

Volume 18 Number 2 (2024): 49-58

<https://openjournals.utoledo.edu/index.php/infactispax>

ISSN 2578-6857

Interview With Dr. Betty Reardon

Armene Modi

The following interview with Dr. Betty Reardon was conducted shortly after the conclusion of the International Institute of Peace Education (IIPE) held in Pune, India, in July 2000. Dr. Reardon's message, seems as relevant today as it was when recorded a quarter century ago. The interviewer, Armene Modi, was so inspired by Dr. Reardon's course on Peace Education at Teachers College, Columbia University, and by several IIPEs she attended, that she decided to transform her teaching style to include issues of peace and human rights in her English language courses. With Dr. Reardon's encouragement and guidance, Armene subsequently set up Ashta No Kai, a non-profit organization to educate and empower rural women and girls in ten villages near Pune in 1998, resulting in the positive transformation of thousands of lives. She would like to dedicate this interview to the memory of Dr. Reardon, an outstanding peace educator, whom she was fortunate to have as a friend, mentor, and guide through many decades.

Editor's Note: Dr. Betty A. Reardon (1929-2023) was a pioneering and world-renowned leader of peace and human rights education. Her groundbreaking work has laid the foundation for the cross-disciplinary field that integrates peace

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Volume 18 Number 1 (2024): 49-58

<https://openjournals.utoledo.edu/index.php/infactispax>

education and the quest for international human rights within a gender-conscious, global perspective. In recognition of her internationally acclaimed contributions, achievements and awards as a teacher, activist, researcher, author, and consultant spanning over five decades, she was nominated by the International Peace Bureau (Geneva, Switzerland) for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2013.



Betty Reardon (far left in blue plaid) and IPE 2000 host/organizer Armene Modi (in blue sari) visit with village women served by Ashta No-Kai, the non-profit Armene founded to promote the education and empowerment of rural women and girls. <https://www.peace-ed-campaign.org/9-gifts-peace-education-gives-year-round-and-a-note-of-thanks-from-betty-reardon/>

Armene: *What is Peace Education? How would you define it?*

Dr. Reardon: I would define Peace Education as the intentional learning towards a society in which problems are solved without violence, and people can live with the expectation that their dignity will be respected. Peace Education is an essential area of education because there has to be a learning of what human dignity is and how it can be realized. It is something that must be much more intentional than it has been in the past.

Armene: *What should be the aims of Peace Education?*

Dr. Reardon: The aims of Peace Education should be to give people a set of values, a given group of capacities, and a vision of possibilities. The values are essentially the values of justice, non-violence, and human dignity; the capacities are the capacities for conflict resolution, for visualizing alternative possibilities to the present and working towards them; towards collaboration with those who are very different; for tolerance of and understanding of other cultures – many things that are now the aims of education. But these are not aims that are well synthesized and integrated into a system that we could call Peace Education. So, I think that one of the areas to focus on in Peace Education is pulling together various fields and educational endeavors that would be related to peace but haven't yet been conceptualized in a general system of Peace Education.

Armene: *So, do you feel that Peace Education should be a required course in school curriculums?*

Dr. Reardon: I'm not an advocate of separate courses in Peace Education, except in so far as that there are courses that focus on particular problem areas. I think there should be courses on Human Rights, Alternative Security Systems, and courses on Conflict Resolution. But the development of the values and the capacities in a kind of vision that I am referring to as a purpose of Peace Education cannot be achieved within a course. I think Peace Education should be the brainwork for all education. All education should be education for peace, which is the kind of social order I was referring to and, also, a kind of development of the person to expect and work for such a social order.

Armene: *Do you think this question is now relevant: why should we teach Peace Education?*

Dr. Reardon: I think the reason we should teach Peace Education is that in the act of teaching, in the planning for teaching, in the decision to teach towards a goal, there is a process in which the educator goes through a values analysis and makes an assessment of her or his own capacities in the area to be taught. There are discussions about the curriculum; there are sometimes also interactions between the school and the community. All of these are, it seems to me, processes that are essentials to Peace Education achieving what I'm talking about when I say I think it should pervade all of education. We have to look again at the purposes of education. To me, the phrase 'teaching Peace Education' means this whole process of becoming conscious about the present state of education, what its inadequacies are to our needs, and how we might overcome those inadequacies to make education a real instrument of peace.

Armene: *So, what kind of authentic education do young people need, given the kind of violence, and the kind of society we have today?*

Dr. Reardon: Well, I think we need an education which makes them feel valued and able to value, to value others, to value the kinds of conditions that we would say are peace, to hold values strongly enough that they would want to struggle for them. They need an education which would enable them to conduct that struggle. This doesn't mean that traditional education has not to some degree provided this. I think there are a lot of things in traditional and classic education which must be preserved. But I also think that we need to understand that we are in a rapidly changing society – that, we have gone very quickly through a whole stage of human and social evolution and that we have to begin to take more control of that evolution and guide it to a positive value, not to be pushed along by it.

I think our children feel pushed along by the world and what's happening in it; they feel powerless and unable to control their lives. Until we face that sense of impotence, none of the problems are really going to be faced. Education must be more focused on these specific problems, as well as the possibilities for overcoming them. I believe it is the only way that we can get what I would call authentic education in the sense of learning that is relevant in the lives of the learners and the society in which they are going to live.

Armene: *Can you tell us about some of the activities by various Peace Educators in different parts of the world?*

Dr. Reardon: Peace Education takes many different forms, and the activities are very different and are directed at learners of all ages and all circumstances. For

example, in Europe, there are many, particularly urban schools in European countries, that have had a great influx of immigrants from cultures other than the dominant culture, and they have had social problems as a consequence, which have resulted in violence. So, they are focusing on how they can educate towards an understanding, not simply of multiculturalism, but a kind of inter-culturism that is aware that the cultural differences have, or their interpretation and application, have led to violence.

In Norway, in the Netherlands, and in many schools, they have really added new curriculum so that children could learn about the cultures of people who are coming into their communities and to integrate the immigrants, not by acculturating them, but by introducing them to a new culture while respecting their old, original one.

Peace Education does exist virtually in all parts of the world to some degree, but not really at the level that is necessary. There are a lot of organizations and associations, both national and international, wherein educators are working together to push this form of education along. There are some interesting transnational collaborations in which curriculum is developed for adaptive use, not exactly in the same sense, in a number of different societies, with the notion that if we are going to have a world community there should be some commonalities in our education.

Armene: *Can you give us some examples of one of these transnational efforts?*

Dr. Reardon: One that I worked on was a ‘Project on Ecological and Co-operative Education’. In short, the abbreviation is PEACE. It was initiated by Americans and Russians, while there were some Ukrainians, who we called ‘Soviets’ when we started. Norwegian educators arranged for American and Soviet educators to meet and talk about these kinds of issues because they could not have met in the United States or in the Soviet Union to talk.

We looked at the common problems we faced, we explored what we meant by Peace Education and whether we could say in our societies that we were doing Peace Education together. Then we determined that we had one common problem, that was something that would not cause us political problems and that was the environment. But we were also able to interpret environmental issues to see that there are political dimensions, that there are relationships to the security system and there are human rights issues and so forth. But as long as we didn’t say Security Education or Human Rights Education, the project went along on its

own course. It has produced, among other things, what you call Twinning Schools, common learning units and development of a method of education which we call ecological and cooperative.

Armene: *Could you elaborate a bit more on this method of education?*

Dr. Reardon: Ecological, is what we believe is essential as one of the components of Peace Education, to learn and help students learn how to think in holistic systems and inter-relations, particularly in living systems, to take our analogies not from constructive systems but from living systems, which have values embedded in them as well, because it is values of life on the earth and so forth.

In each of our societies we had been educating more for forms of competition, even if it were that we worked together as a country, we collaborated to compete against the other society. Competence at competition was one of the major efforts. We believe that we have to be much more intentional about teaching skills of collaboration and cooperation for the sake of cooperation in the way an ecological system functions together cooperatively to maintain the life of the system. In order to maintain the life of the human species, and the life of the planet, human beings have to be able to function that way, and we have to educate for that. So, these methods, as well as particular kinds of materials have come out of that project.

Armene: *You have been active in the field of Peace Education for several decades. Do you feel that Peace Education has gone beyond the slogan stage and become a reality at least in a few parts of the world?*

Dr. Reardon: I think we need to differentiate between Peace Education and Peace Studies. If we look at Peace Studies as the kind of work that goes on in universities, where there are courses and degree programs, the education that takes place around that substance of peace is a reality. We even have professional associations as well as universities offering these kinds of courses, predominantly in North America as well as in Europe and a growing number in other parts of the world. Peace Education, however, is a reality in various parts of the world but is still not a practiced policy. Ministries of Education give lip-service to Education for Peace, but they have yet to prepare their systems to do the kind of education that I was talking about before, because Ministries in general don't want to challenge the fundamental purposes and processes of education. The kind of

massive effort that is required of training teachers, of reviewing textbooks, of changing the structure of classrooms, and so forth, is far from a reality.

Armene: Why should an educator be concerned with Peace Education? Shouldn't the field of peace issues and peace work be the responsibility of politicians or citizens or other public figures?

Dr. Reardon: Educators should be concerned because citizens, politicians, public figures and people who have great power over the direction of society need to be pushed to change the way they function and to take action for peace. The only way that it is going to happen, is if society demands it. Education cannot be separated out from society and blamed for some of these symptomatic problems – neither can politics and citizenship be something that functions after you finish your education.

Education itself is political. The decisions that happen in the education system come from politicians, so that if people are not educated to what peace is about, what is required for peace, what some of the capacities of peace making are and so forth, they will not be able to demand that of their politicians. Once in a while you get an inspired visionary leader who will work for peace because she or he is so committed, but for the most part, politicians are like everybody else. They have a job which they do day by day, and they are going to do that job according to the job description. In a democratic society, citizens are supposed to write the job description. What we have to put into that job description is “work for peace”. Without education, politicians cannot do their work, or citizens can't do their work for peace.

Armene: Now turning to language teaching, what implication does Peace Education have for language teachers and should Peace Education be taught only by language teachers?

Dr. Reardon: Peace Education belongs in every subject, every grade, everywhere people learn. Language has a special opportunity because language is the medium through which human beings most inter-relate. A language can help people come together, live together, but also separate. Those that teach a language – not only the context of what is taught, but the spirit, the notion of why it is taught, determines, I think, whether that language is going to be for or against peace. Language can be learned as a tool to manipulate or understand manipulation, towards dominance, towards control of another country. Although all the colonial administrators did not learn the language of the colonized, enough

of them learned it so that they could give orders, they could understand certain customs and manipulate the colonized people. The colonized learned the language of the colonizer in order to survive in an oppressive situation, but they did not learn to communicate as full human cultures and human beings, one to another.

So, when the language teacher takes a stance on why the language is being taught, the language teacher will be able to say – you can get a good job, you will be able to get in this corporation, you could go to the UN, but that is not the fundamental reason for learning the language. The fundamental reason for learning the language is to truly understand and appreciate others in as much of their own context as possible. If you fully learn another language, you also learn another way of thinking, and our thinking influences our language.

The teaching of whole language, living language, and not just translating sentences is a way in which we can take learners into an experience of a different way of conceptualizing, a different way of seeing the world and the structure of a language tells us a great deal about much in the culture and about the way people who have devised that language think. Therein we understand that there are multiple ways to think and that there probably isn't only one right way. So, people who have various languages, if those languages are learned out of a love of language, a love of learning, it becomes a very empowering tool, but languages still to this day are learned and manipulated as tools for control and oppression. So, it seems to me that the professional stances of language teachers and language associations and so forth, have to begin to look at this and to really confront the issues and the problems. Why are schools teaching languages? Why do corporations teach languages? To have the teachers particularly be more aware of that, because it seems to me that only by confronting these issues can language, as any other subject, become really a tool of peace.

Armene: *So how can language teachers put the aims of Peace Education into practice?*

Dr. Reardon: I think to begin with the kind of atmosphere that I was just referring to in the classroom – communicating what the purposes of learning a language are, but also the context that is used for teaching language. Much of what learners need to know about the world can be presented and learned in language learning, as well as much of the culture of the people who have devised that language. Language education has traditionally done this, but gone to the roots of the culture. You learn something - ultimately you get to learn the literature of the people which can be very revealing.

In elementary and secondary school, we get lessons on how people from other countries dress and their table manners and things of that kind without looking to the roots of the culture. I think language can be used in that way to promote a deeper understanding. I know there are certain phrases in my own language which are clearly violent and militaristic, and they are part of our everyday speech. When we teach students idioms, for example, we could do so by being much more conscious about the underlying values and assumptions of these idioms as well as other common phrases. I think there are lots of things language teachers can do, and I think many of them have invented approaches to Peace Education for language.

Armene: *Language is basically communication, and communication can be either destructive or constructive. What are some aspects of communication that language teachers need to consider to help students engage in constructive communication?*

Dr. Reardon: Essentially, what I would emphasize here is the relationship to the Other. The language teacher needs to make the climate of the class constructive in ways that I've indicated before but also to raise to the level of consciousness about how the way we communicate determines not only individual relationships, but also how it determines an entire system and climate.

The interaction between two students in a classroom concerns a lot more than those two students. When language teachers are doing things such as dialogues, they need to be very sensitive to some of the aspects other than the spoken language, as I have talked about before, particularly when they are teaching adolescents to make it possible to confront some of the negative behaviors that exist in those interactions without intimidating the students. Even students who are engaged in what the teacher would consider reprehensible behavior sometimes are doing it for reprehensible reasons, but not always. So, the teacher needs a lot of sensitivity to that and needs to sensitize all the students in the classroom to the degree to which they are affected one by the other. Bad vibes or whatever between two are going to affect the whole system and then the whole system has some responsibility for the relationship between the two. I think a language class is one of the best possibilities for discussing these types of things, particularly in teaching conversational abilities and not just the diatomic or dialogic, but other dynamics of the classroom. I think in that way, the communication process, when the teacher is conscious of it as a process, can be conditioned by actions and some professional principles to be very, very meaningful to peace.

Armene: *Finally, how can language teachers approach issues of human rights in a language class?*

Dr. Reardon: Well, I think issues of human rights could be both in the context area and in the climate of the classroom. When you create the climate of your classroom, sometimes it can be done in a totally unspoken way, through the teacher's behavior and the teacher's expectations of the behavior of the students, but it also can be made explicit that we conduct this class in this way because it is consistent with human rights.

Human rights documents exist in all, virtually all languages – principles of those documents can be introduced into the classroom. I think it is very important for students who are learning another language to be exposed to the press of the countries in which those languages are spoken and what some of the issues are. If some of those issues are the issues of human rights, then they could read stories of human rights issues in the original language. There are many opportunities for human rights, community rights and environmental issues, but I want to re-emphasize the content of my point about what makes Peace Education. What makes Peace Education is it consciously reflects upon the degree to which violence is problematic in the situation under study, and leads students to be capable of imagining, selecting, or acting out alternatives to violence.