, there were cases of students who did not trust information from their teachers, and evidence was given by a teacher where "some students laugh when they are hearing from the teacher." This simply means that students do not take seriously some of their teachers' arguments whilst teaching. Maybe this is partially the consequence of the fact that teachers fail to answer some of the students' questions, which is likely to increase student scepticism towards the material.

To sum up, on the one hand, the environment in which peace education in Rwanda is occurring has a number of supportive ingredients, such as school regulations and exemplar peace-related behaviour of

teachers and school administrators; on the other hand, it still suffers from little trust between educational stakeholders, namely students, teachers, and parents.

Categories, Origins, and Channels of Messages Contradictory to Peace Content

Whilst in the process of the acquisition of the competences for PVE, students have been encountering other content and messages contradictory to the peace-oriented content already set by the curriculum. The contradictory content evident in this study 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.

In the past and recent history of Rwanda, there were violent conflicts, the interpretation of which has been sometimes distorted for individual purposes. Students stated that they came across content related to how the country was inhabited by different ethnic groups and their cohabitation, governance, and socioeconomic organisation of the country, the liberation war, and ethnic-based violence including that of 1959¹ and 1973.² Students reported instances of messages about how Rwanda was inhabited by different ethnic groups at different times, which put forward the argument to treat some Rwandans as autochthones and others as foreigners. The focus was put on the order of arrival of different ethnic groups, namely Tutsi, Hutu, and Twa. Other contradictory messages were also reported about the kingdom regime that ruled the country before colonisation, where statements such as “kings were unfair towards people who were not from their ethnicity” or “one ethnicity dominated the other” were made to students by their parents. The messages are contradictory to the curriculum content, which emphasises good cohabitation between Rwandans before colonisation and effective administrative organisation and governance of the country under the kings’ regime.

There were further reports of a number of contradictory views on the liberation war of 1990. Some examples recorded by students, though not antipeace, included “RPF *Inkotanyi* was composed of invaders from outside the country,” “the purpose of the war was to take the power,” and “during the liberation war, there were so many innocent people killed.” The curriculum content instead, through the history and citizenship syllabus for ordinary level S1–S3, has provided details about the causes, course, and consequences of the liberation war in Rwanda (1990–1994) with special emphasis on the great need for the people who prompted the liberation war to return from exile.

Most of the contradictory messages linked with the violent conflicts that happened in Rwanda were related to the Genocide against the Tutsi in 1994. Students from all the five sites stated evidence of messages they had received in that regard. They may be grouped under the umbrella term of “genocide denial” messages, though the students should not be taken as genocide deniers. Examples were “genocide was caused by the crash of the former President Habyarimana’s plane,” “there was no genocide but rather interethnic killings/massacres,” “Former President Habyarimana was also a victim of genocide,” “there was double genocide,” or “there were ethnic massacres and not genocide.” Furthermore, since after the genocide, the government put in place mechanisms and practices for the commemoration of the genocide, there were also messages contradictory to that policy. Examples of messages which disregard the commemoration of the Genocide against the Tutsi were “those who passed away, passed away; there is no other time to spend on them” or “we do not have any relationships with those genocide victims.”

The messages in this cluster are contradictory to the content of the curriculum, which gives details about the preparation and execution of the Genocide against the Tutsi, points out its consequences, explores measures taken by the government to rebuild Rwandan society, and reviews challenges

encountered in rebuilding the country (REB, 2015b, p. 59). The expected competences to be developed are oriented to the concepts of social cohesion, personal values, family, and self-reliance in reference to nation-building.

Other important learning outcomes expected from the PVE as contained within the CBC are the promotion of social cohesion and positive values including pluralism, tolerance and personal responsibility, and unity and reconciliation (REB, 2015a, p. 5). They are very relevant in the context of a country like Rwanda, which was torn apart by divisions based on ethnicity, regionalism, and faith/religious beliefs. The curriculum content aims to impart to students the competences such as avoiding all kinds of division and dehumanisation, accepting differences in physical appearance and opinions, and maintaining unity in diversity.

Nevertheless, contradictions were evidenced by the student respondents with different frequencies at different research sites. They include examples such as parents who told their children to judge their mates' ethnicities by physical appearance before they make them friends; instructions about not being a friend of a student from a different ethnic group; discouraging trust in one another when belonging to different ethnicities; discouraging partnership in business or other joint activities for people of different ethnic groups; and being cautious of members of another home or community and different ethnic-based, group-based, or individual-based stereotypes. This is evidenced by specific biased adjectives that emerged from data to qualify the opposing group such as "these are crooks," "they are wicked," "... are canny," "he is rancorous," "... are brutal," and "... are tyrants."

Particular instances of clearly expressed divisions were regretted by students. At least one piece of evidence from each of the selected schools was given where students regretted that, at their homes, they heard parents, relatives, or neighbours publicly stating ethnicities by the names "Hutu and Tutsi," whilst at school, they are taught that they are all Rwandans. The messages are against the policy of the *Ndi Umunyarwanda* programme, which has been promoted in schools from 2014. Furthermore, religious extremism was pointed out as a contradictory and divisive message. Data revealed that there were people who, inspired by their sects, transmitted to the children contradictions which nurture stereotypes, discrimination, and exclusion of others. A student respondent repeated a contradiction heard from a parent: "I may not hire that man because he is a member of the [name of the religious organisation] Church," and another student reported a stereotyped statement heard from a friend that "[Members the religious organisation] worship the devil." These religious-based negativities contradict the Religious Education Syllabus for Ordinary Level S1–S3 (REB, 2015c, pp. 8–11) mandated to develop competences such as to "accept religious differences and aim at moral and spiritual development in order to build a better society for everyone."

Real-life experiences of injustice and unfairness were identified as risking the diversion of students from the peace-related curriculum content. Evidence of corruption and abuse of power were given as instances showing lack of empathy amongst people. Twenty-one 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," or "we have seen examples of people who are not flexible towards their neighbours while we learnt otherwise." The messages contradict the basic values of justice, respect for others and for human rights, and equity and transparency promoted through the CBC content (REB, 2015a, p. 3).

The research revealed different promoters and channels of contradictory messages. Most of them (56%) were conveyed from the home setting (parents, brothers, and other family members), 24.7% were conveyed by school friends, and 19.4% from other community members without any specified

relationship with the student. The contradictory messages were conveyed through different settings such as open face-to-face conversation (44%), private face-to-face conversation (34%), and interpersonal chats through electronic and social media networks (22%). Commenting on social media in educating for peace, Comminos (2013, p. 13) posits it as an ambivalent factor which can be used in “both transforming a conflict to a more peaceful situation, as well as for aggravating a conflict.” As an answer to the problem, he proposes enhancing “media literacy,” which should be “a component of peace education programmes.”

Briefly, the above data analysis revealed that contradictory messages work against PVE aims, summarised as the promotion of social cohesion, positive values, empathy, critical thinking, and actions for building a peaceful society. Interpersonal communications, especially through face-to-face chats, constitute the most recurrent propagation means of the messages contradictory to the peace curriculum content.

Alternatives and Responses to Messages Contradictory to the Peace Curriculum Content

Having identified and explored the existence of contradictory messages to the curriculum peace content, this research examines the ways in which they are handled by the students. Three different responses were given at different times. Indeed, the contradictory messages and views were either rejected or accepted by the students after assessment, or the students were unable to assess the validity and authority of the competing claims and ended up confused.

Once the students had acquired the peace curriculum content from their teachers and were confronted with other content from outside of school, 48.7% attested to their awareness of the contradictory messages and their ability to differentiate them from the curriculum values. They were therefore able to contain the contradictions and to continue their learning of peace competences without any problem. In other words, they rejected what was contradictory to the curriculum content taught at school. Students' statements such as “I do not believe in them,” “I seem not to have heard it,” or “there are those [messages] I reject” were recorded as evidence.

On the other hand, there were 22.6% of the students who stated that they regarded the messages from the teachers and others from outside the school with the same level of importance. They accepted the messages, regardless of their origin, either in school or outside of school. For this group of students, responses from group interviews reiterated that it may be very difficult to resist information that comes from parents because of the trust children have in them.

The remaining students, representing 28.7%, stay in a frightening situation of total confusion. Apart from recognising the promoters of the messages, namely teachers on the one side and parents, friends, and relatives on the other side, the students explained that they did not have any other basis for establishing a clear-cut distinction between the messages. One student's statement was “I may not know the truth.” Therefore, they acquired information from the two diverging sources, and they stayed confused as to which to retain or reject.

This research was interested in investigating the students' capacity to assess the messages before making a decision to reject divisive messages; 83.4% of them stated that they referred to the content already taught in class and compared it to the newly acquired information. Two examples from the students were “we were told there is no longer hatred between Rwandans” and “we learnt from school that we are all Rwandans,” given as a reaction to messages which were encouraging hatred and division. These responses constitute some evidence of students making reference to the curriculum content.

Teachers and school administrators commented on their responsibilities to help their students to adequately respond to the messages contradictory to the curriculum content. A group of interviewees at one school raised the issue that “some teachers [who] think that learners don’t care about the contra-

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dictory messages” and thus did not do anything to enhance their capacities at least to recognise them. However, teachers from all the schools stated that their students, aware or not of the difference between the curriculum content and contradictory messages, “are confused and live with internal conflict difficult to resolve.” Faced with the “two narratives” from people they trust, perhaps at different levels, students seemed challenged to make a choice between controversial messages encountered on the same ground.

As for helping the students to get out of that confusion, teachers and school administrators from all the selected sites regretted their partial ability to accomplish their role, especially because of their lack of confidence and resources. Evidence was given by teachers, such as “there are some sensitive topics on which teachers do not comment enough because of a lack of knowledge about them,” “sometimes we see that students are not fully convinced by what we teach them,” or “don’t be surprised to realise that, with regard to some sensitive issues, teachers also have the same questions as those asked by their students,” which showed a critical gap in this domain. The worst situation was when the gap was discovered by the students who were not satisfied with the answers they received from the teachers. Another statement that “teaching the peace education content at school is done within some boundaries, whilst the messages conveyed at homes are delivered without boundaries” made by a teacher highlights how teachers may think that their teaching is disadvantaged, compared to the messages from outside the school. A further argument emphasised that teachers hold a defensive position when learners were educated about peace at school, but they “become intoxicated at home.” This was supported by the following comparison: “It is like a malaria patient who receives medical treatment at the health centre recovers but is infected again when back home because of defective hygiene conditions.”

The existing teachers’ situation with regard to the teaching of peace content and responding to contradictory messages encountered by their students is not far from Buhigiro and Wasserman’s (2017, p. 5) findings about teachers’ challenges in teaching controversial topics such as those related to the Genocide against the Tutsi. They include, amongst others, teachers’ lack of the necessary skills to deal with controversial issues, teaching in “the narrowest possible manner to avoid engaging their learners in debate” (Buhigiro & Wasserman, 2017, p. 8), and the lack of appropriate educational resources (Buhigiro & Wasserman, 2017, p. 12) related to sensitive topics including peace education in a community that experienced one of the most violent conflicts, namely genocide.

The discussions on the issues around the contradictory messages and the existing ways to respond to them indicated that the students and teachers are living in a challenging context, marked by dilemmas, contradictions, and confusion. This article has expressed concerns about the divergent narratives of the content that makes up the peace competences of the competence-based curriculum. Both the peace curriculum content and messages contradictory to it coexist in the same environment and they apply to the same target audience, which are students. The contradictory aspect of the messages from the two sides that should be working together for a common purpose, here, peace education, remains a situation to handle with care if the peace education programme wants to be successful.

Conclusion

The topic of peace education at the S3 ordinary level of secondary school and messages contradictory to the peace curriculum content were examined in order to shed light on how peace-related competences are imparted to students within an environment full of controversial content. The research indicated the existence of messages contradictory to the peace content embodied in the CBC, which come from parents, family members, partners, and friends. Their content is susceptible to hindering, in one way or another, the peace foundation already constructed at school through the curriculum designed and implemented for that purpose.

Teachers and school personnel, as the ones who offer PVE, need to be well-prepared to facilitate PVE. This will increase their awareness on the integration on PVE in the curriculum, improve their knowledge on peace and values content, and positively handle the problem of contradictions. Moreover, schools should be a place of learning and confronting ideas with the reality and should not prepare ideologists. Rather, the school orientation should prepare people who will serve the society for the welfare of every human being, people ready to strive for justice, empathy, critical thinking, and personal responsibility.

It is also necessary to 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 the education stakeholders. This could help transform the learning environment and ensure that students have the freedom to ask sensitive questions and receive feedback and are encouraged to critically think and ask for further explanations. This is very important because, as long as a peace education programme does not reach the expected results, the ideal of building a peaceful society for Rwanda may be compromised.

Finally, it is worth noting that there is no single way of educating for peace. Despite this, the research pointed out a disjuncture between stakeholders in education, especially students, teachers, parents, and the curriculum. Mishra (2015, p. 52) has advanced an argument for the need for an effective synergy amongst stakeholders for peace education to work. This synergy will be developed if parents place importance on curricular activities at home, teachers give their perception on peace content in non-formal ways that engage with contradictory messages, and children share with their parents what they have learnt in school.

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Notes

1. Ethnic violence of 1959 and the advent of the Republican regime in 1962.
2. Violence during the transition from the first to the second republic.

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