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Pedagogy of Peace as Moral Rectitude of University Institutions in Post-War Sierra Leone

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Abstract

This article posits that the active promotion of peace education constitutes a fundamental moral imperative for higher education institutions (HEIs), particularly in societies emerging from violent conflict. Framing this imperative as the "pedagogy of peace", it argues that such pedagogy transcends mere curriculum addition. It represents instead a core attribute of institutional rectitude — a commitment to fostering the knowledge, virtues, and civic dispositions necessary for sustainable peace. Drawing upon a transformative mixed-methods study of all accredited universities in Sierra Leone, this article examines the degree to which this moral mandate is understood, embodied, and enacted in post-war Sierra Leone.

The findings reveal a significant normative consensus on the importance of peace education, yet a considerable gap exists between rhetorical commitment and integrated, transformative practice. The analysis identifies institutional policy vagueness, resource constraints, and the predominant focus on extracurricular and remedial activities over deep curricular reform as key limiting factors. The study concludes that for universities in Sierra Leone to fully realize their moral vocation as agents of social reconstruction, a more deliberate and holistic institutionalization of the pedagogy of peace is required, one that aligns mission, curriculum, pedagogy, and community engagement into a coherent framework for ethical citizenship.

Keywords

Pedagogy of peace, Moral imperative, Ethical citizenship, Post-conflict societies, Social reconstruction

Introduction

The classic conception of the university as a universitas, a community of scholars dedicated to the pursuit of truth, carries an inherent, though often implicit, ethical dimension. This dimension is acutely magnified in nations grappling with the legacy of mass atrocity, where the role of the university expands from knowledge production to active social reconstruction. In such contexts, we argue that the adoption and implementation of a "pedagogy of peace" becomes a measure of moral rectitude of an institution. This term denotes not only technical correctness but moral uprightness and a commitment to the fundamental good of the society it serves (Shields, 2019). For Sierra Leone, emerging from a devastating eleven-year civil war (1991-2002) characterized by profound brutality and social fragmentation, the need for institutions that can cultivate a culture of peace is paramount (Millar, 2011). Higher education institutions, as crucibles of future leaders, professionals, and citizens, hold a unique responsibility in this endeavor.

This article explores the manifestation of this responsibility. It interrogates the pedagogy of peace as the moral rectitude of universities in Sierra Leone, assessing the degree to which this imperative is embedded within institutional fabric. The pedagogy of peace is understood here as an integrative framework that combines critical content (history, conflict analysis, human rights), dialogic and participatory processes (fostering empathy, critical deliberation, and collaborative problem-solving), and a transformative purpose aimed at nurturing agents of positive social change (Bajaj, 2008; Zembylas & Bekerman, 2013). It is the

institutional embodiment of what Lederach (2005) describes as the moral imagination — the capacity to envision and enact peaceful relationships in the midst of destructive conflict. To what extent, then, have universities in Sierra Leone internalized this pedagogy as a core defining element of institutional identity and practice?

Conceptual Framework

The argument for peace education as moral rectitude is anchored in three interrelated conceptual pillars. First, it draws on the notion of the "civic university," which asserts that universities have a fundamental obligation to contribute to the public good, societal health, and democratic resilience (Goddard & Vallance, 2013). In a post-conflict setting, the primary civic good is peace itself. Second, it aligns with transformative education theory (Mezirow, 2000), which views education not as neutral information transfer but as a process that can challenge dominant, often violence-sustaining, narratives and empower learners to reframe their perspectives and agency. A university that shirks this transformative potential in a fragile environment arguably neglects a core ethical duty.

Third, it incorporates the concept of "institutionalization," which refers to the process by which a practice or norm becomes embedded within an organization's rules, routines, and culture (Selznick, 1957). The moral rectitude of an institution is demonstrated not through sporadic initiatives but through the systematic integration of a value into its policies, resource allocations, curricula, and reward structures. Therefore, assessing the degree of a university's commitment to peace pedagogy requires moving beyond anecdotal evidence to examine its institutionalization across multiple domains: official policy and mission; curricular and co-curricular programming; pedagogical approaches; research agendas; and community engagement.

Methodology

Sierra Leone provides a critical case study. Its higher education sector, while historically significant in West Africa, was severely degraded by the civil war and subsequent challenges. Post-war, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) explicitly highlighted the role of education in reconciliation, recommending a review of curricula to promote peace, human rights, and civic responsibility (TRC Report, 2004). This placed a direct, national mandate upon educational institutions.

The findings presented here are derived from a nationwide study employing a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design. The research constituted a full census of all accredited universities and university colleges in Sierra Leone (N = 9), as listed by the Tertiary Education Commission. Phase One involved a quantitative survey of institutional leadership and a systematic analysis of university policy documents. Phase Two comprised qualitative case studies at four purposefully selected institutions, involving 38 in-depth interviews with administrators, faculty, and student leaders, 8 focus group discussions with students and alumni, and non-participant observation. This approach allowed for both a macro-mapping of the sector and a micro-analysis of the lived experiences and challenges of implementing peace pedagogy (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

Results

The research revealed a landscape of widespread normative assent but uneven and often superficial institutionalization.

Policy and Rhetorical Commitment:

A significant majority of universities (89%) referenced peace, social cohesion, national development, or civic responsibility in their mission statements or strategic plans. This indicates a high-level recognition of their societal role. However, document analysis showed these references were often vague and aspirational, lacking specific operational frameworks, assigned responsibilities, or dedicated budget lines. As one Deputy Vice-Chancellor noted, “It is in the plan, yes, but it is one of fifty priorities. Without a champion and a budget, it remains just beautiful words.” This suggests that while peace is acknowledged as a moral good, it has not yet been elevated to a non-negotiable institutional imperative guiding concrete decision-making.

Curricular and Programmatic Integration

Curricular integration was found to be the weakest link. Only one university offered a dedicated undergraduate degree program in Peace and Conflict Studies. More commonly, peace-related content was confined to a few optional modules within departments like Sociology, History, or Law. There was little evidence of the systematic “mainstreaming” of peace education across disciplines — for example, in Business (ethics, non-violent negotiation), Engineering (resource conflict), or Health Sciences (psychosocial trauma). The pedagogy reported was predominantly

traditional lecture-based, with limited use of the participatory, dialogic, and experiential methods considered essential for effective peace education (Harris & Morrison, 2013). This compartmentalization treats peace as a specialized subject rather than a foundational lens for all university learning, thereby limiting its transformative reach.

Co-curricular and Remedial Focus

In contrast to the thin curricular presence, co-curricular activities were vibrant. All universities reported student-led clubs (e.g., Human Rights Clubs, Debating Societies) and periodic events like peace marches, guest lectures, and cultural festivals celebrating national unity. Student Affairs units often engaged in conflict mediation on campus. While immensely valuable, this focus carries a risk. It can render peacebuilding an extracurricular "activity" or a remedial measure for managing student conduct, rather than the central, academic raison d'être of the institution. It may address symptoms of conflict without challenging the epistemological foundations that can underlie division.

The Chasm of Resources and Capacity

The single most consistent theme across both survey and interview data was the constraint of resources. Faculty reported a lack of training in peace pedagogy, inadequate teaching materials, overcrowded classrooms, and overwhelming teaching loads that stifled innovation. A lecturer from a provincial university stated, "I believe in this work, but I am using notes from my own undergraduate studies twenty years ago. How can I teach transformative peace when I have 200 students in a hot room and no projector?" This resource gap creates a moral dilemma: institutions assert a commitment they are structurally unequipped to fulfill, potentially fostering cynicism over transformation.

Discussion

The findings indicate that Sierra Leonean universities are caught in a critical juncture between moral aspiration and full institutionalization. There is a clear, sector-wide acknowledgment of the pedagogy of peace as part of their moral vocation—their rectitude is recognized in intent. This is a crucial first step, born from the nation's collective trauma and the explicit recommendations of the TRC.

However, the rectitude is not yet fully realized in practice. The institutionalization process remains partial. Peace education is often peripheral, dependent on the zeal of individual "champions," vulnerable to donor funding cycles for specific projects, and overshadowed by more immediate pressures of financial survival and academic accreditation. This creates a discrepancy between the institution-as-ideal and the institution-as-practiced (Barnett, 2018). The moral commitment has not yet been sufficiently "routinized" into the bureaucratic and academic DNA of the universities.

This partial institutionalization can be interpreted through the lens of "decoupling" (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), where organizations adopt policies ceremonially to gain legitimacy from their environment (in this case, the post-war national and international expectation for peacebuilding) but buffer these from their core technical activities (day-to-day teaching and research) due to internal constraints. While understandable, this decoupling represents a failure to fully embody the moral rectitude the situation demands.

Conclusion

For Sierra Leonean universities to fully embrace the pedagogy of peace as their moral rectitude, a more conscious and integrated approach is necessary. This requires moving from ad-hoc activities to a strategic framework. First, vague mission statements must be translated into concrete institutional policies with clear objectives, accountable units, and dedicated resources. Second, peace pedagogy must be curricularly mainstreamed, not as an add-on but as a cross-disciplinary competence, influencing program learning outcomes and teaching methods across faculties. Third, faculty development is critical — investing in training for lecturers to become facilitators of dialogue and critical thinking about the nation's past and future.

Ultimately, the pedagogy of peace must become synonymous with what it means to be an educated citizen in post-war Sierra Leone. It is not merely about avoiding a return to violence, but about actively building a just, equitable, and participatory society. When a university's structures, curricula, and daily practices are aligned to cultivate the knowledge, skills, and values necessary for this project, it truly fulfills its highest moral purpose. The journey for Sierra Leone's universities is underway, but the findings of this study suggest that the path from rhetorical

assent to deep institutional rectitude (where the pedagogy of peace becomes the very heartbeat of the institution) remains a vital and urgent undertaking.

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