

Book Review: *Constructive Conflict Pedagogies for Building Democratic Peace: Teaching Strategies from around the World* by Kathy Bickmore. Bloomsbury Academic, ISBN 978-1-3505-1971-8.

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The book *Constructive Conflict Pedagogies for Building Democratic Peace: Teaching Strategies from Around the World*, edited by Kathy Bickmore, presents a thought-provoking exploration of how education can play a pivotal role in fostering peace in conflict-prone societies. The collection offers a diverse range of pedagogical approaches from global contexts, aiming to cultivate democratic values and social cohesion through conflict resolution. I was drawn to this book because of its timely focus on the intersection of education and peacebuilding, which aligns with my own interest in how teaching strategies can create more peaceful, democratic environments. While I appreciated the book's emphasis on dialogue and mutual understanding, I also found myself reflecting critically on certain strategies presented, questioning their feasibility in specific contexts. In this review, I will engage with the arguments and ideas presented in the book, offering my perspectives on where I find resonance with the authors' insights, as well as where I see potential challenges or conflicts.

To start it off, Bickmore's introduction to the book poses a very crucial question: how can young people, alongside their teachers, develop the necessary capabilities and relationships to actively contribute to democracy and peace? As she explains, both democracy and enduring peace are built on social processes that involve recognizing, resolving, and transforming the dimensions of conflict. These dimensions include cultural beliefs and norms around mutual recognition and inclusion, social-structural equity in the distribution of power and resources, and the processes of participation and representation in decision-making. Bickmore further emphasizes that constructive conflict resolution does not equate to avoiding conflict or suppressing differences; rather, it is about addressing difficult conflicts in a way that promotes mutual understanding and long-term peace. She highlights the importance of pedagogical principles that can guide teachers in navigating these challenges and as a result of equipping teachers with the knowledge of such practices, Bickmore argues, that we can empower students to develop the democratic agency necessary to contribute meaningfully to peacebuilding efforts.

In reflecting on Bickmore's approach, I came across Davies (2011), who eloquently stated that, "[w]hile education alone cannot develop durable democratic peace, it can bring on capabilities, inclinations, opportunities, understandings, and relationships for handling social conflicts." I agree with this perspective because education, when approached strategically and intentionally, helps individuals systematically develop a clear sense of how to address present-day injustices in a more reasoned and constructive manner, and can (re-)shape their approach to social challenges.

Looking at it from the Ugandan context, from around 2018, political education as a single subject was suspended and merged into other subjects within the secondary school curriculum. The stated reason for this change was to reduce the number of subjects and merge those that were closely related, streamlining

the curriculum. However, some may argue that this decision was motivated by a desire to limit students' awareness of the country's political landscape. The concern was that such awareness might nurture critical thinking, potentially leading young people to challenge government policies. This, however, is largely based on public speculation, as the true reasons behind the decision still remains unclear. However, if the intention behind merging political education into other subjects was to diminish students' capacity for critical thinking, then the policymakers were mistaken, as such an approach risks limiting democracy by fostering outdated perspectives and reinforcing hegemonic, inequitable, and divisive education practices that hinder the progress toward democratic peace.

Identity politics, which involves prioritizing the interests of particular social groups based on shared characteristics like race or gender, and essentialism, which refers to the reductionist belief that individuals can be defined solely by fixed traits, have no place in educational spaces intended to foster critical, democratic engagement. These concepts can limit open dialogue and reinforce divisions, rather than encouraging inclusive, thoughtful discussions essential for democratic growth. Recently, the subject has been reintroduced into the curriculum at the lower secondary school level, which I see as a positive step forward. My argument is that for a nation to truly enjoy the benefits of peace, there must be a democratic dispensation where knowledge is freely and democratically shared, and where discourses, even those critical of the government, are welcomed---acceptable, provided they do not escalate into violence. In this context, citizens must become agents of democratic revitalization, understanding how to feasibly enact constructively conflictual pedagogies to foster lasting peace. This aligns with the critical pedagogical perspective espoused by Freire, (1970), who emphasized the importance of education as a tool for fostering democratic dialogue and challenging oppressive structures. Similarly, Apple and Au (2009) argue that critical pedagogy encourages the transformation of society by engaging individuals in discussions that question power dynamics and promote social justice, ensuring that even dissenting voices contribute to a more inclusive, democratic society.

This aligns with the core themes of this book, which bring to light the importance of advancing educational spaces that encourage critical engagement with historical and political realities. The book highlights the transformative power of education in helping students engage with both past and present injustices, encouraging the critical thinking needed for navigating difficult contested histories and making informed democratic action decisions to create a more inclusive and peaceful future. Therefore, connecting this to the Ugandan context earlier explained, it is encouraging that the Ugandan government has reconsidered its position and reintroduced political education, in line with the book's call for education that advances reflective, transformative learning. While political education is not yet offered at the upper secondary level the inclusion of political science at the university level signals a broader acknowledgment of the need for an informed citizenry, echoing the book's emphasis on equipping individuals with the tools to engage in democratic processes and contribute to peacebuilding. Monolithic constructions of history and politics, which limit critical engagement, can no longer hold sway in a society striving for peace and democracy.

Confronting the Past for a Peaceful Future

The fear of conflict should not be at the forefront, especially when proper education is in place to address, for example, past injustices and contemporary issues within societies. Subjects like political education and history education should be given more attention, particularly when it comes to finding ways through which students can critically understand both the past and the present, since promoting political education at school (Sant, 2021) makes it clear that democracy is not a natural form for organizing societies but a political project that is constantly being constructed and reconstructed. In addition to that, Dryden-Peterson & Robinson (2023) also rightly point it out that, "history education can be especially challenging for both learners and teachers when it deals with experiences of armed conflict or human rights violations among identity groups." However, despite the difficulty of confronting such painful histories, students

who have lived through or studied these experiences should still be educated about what happened, how that past is understood today, and how to ensure it does not repeat itself in the future through intergenerational restorative dialogue, addressing specific historicized hurts, and fostering norms of reciprocity.

With that approach of constructively reasoning and intellectually engaging with the past, and the use of dialogical or interactive means, such as academically written texts, storytelling, or informed media, a powerful way to help students or people who have faced difficult histories reposition themselves and find solace in the present would be through engaging in constructive conflict and reconciliation, humanizing relations of equity and kindness, and uncovering tacit meanings. While some may be sceptical about confronting these painful truths, it is essential to move beyond a reality-as-truth perspective that assumes one interpretation of history is the only valid one. Instead, this approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of the past on a relativistic basis, enabling students to understand the complexities of historical narratives. In teaching about contested histories, educators help learners grasp how contemporary patterns of inequity have been socially constructed in historical moments, providing a deeper insight into the ongoing implications of these histories. Hardly can we expect peace to be achieved if we ignore or oversimplify the fundamental lessons of history, which are critical to building a better future.

As Bickmore emphasizes, and aligning with peace education approaches, democratic politics provide alternatives to direct violence, offering negotiated solutions to conflicts and establishing processes for non-violently and justly handling social conflicts. In her view, democratic processes are centred around nonviolent problem-solving and power-sharing, even in the face of contrasting interests. I align with this perspective and argue that political and historical education plays a crucial role in promoting these very principles. As a result of teaching students about the complexities of conflict and the importance of thoughtful persuasion, listening, and negotiation, educators can equip them with the tools to engage in political solutions that promote democratic peacebuilding. This process, as Bickmore suggests, goes beyond mere dialogue---it requires action and a commitment to rebuilding and navigating social processes, institutions, and roles that allow for equitable and inclusive decision-making. In line with this, understanding difficult histories through education can create a foundation for addressing past injustices while preventing future ones, as earlier stated.

Another line of argument is that critical engagement with the past, especially through history and political education, empowers students to navigate the present with the knowledge of how to avoid repeating the mistakes of history. In doing so, they not only come to terms with past conflicts but also develop the capacity to engage in democratic education that values constructive discussion and the constructive confrontation of conflict as essential for lasting peace. Depoliticized approaches that ignore the power dynamics inherent in historical narratives risk depriving students of the ability to critically evaluate the past and its implications. Instead, education must expose and question these dynamics, challenging the justification of illegitimate actions and authority, and enabling students to resist manipulation and oppressive ideologies. In this sense, the potential of education goes beyond knowledge transfer; it has an emancipatory role in liberating individuals and societies from cycles of violence and injustice.

As one of the authors in part two of the book, Natasha Robinson argues for the critical importance of teaching a “usable past” in post-apartheid South Africa, particularly in societies that have experienced deep structural injustices. She highlights that a usable past is not simply about recounting historical events but about helping young people understand and interpret their own social context and identity. Robinson outlines that, to teach this usable past, students and teachers must engage in a process of exploring the connection between the past and the present, grappling with social realities that may contradict dominant national narratives, and developing approaches to help students historicize their emotional responses to

history. Robinson's perspective directly aligns with Bickmore's argument that democratic education is key to encouraging democratic peace. In both cases, the importance of equipping students with the tools to critically engage with their history is essential for enabling them to understand their own circumstances and work toward social justice. Just as Bickmore advocates for nonviolent negotiation and inclusive decision-making, Robinson's call for a usable past serves as a foundational element in building the capacities necessary for young people to navigate their lives and contribute meaningfully to social change.

Truth-Seeking Pedagogies for Peace and Citizenship

In the context of Uganda, as I discuss in my work (Muganga, in press, *Global Commons Review*) I argue that Global Citizenship and its Education (GC/E) has a vital role in helping students connect with their historical and social realities, particularly in a society where sectarianism and political division are ongoing challenges. Like Robinson's work, I believe it's essential for young people to critically engage with their social context, including the legacies of ethnic identity and political conflict. In this particular case, I further argue that GC/E, through constructive conflict pedagogies, can play a key role in addressing the divisive politics that fuel instability by encouraging a deeper understanding of identity that goes beyond ethnic lines. Much like Bickmore's focus on democratic peacebuilding, this approach not only provides students with knowledge but also gives them the agency to shape a more inclusive and peaceful society---one where past injustices are acknowledged and actively worked to prevent from repeating.

However, as we talk about all these past histories, I also align myself with Maria Jose Bermeo and Diego, who discuss the importance of using truth as a constructive conflict pedagogy. In their work on the Colombian Truth Commission, they emphasize that processing the truth of a violent past is not just about recounting historical facts but about engaging in collective processes of verification and recognition of past violence to inspire transformative action. This approach, grounded in truth-seeking pedagogies, invites critical analysis of conflict dynamics and encourages learners to reflect on how the past shapes both present and future societal practices, while also countering the rise of post-truthism that undermines shared understandings of reality (Lewandowsky et al., 2017; McIntyre, 2018). However difficult or unsettling the past might be, the essential task of critical pedagogy is to engage with historical facts honestly, since the truth---no matter how uncomfortable---must be taught with accuracy and integrity. Only through such honest engagement with the past can students develop true understanding and work toward meaningful consensus. It is only by confronting and grappling with the full scope of historical truths that we can speculate meaningfully about the future and identify potential red flags---patterns or tendencies that may point to the repetition of past mistakes. In this sense, truth is not only a moral imperative but a vital tool for preventing future conflict and leave behind long-term peace. As one of the authors notes

...I remind students that core to reconciliation is truth telling and that while the course involves historical witnessing, they will also learn about present day violences... (Jenniffer Brant, 2025, p. 78)

Diverse Educational Contexts and the Work of Conflict Pedagogy

In exploring the role of education in addressing conflict, several authors in the book highlight the power of teaching strategies that confront historical and ongoing social divisions. One such example is Constadina Charalambous, who focuses on Cyprus and examines how cultural heritage, often celebrated in terms of preservation, can also be associated with conflict and stigma, particularly in post-1974 Cyprus, where ethnic divisions remain deep. Through linguistic ethnographic projects, she emphasizes the need for sensitive pedagogies that challenge hegemonic narratives and foster intercultural communication. In a

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similar vein, Najme Kishani-Farahani focuses on the transformative potential of education in Iran, where authoritarian structures promote division and violence. Her work shows how dialogical and developmental approaches in schools can create safe spaces for youth to reflect on their experiences of social conflict and develop peacebuilding agency. Sarah Dryden-Peterson highlights the complexities of refugee education, especially in Lebanon, where refugee students experience exclusion outside the classroom despite fostering belonging within it. In her work, she develops what she calls *pedagogies of belonging*, which emphasize predictability, adaptability, and future-building, rooted in relationship-building. Similarly, in part four, Judith L. Pace tells us the importance of teacher development in navigating controversial issues through deliberative dialogue, focusing on a case study involving a US school mural that depicted a history of racist violence. In addition to that, Paloma Ramírez-Palacios offers a powerful example of how *convivencia* pedagogies can address social exclusion and violence in Guerrero, one of the poorest and most violent states in Mexico. She describes how, during the Covid-19 pandemic, six teachers participated in an online professional training and then applied equity-focused teaching strategies to help students at risk of dropping out. As a means of facilitating cooperative learning and building trusting, supportive relationships in the classroom, these teachers created an environment where students felt encouraged to stay in school and take an active role in their own education. This intervention not only helped improve academic performance but also strengthened students' sense of agency, offering them a sense of hope and belonging despite the challenges they faced. These pedagogies collectively stress the importance of engaging students with their complex histories and social realities, empowering them to confront the challenges of division, promote dialogue, and contribute to building democratic peace in their societies.

Conclusion

After a thorough reading this book as edited by Bickmore, it is evident that the editor and contributing authors have expertly crafted a compelling, intellectually robust discourse on the importance of conflict pedagogy. The book systematically examines how constructive conflict pedagogies, when applied thoughtfully, can serve as powerful tools for not only addressing present-day conflicts but also for shaping more peaceful futures. The authors consistently maintain focus on the central theme of the book---how teaching history, particularly difficult and painful histories, is crucial in enabling both educators and students to critically engage with the past as they navigate the present and prepare for the future. Each case study within the book contributes meaningful perspectives into the practical applications of these pedagogies, demonstrating their relevance across diverse geopolitical contexts. What stands out is the consistency with which the authors emphasize the need for education to address and engage with historical injustices and their contemporary echoes. In light of current global conflicts -- whether in Israel, Ukraine, Syria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Chad, and other contexts -- the book's argument resonates deeply. These conflicts are stark reminders that, despite the advances of the 21st century, history often repeats itself. The illusion of progress is shattered by ongoing violence and division. This pattern shows the urgency of the book's central message; we must confront the truths of our histories to break the cycle of conflict.

The book further offers a crucial perspective on how educators can teach the difficult truths of the past in ways that are not only informative but transformative. Using critical approaches to historical narratives, the book advocates for equipping future generations with the tools to examine and learn from past mistakes, ensuring that the future does not mirror the destructive patterns of history. This is a timely and necessary intervention, particularly as the world faces new and persistent challenges in conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Constructive Conflict Pedagogies effectively provides a roadmap for how education can serve as a foundational pillar in building a more just, peaceful, and inclusive world. In comparison to other works in the field, this book stands out for its holistic approach to conflict pedagogy. While similar texts focus on conflict resolution or peacebuilding in isolated contexts, Bickmore's collection integrates a

wide variety of international perspectives, offering a more comprehensive understanding of how education can act as a catalyst for both individual transformation and societal change.

The book's diverse range of case studies makes it a valuable resource for educators, policymakers, and researchers alike, and its contribution to the field of peace education is both significant and timely. Beyond these groups, it offers immense value to students and teachers who have personally experienced difficult pasts, providing them with tools for understanding and overcoming their histories. Organizations like the United Nations and UNESCO, which focus on global peacebuilding and conflict resolution, will also find this book essential as they work towards creating lasting solutions. The authors present a plausible and historically informed conception of how education can play a pivotal role in resolving conflicts, making the book an indispensable guide. Lastly, political leaders, who often play a critical role in shaping the histories that lead to conflict, can draw from its insights to better understand the complexities of their decisions and the long-term impact they have on societies. The book's strategies are adequately justified without recourse to oversimplification, offering concrete ways to address historical and present-day conflicts, making it a crucial resource for anyone involved in the pursuit of peace.

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