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Youth as Actors in Peace and Human Rights Education

Marloes van Houten¹

Course Director for the Utrecht University Summerschool 'Peace and Human Rights Education'

Former Program Coordinator and Management Team Member of United Network of Young (UNOY) Peacebuilders

And

Vera Santner²,

Former Asia Desk and Project Officer of United Network of Young (UNOY) Peacebuilders,

Participant in the Summer School course 'Peace and Human Rights Education 2010'

Tomorrow's leaders are today's youth. Their education and participation is key to the world's future, yet they have not been accorded the attention that is required. -- Federico Mayor, President Fundación Cultural de Paz (Mid-term youth report 2006)

¹ Marloes van Houten (1982), Msc. Hon., email: marloesvanhouten@utrechtsummerschool.nl, mrls.vanhouten@gmail.com,

² Vera Santner (1984), Mag. , email: santner.vera@gmx.at

Introduction

Speaking of violence, youth are often perceived as perpetrators of violence³ and are therefore seen as the perfect target group for peace and human rights education projects. However, more recently, voices from the field and from academia, highlight that “peace and conflict research has insufficiently considered youth as relevant actors in [development and] peacebuilding processes” (Del Felice & Wissler 2007: 4; Fischer 2004). Therefore, as is stated in the European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life, youth should be given “the rights, the means, the space, the opportunities for participation in decision-making and for influencing decision-making processes, [...] and active involvement in activities that contribute to the positive forming of society”. In line with this, the youth mid-term report on the UN Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-violence for the Children of the World from 2006 voices the wish of youth to be more involved in decision-making processes.

Besides youth being relevant actors for peacebuilding processes, some argue the future-oriented nature and activism of pro-peace youth makes it unlikely to negotiate with them, and makes them in some cases reckless and easy recruits for political activism (Cairncross 1994; McEvoy-Levy 2001). That is why it is necessary to go beyond creating opportunities for youth to be actively involved in pro-peace action. As happens when different people/organizations become partners in pro-peace decision making processes and actions, they give feedback on each other and are shaped by each others knowledge, insight and experience. In the same way, youth as serious partners in decision making processes concerning pro-peace policies, projects and research, can learn from the other actors involved and their feedback given as a reaction on the ideas and action proposed by the youth partners. The United Network Of Young (UNOY) Peacebuilders learned from working for more then 20 years with youth peace builders all around the world, that it would help if youth are encouraged by ‘adult’ actors (politicians, International Non-Governmental Organisations, the media, etc) to continue to focus their potential (characteristics, abilities, skills) on the peace agenda.

To give the first remark about youth as overlooked peace potentials some more flesh to its bones, let us exemplify that young people are the prospective leaders, facilitators and stakeholders and the involvement of young people in “peace processes/peacebuilding and the shaping of their political attitudes and skills [...] will have important long-term implications” (McEvoy-Levy 2001: 5). Youth may in the end for a great part determine the future of a country, neighbourhood, or family. Moreover, Del Felice and Wissler (2007) emphasize that youth possess certain characteristics and skills which give them a unique power and potential to urge positive social change. In sum, youth “are future-oriented”, “flexible”, “innovative/creative in their use of communication means”, and they are “knowledgeable about their peers' realities” (ibid).

In November 1998, the United Nations (UN) proclaimed the period 2001-2010 as the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-violence for the Children of the World (A/53/L.79). Eight characteristics were identified to operationalize the concept: i.e. to foster a culture of peace through education; promote sustainable economic and social development; promote

³ Brett & McCallin, 1996; Cohn & Goodwin-Gill, 1994; Klare, 1999; Machel, 1996; Wessells, 1998; identify an increase in the number of children and youth participating in armed conflict. Cook and Laub (1998) speak of an explosion or epidemic of youth violence, based on the fact that “from 1983 to 1994 the United States experienced a tripling of homicide victimization rates for Black males between the ages of thirteen and seventeen, an approximately 70 percent increase in youth arrest rates for violent offences, and a nearly 300 percent growth in youth homicide arrest rates (Snyder and Sickmund 1999).

respect for all human rights; ensure equality between women and men; foster democratic participation; advance understanding, tolerance and solidarity; support participatory communication and the free flow of information and knowledge; promote international peace and security (Adams 2002).

The Mid-Term Youth Report (2006) and the Final Civil Society Report (2010) on the UN International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-violence for the Children of the World show that youth have been important players who applied their knowledge, skills and abilities to work towards a realisation of the Culture of Peace. When looking at the first characteristic of the Culture of Peace; to ‘foster a culture of peace through education’, it is remarkable that peace and human rights education programs have mainly been developed *for* children and youth, and not *together with* or *by* them. The mid-term youth report, which is based on a survey among 475 youth organisations from 125 countries, for example indicates that youth are not given much decision-making power and that their efforts to promote a culture of peace are often not recognised and taken seriously. The programme executive of the World Council of Churches World Youth Programme, to take out one of many examples, argues: “We need to pick up on and recognise what youth are already doing, to give them acknowledgement and encouragement. Too often the work of young people is not taken seriously.”(Mid-term youth report 2006: 32)

With regard to the youth's wish to be more involved in decision making processes on the local, national and global level, especially when decisions affect their lives directly, the participating African organisations for instance suggest the creation of a “National Commission with youth representations to coordinate and support peace initiatives and a youth platform to respond to issues like poverty reduction strategies designed for youth by policy makers” (ibid: 42). From the authors experience working together with young peace workers from all around the world, this also applies to the involvement of youth in developing peace and human rights education curricula.

In the paragraphs to follow, a case study will be presented in which the characteristics, knowledge and skills of youth contributed to the development of a peace and human rights education curricula. Even more specifically it promoted the creation of an open and inviting learning atmosphere and the adoption of more interactive educational methods.

The development of the summer school program

The project of the Utrecht Summer school course on peace and human rights education was mainly inspired by two initiatives. The already above mentioned UN Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-violence for the Children of the World (2001-2010) and the EURED project for European Peace and Human Rights Education, an initiative by a network of scholars and teachers promoting peace education in every school. The Declaration by the United Nations General Assembly of the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-violence for the Children of the World (Resolution A/RES/53/25) inspired several traditional and new peace groups in the Netherlands to cooperate as a platform to promote its acceptance and elaboration within the country. Within this Platform for a Culture of Peace, a group was started that focussed primarily on peace education. Some Dutch peace educators were part of the second incentive, the Education for Europe as Peace Education (EURED) project. With the support of the European UNESCO committees, this initiative from European educators intended to promote peace education in European schools by schooling teachers in peace education issues and strategies. Implementing this initiative in the Netherlands turned out to be difficult. Teachers were not able to get funds for EURED courses, teacher

education institutes showed hardly any interest and did not see peace education as a priority, and school counselling had their own priorities.

Looking for other possibilities, the Dutch peace educators of the Platform for a Culture of Peace started to cooperate with the University of Utrecht. Shortly after, the idea was born to start with an international Summer school on Peace and Human Rights education. After initial difficulties to begin – the first time the course was offered it did not attract enough participants – the course began in 2006 with 12 participants and the following years had a continuous number of about 20 to 30 participants from all over the world. Over the years, the participants' feedback and the facilitators' experiences were used to continuously develop the course program.

All six years of Summer school were located in Utrecht, the Netherlands. In this period a total of 130 young professionals and students from over 45 different countries were introduced to concepts, skills and values of peace and human rights education. The participants consisted of international students from a broad variety of disciplines (e.g. law, social sciences, economics, natural sciences, chemistry, and arts), as well as (future) educators and young professionals from various working backgrounds such as lawyers, artists, NGO workers, an army officer, people working in public health institutions, people in public administration and government posts. The overall aim was to increase the capacity of the individual participants, as well as create networks of co-operation among participants, trainers and the organisational team. One of the specific objectives was to build knowledge, motivate and train young people to become non-violent agents of social change and thus active 'global citizens'. Special focus was placed on how to use peace and human rights education as a tool for transforming violent elements of societies to create a culture of peace.

Before we focus our attention on the involvement of the youth, and in particular that of UNOY Peacebuilders, in the summer school project, we will elaborate in the next section the educational approach of the Summer school for peace and human rights education.

The Summer school courses' educational approach

The Summer school course builds on the ideas of education for peace and human rights, as formulated by the UN Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence for the Children of the World (2001-2010) as well as by the EURED project. According to these approaches, learning peace is a very complex process. It includes all levels of the human condition; it expands the levels of macro (politics/society), meso (institutions/organisations) and micro life (personal violence/inner peace) (CEO 2010). Hereby, the Utrecht Summer school challenges the common western idea of learning as a pure rational cognitive strategy, which does little to support young people in their social learning and the development of their personality; to grow in wisdom and experience in their interaction with "essential human phenomena of the affective domain, like friendship, love, hate, involvement in human values, creativity, intuition, etc." (Vriens 2004: 27 - 30).

In such an approach education for peace and human rights is not understood as a guarantee for peace and a just world. But peace education can offer young people, and to a certain extent, their educators: a concern for the world; an ability to judge political and social situations and understand where their choices can make a difference; as well as competencies to contribute to peace in their own environment (Navarro-Castro & Nario-Galace 2008: 21, 22). Human rights education similarly aims primarily at equipping learners with knowledge, skills and understanding – towards tolerance and to value diversity – so that they can defend their own human rights as well as those of others. In sum, peace and human rights education has the potential to challenge and change people's

perspectives of the world. It can prepare people to take responsibility for the future of the world and in their personal life and surroundings. To do so, peace education aims at empowering and promoting self-respect of both the educator and the learner as a step forward to further a culture of peace and non-violence. In this way peace education is firstly oriented to peace as a positive quality of the human condition, and only secondly, as education against war and violence.

The concept of education entails two dimensions that are interlinked but also have their own demands: teaching and learning.

Teaching peace and human rights. Teaching peace and human rights is not only a matter of the content taught, but also of how and where this happens. All three dimensions, content, form, and context convey an explicit and an implicit message which should not contradict each other. Therefore attention should be paid to the environment in which peace and human rights takes place. And with regard to the educational process: a careful selection of strategies and an awareness of their underlying values and norms is necessary. As for the contextual factors in which an educational project takes place that are of great importance to its successfulness, one can think of: how the teaching and learning happens; and what can be done to create a peaceful contextual situation, e.g. by stimulating a safe, inviting, and positive learning environment and by preventing a hierarchical class room setting and the use of violent language (Vriens, 2003: 79 ; COE 2010: 20).

Learning peace and human rights. As peace and human rights education is also about moral learning and the development of values, learning peace asks for a broad concept of learning that includes affective and social dimensions of learning to the same extent as cognitive strategies. Applied to the Summer school's curriculum, the focus was not only on knowledge, but also on values, skills and action. Hence, knowledge about peace and human rights issues formed just one part of the program. Here, the program also dealt with the basic values of human rights and justice, social competences and tried to offer its participants opportunities for transformation. Personal experience was put at the centre and students (and teachers) were challenged to develop their own values, norms, and skills.

During the two weeks of Summer school, the organisers strove to create an atmosphere of openness, trust, shared responsibility and co-operation; the students were invited to learn with their brains, their heart, and – as far as possible for each person – with their whole body and soul. For example, the course opened with an informal dinner and some interactive games and stories to introduce the students to each other, to the organisational committee and to the topic of the Summer school. Each morning started with an exercise to summarise the experiences of the day before and a short reflective introduction of the topic(s) of the day. The educational philosophy of the Summer school course recognised: the specific knowledge of each participant; the importance of group dynamics to the learning process; each person's uniqueness; and the different cultural backgrounds. From the beginning, the students were thus invited to share their work, life and study experiences. Since every person is different and has her/his own cultural background, the students were stimulated to build up their own frame of mind regarding education for peace, social justice and human rights, and to integrate this into their own situation.

Methods. There was a mixture of methods employed combining methodologies developed by youth work, peace education, community development and inter-cultural learning to facilitate cognitive, affective and action learning. Participatory youth work is one of the areas where we included educational methods and techniques from. Participatory youth is carried out in partnership with young people: the participants were seen as full and equal partners in determining their own

development and progress towards achieving their own aspirations. The methods and techniques used aimed at establishing an interactive learning environment for all parties involved. A participatory and inclusive way of teaching ensures that the participants can contribute actively to the process and learn about different methods of education by experiencing them themselves. We used movement based learning to led students 'experience by doing' what affirmative learning means. One of the movement based learning exercises which we used was the blind folding game where one student was leading another around who was blindfolded, without being allowed to talk. In this exercise students experienced to receive and give trust, to cooperate, to take responsibility for a collective learning experience. This reflected the ideas of the Summer school that it is important to facilitate a collective process of learning instead of a unidirectional way of teaching – learning, in the sense of a 'co-construction of knowledge'.

However, due to the academic setting of the course, a compromise between traditional lectures and the above mentioned interactive methods needed to be reached. One way of doing so, was to invite trainers and experts who would facilitate parts of the program. To give an example, the day on prejudices and discrimination was facilitated by Prof. Ido Abram an expert in Holocaust education and director of the *Stichting Leren* (Learning Foundation) who works a lot with identity circles. He prepared the group for a visit to the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam. With his guidance the participants were able to experience inter-cultural learning methods and to reflect upon how to prepare a group for a visit to a place like the Anne Frank House.

The participants' involvement. The open atmosphere and the non-hierarchical relations between the facilitators and the participants ensured that participants could easily ask questions and give comments about the content of the summer school, the educational methods used and on any other element. While the participants were free to do as such during the course, there were also moments where they were explicitly invited to reflect and evaluate. A mid-term evaluation was held in the middle of the course, using interactive methods, where students were asked how they had felt during the first week of the course and they were invited to evaluate the course based on several keywords like physical space, educational methods, group dynamics, lectures/organisers, etc. It was important to the facilitators to have a mid-term evaluation as to react to problems and to adjust the course as far as possible to the wishes of the participants during the second week. Flexibility was a core value the organisational committee aimed at, while adapting the program, the educational approach, the class room setting to the suggestions of the participants. For the final evaluation at the end of the course, the open space technique was used. This technique creates a relaxed atmosphere where participants are invited to reflect on their individual learning experience according to their personal expectations and learning goals identified in the beginning of the course.

We will now turn to the involvement of youth, and especially that of UNOY Peacebuilders, to elaborate on what the added value can be of integrating youth in the development and implementation of peace and human rights curricula and projects.

Youth as actors in peace and human rights education: the case of UNOY and the International Summer school

In 2007, the participants' evaluation of the program led to the conclusion that the program needed some younger faces to prevent it from the image 'the older peaceniks with old stuff'. The United Network of Young Peacebuilders, a global network of youth peace organisations, had already provided a guest lecturer to the program in 2007. As a youth organisation, UNOY could

give the program a younger face. And as a global network of practitioners in youth peace work, UNOY added practitioners' knowledge to the content and methods of the Summer school program.

In 2008, UNOY Peacebuilders became a co-operating partner and it has since then played an active role in both the logistic organisation and the development and implementation of the content of the program. UNOY's involvement as a serious partner in the organisation committee provides us with the opportunity to see what the added value can be of including youth in the development and implementation of peace and human rights education curricula and projects. According to the senior members of the organisation committee: the integration of UNOY into the organisational team was "an enrichment for the program in all its aspects: UNOY Peacebuilders brought in new themes, methods and a lot of young idealism".

The United Network of Young Peacebuilders. As an INGO, UNOY Peacebuilders connects different young peace actors and organisations from all over the world with each other and builds up their capacities. It organises trainings, study sessions, job shadowing projects, and develops toolkits and manuals on all kind of topics that are related to the concept of 'conflict transformation'. In its work, UNOY Peacebuilders uses training methodologies and techniques developed by youth work, peace education, community development, and intercultural learning. With this background, UNOY was introducing new methods and techniques to the Summer school program that made the approach more interactive, informal and inclusive. Since UNOY was used to organise practical trainings focused on learning skills, it took some time to find the best way to incorporate its knowledge and expertise and to work within the boundaries set by the academic setting in which the Summer school took place.

New methods and techniques. Examples of new methods and techniques added to the program are: youthful introduction games; creative group team building exercises; group and individual reflection exercises using dialogue, body language and artefacts; experiential learning activities from the COMPASS Handbook on Human Rights Education of the Council of Europe; discussion, dialogue and work group methods which UNOY developed in the 20 years of working with youth. During the discussion, dialogue and group work methods participants were often asked to be facilitators; internet and drawing material was made available to the working groups; working group formats were tailor-made to the learning objectives and focused on inviting all participants to be actively involved. Sometimes multimedia (e.g. a music video, documentary, etc.) was used to illustrate a case study or the introduction of a theoretical concept.

A practitioner's perspective. UNOY Peacebuilders, as an international NGO, provided a practitioner's perspective on the topic of peace and human rights education and on working with a culture of peace. The global connections with its 49 member organisations and its 350 affiliated individuals and organisation, working on the same topic, made it possible to provide a lot of case study material to the Summer school participants. Insights were shared of the applicability of the newest peace and human rights educational methods and of tools that aimed to measure the progress made in working towards more peace worldwide (for example the Global Peace Index). With every characteristic of the Culture of Peace and the Culture of War, examples were given from situations and projects world wide UNOY was somehow involved with. Both the examples provided by UNOY from youth active in peace building around the world and the active involvement of youth in the organisation and facilitation of the Summer school provided the participants with concrete ideas how they could get active themselves. As was stated by youth organisations active in building peace from the Americas in the survey done for the Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-violence youth report from 2006: "Seeing youth actively involved in projects is very inspirational and

motivational for youth” (Youth report 2006: 63). This citation shows how important role models for motivating youth.

Youth’s specific power. As outlined above, youth are “innovative/creative in their use of communication means”, and “knowledgeable about their peers' realities”. Both these elements are interesting to exploit for those trying to tailor-make peace and human rights education to the language of today’s youth population and the societal challenges they are faced with. Their innovative mindset and creativeness can contribute to the development of interactive educational methods. Furthermore, considering youth as ‘flexible and future-oriented’, means that it is easier for youth to accept approaches that go beyond traditional rationalistic theories of current western learning psychology. This is definitely an asset of youth, since peace and also human rights education ask for a more complex theory of learning, which includes the cognitive, the affective and the action domain of human understanding, which each have their own rationality (Vriens, 1987; 2005; Coles, 1997). To take things a step further, the flexibility and future-orientation of youth can help reform prevailing education philosophy and methods that generate a hierarchical learning atmosphere. The flexibility and creativity of young people can be an incentive to create an atmosphere where learning about peace (cognitive, affective, and action oriented) becomes a collective responsibility of all; teachers and students alike.

As mentioned initially, the future-oriented nature and activism of youth makes them not only potential actors for positive change, it also makes them in some cases easy recruits for destructive forces in society. As De Felice and Wissler (2007) put it: “[Y]outh need to be supported as builders of peace and democracy. Their potential and power needs to be developed in order to sustain a process of change.” This is not an easy task. Involving youth actively in the development and implementation of peace and human rights education curricula and projects might be one way of doing so, as it trains their skills necessary to build up a positive future. Youth can highly profit from such an experience. Besides a skill training opportunity including youth as actors in peace and human rights education also shows youth they are taken seriously and attention is paid to their interests and qualities, which highly motivates them. For the mid-term Youth report on the UN Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-violence youth organisations were also asked about ways of reaching and motivating youth. One argument that was given by youth from many different parts of the world is the following “what highly motivates youth is the recognition of their capacities to organise, of their constructive power and their ability to offer social solutions”.

Conclusion

Youth is a heterogeneous group with multiple needs, (political) ideas and capacities which are important for the successfulness of pro-peace and development processes.³ Research and practice shows that youth are often the primary producers of violence in the period after the signing of the peace accords, because: 1) Youth victims of violence have learned using violence is a way to approach conflicts. 2) There is a lack of alternatives for former combatants. 3) Political exclusion and marginalisation of youth during and after peace and development processes leads to frustration among youth. 4) Of the thin lines between politically active youth and youth criminality (McEvoy-Levy 2001:10-14).

These four arguments indicate the need to value youth for their positive potential and to give them opportunities to be involved in pro-peace decision-making and development processes. Which means, to recognise youth as *agents* of positive change and to invest in developing their power and potential to work for a peaceful and just society.

To offer youth the possibilities to be included in projects that work towards a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence, such as peace and human rights education, may contribute to the quality of these projects because of the following skills and characteristics of youth: innovativeness, flexibility, the abilities to use creative means of communication, and the knowledge they have of their peers' reality.

With the successful inclusion of a youth organisation, the Summer school course 'Education for Peace and Human Rights' shows that youth can be an important partner, particularly, but not only in peer-to-peer education. The above outlined skills and characteristics of youth can be resourceful when aiming to: develop a non-hierarchical learning atmosphere; connect the content of educational projects to the language of young people; invent and implement new and inspiring education methods and techniques.

The Summer school course brought together institutions from different levels of society (such as an academic institution -the University of Utrecht-, peace educators from the Dutch Platform for Peace Culture and UNOY Peacebuilders) drawing on their specific capacities. What makes this partnership exceptional is the inclusion of a youth organisation (UNOY Peacebuilders) as a serious partner, this, while youth are often perceived solely as beneficiaries or 'students' of peace and human rights education projects. The involvement of UNOY Peacebuilders in the International Summer School 'Education for Peace and Human Rights' bestows that youth can be co-creators of knowledge and be even more effective in reaching their peers than 'adult actors'. Moreover, as a culture of peace also entails a good and respectful being and working together of all generations, the inter-generational Summer school team shows how existing boundaries between different generations can be overcome.

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