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## Book Review: Teaching for Peace and Social Justice in Myanmar: Identity, Agency, and Critical Pedagogy

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Book Review

## ***Teaching for Peace and Social Justice in Myanmar: Identity, Agency, and Critical Pedagogy***

By Mary Shepard Wong (Ed.)

*Bloomsbury, 2022, 234 pages.*

*\$130.00 (Hardback), \$39.95 (Paperback), \$35.95 (eBook).*

*ISBN: 978-1-3501-8407-7*

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The power and potential of the intersection of peace education with human rights education shines through in *Teaching for Peace and Social Justice in Myanmar* (2022), edited by Mary Shepard Wong. Presented in three sections entitled Agency, Identity, and Critical Pedagogy, this book describes how various actors design, implement, and interpret peace education in Myanmar. The book has a distinct spotlight on intersectionality and addressing who is missing, why they are missing, and what is next if we fail to teach peace and human rights. Another theme centers on critical education, which Wong contends is foundational to peacebuilding as it “interrogates inequalities, examines power structures, and acknowledges and unleashes agency to teachers and students” (p. 3).

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A key premise of the book focuses on valuing diversity and prioritizing social justice to reduce armed conflicts within Myanmar. Each chapter provides localized examples centered on the praxis of teaching for peace and contributes to a growing body of knowledge on how peace education efforts are understood by educators and learners (Bajaj & Hantzopoulos, 2016). Almost half of the contributors are from Myanmar, with the intentional inclusion of young and marginalized educators from diverse regions of the country. Each chapter begins with a personal narrative on how each author came to their peace education work and the local context, challenges, and breakthroughs they have experienced. These narratives pull the reader in to grasp the agency and positionality of the contributors toward peacebuilding and human rights education.

The first section includes three chapters dedicated to the agency of educators and learners. Practitioners seeking to incorporate peacebuilding exercises into praxis could find these examples insightful. Chapter 1 documents the journey of 16 teacher participants seeking to develop agency or “pro-social capital” (p. 28) in their students through participatory and problem-posing lessons as a mode of sustainable peacebuilding. The next chapter describes the conditions, highlights, and recommendations for effective dialogue between diverse ethnic groups and the promotion of engaged learning, including designing projects, addressing time constraints, determining target areas and participant selection, and recognizing learning styles and cultural issues. This section closes with a chapter outlining two case studies that illustrate the opportunities and challenges of generating self-awareness and conflict responses through creative dialogues by effectively setting the stage and encouraging an enabling environment for participants engaged in peacebuilding praxis.

The middle section of the book focuses on how identity informs peace education. In opening this section, Chapter 4 outlines the historical, ethnic, and religious identities that impact education and peacebuilding in the state of Rakhine. This overview sets the frame for the stories of two young educators who were first students and then teachers in a one-year college-level nonformal peacebuilding program established by a civil society

organization with the overall objective of developing youth as peacemakers for change through participatory educational practices. The next chapter explores the role of mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) and first language-based MLE, as compared to ethnic language-based multilingual education (ELB-MLE), in improving the access and quality of education to support peacebuilding and democratization. In uplifting MTB-MLE, the authors work with two teacher-training MLE projects that promote community building and sustainable peace and demonstrate that MTE-MLB allows a better understanding of personal identities and fosters skills needed for interpersonal relationship-building. Finally, this exploration of identity closes with a chapter describing the collective experience of three practitioners implementing the Learn and Share Together (LST) initiative in both community-level and formal school settings. From their experiences with LST, the authors offer four principles in curriculum development and implementation: conflict sensitivity, contextualization, collaboration and co-creation, and centering local wisdom and voices. They also provide recommendations to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and grant donors who seek to re-evaluate their awards determination process, timeline requirements, and cross-sector connections, as peacebuilding is not necessarily a linear project.

The book's final section addresses critical pedagogy's role in peace education. First, Chapter 7 examines the specific function of curriculum and pedagogy in middle schools to determine the extent and effectiveness of peace education. The chapter outlines a qualitative study that sought to answer questions on how curriculum addresses knowledge of the human rights of children, diversity, and conflict resolution skills. Based on the results, the authors conclude that there was no integration of human or child rights in the curriculum, a lack of promotion of teamwork, over-influence of one ethnic group, and discrimination among students for ethnic, gender, and other identity differences. The authors suggest opportunities for curriculum and textbook revisions or supplementation and pedagogical change to promote cooperation and respect for differences. The following chapter continues the application of critical pedagogy by outlining the use of applied theater in secondary social studies school curricula to foster critical thinking

and reconciliation with painful and contentious topics from Myanmar's history. Through role-playing activities involving primary source documents, secondary social studies teachers and students in separate workshops explored alternative perspectives that honor the dignity of others, foster empathy for differences, and search for commonalities. The section's closing chapter analyzes Myanmar's donor-centric system and the nature of "moral imagination" within peace research (p. 192). This donor-centric research system reflects Western values, practices, and languages, often resulting in policies looking for evidence to support them and based on the preconceptions of donors on the form of peace best for Myanmar. This type of investigation limits researchers' ability to pose unique and probing questions about peacebuilding possibilities in Myanmar. The author argues for realigning peacebuilding research to reflect how the people of Myanmar view their issues and uplift their values and the "soul of the place" (p. 198).

Overall, this volume extends the scholarship that examines peacebuilding within education and educators' potential contributions, including examining challenges and complexities of peace education work. All contributors believe education is crucial in promoting positive peace and unity within Myanmar. Each chapter in this book offers practical, on-the-ground examples of how peacebuilding education functions in various formal and informal settings with supporting theoretical frameworks. While the specific enactment of each program may be unique to the conflicts within Myanmar, the hope and promise that others worldwide engaged in peace and human rights education could take the lessons and apply them in their specific cases shines through each chapter.

An intriguing follow-up to this book would be examples of locations where peace and human rights education intersect in other nations and how this occurs. Peace education practitioners should gain a deep appreciation for the practical models outlined in each chapter. However, the challenges of implementing the ideas presented in the book include the extent to which they could be applied in other locales and the rapid pace of political climate changes in Myanmar. Wong (2022) notes that peace education requires opportunities for local actors to formulate responses to how cultural,

political, and economic factors drive conflict or promote peace. She rightfully concludes that envisioning peace and socially just systems can lead to powerful peacebuilding acts.

## References

- Bajaj, M., & Hantzopoulos, M. (Eds.). (2016). *Peace education: International perspectives*. Bloomsbury.
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