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Evolution of UN Policies for Peace Education with a Focus on Human Rights

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Abstract
Education is central for promoting the UN values of peace and human rights. Focusing on the work of UNESCO, this article begins by overviewing the links between peace education (PE) and human rights education (HRE) in terms of aims, thematic content and pedagogical approaches. It then compares UNESCO's updated treatment of PE and human rights in its soft policy of the 2023 UNESCO *Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights, and Sustainable Development*, which is a revision of the *1974 Recommendation concerning Education for International Understanding, Co-operation and Peace and Education*. The article concludes with some reflection on the implications for PE and HRE moving forward, drawing on UNESCO's expanded definition of peace education infused with human rights, and the existing foothold of the themes of peace and human rights within most national curricula.

Keywords: *peace, peace education, human rights education, UNESCO*

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Introduction

The United Nations and its member states have played a key role in identifying and valorising rights, in some cases through legally binding human rights treaties and in other cases through 'soft policy' declarations and resolutions. Soft policies – though not legally binding – can nevertheless have influence on the behaviours of governments, and also non-governmental organizations with interests in the thematic area of such policies.

The role of education in promoting these, and other, UN values was enshrined in the very beginning of the organization, indicating in Article 26(2) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) that 'education must develop the full human personality and strengthen respect for human rights, fostering ' understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations… and further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.' ' UN support for humanistic education has been promoted through a range of agencies, but primarily through UNESCO in terms of its work with governments and formal education.[1]

UNESCO is a UN agency whose core mandate is to contribute to peace and security by promoting cooperation between nations in the fields of education, science, culture and communication (2025a).

UNESCO's vision for peace includes support for:

- The equal dignity of all human beings
- The achievement of peace and security through the harnessing of the power of education… and to foster mutual understanding and respect for human rights
- People to live as global citizens, free of hate and intolerance…[with] access to quality education, tools and resources, irrespective of gender or origin (UNESCO, 2025b).

Focusing on the work of UNESCO, this article attempts to do the following:

- Overview the links between peace education (PE) and human rights education (HRE) in terms of aims, thematic content and pedagogical approaches
- Compares UNESCO's updated treatment of PE and human rights in its soft policy of the 2023 UNESCO Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights, and Sustainable Development with the 1974 Recommendation concerning Education for International Understanding, Co-operation and Peace and Education
- Reflect on the implications for PE and HRE moving forward.

[1] This is not all inclusive of efforts to promote peace and human rights. Within the UN family, both the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and UNICEF have also promoted human rights education, both with governments and in the nonformal education sector. However, this article is focused on UNESCO's efforts.

1. Peace Education and Human Rights Education

The significance of education for peace was stated already in UNESCO's constitution, 'Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed' (2025c). This not only underscores the significance of peace education but also affirms that its foundation lies in a strong commitment to nonviolence, rejecting the use of war and violence as tenable approaches to dealing with conflict. In 1995, shortly after the establishment of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the UN recognized the link between human rights and peace education, as demonstrated in the definition below:

'Human Rights and Peace Education encompasses all educational and training activities aimed at promoting universal respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It provides knowledge, skills, and understanding to empower individuals to contribute to a universal culture of human rights and prevent violations and abuses. The ultimate goal is to develop a sense of universal values and behaviour that underpins a culture of peace' (United Nations, OHCHR 2025).

Peace education does not have a single definition; it is perceived, interpreted, and practised in many different ways. Nevertheless, it can be understood as a broad term that includes all activities aimed at moving us toward a culture of peace and nonviolence and away from a culture of war and violence. This culture of peace – or a peaceful society – itself exists on a spectrum: at one end, there is a culture of war and violence, often marked by human rights violations, which we seek to move away from. At the other end lies a culture of peace and nonviolence, rooted in human rights, which we seek to move towards (Gittens 2024, 11-12).

Peace education can take many different forms. Major strands include education about/for peacebuilding, conflict resolution, disarmament and demilitarism, violence prevention, nonviolence, but it is also sometimes linked with human rights, along with other strands such as global citizenship, democracy, and sustainable development. Some view these strands as separate, while others see them as overlapping and complementary (Gittens 2024, 16).

Educational activities of the UN, as well as other organizations and scholars focused on peace education, recognize that human rights serve as a foundational basis for peace education, ensuring that respect for dignity, freedom, and justice is central to the development of inclusive and peaceful societies.

While human rights is a pronounced element of peace education – and we will explore its sustained presence in the recent 2023 UNESCO policy

document – the field of human rights education has itself become an autonomous educational approach. HRE and PE both share a vision of a society characterised by peaceful co-existence. However, HRE is traditionally focused on justice and laws protecting a range of human rights. These human rights do not detail the right to peace but are viewed as supportive of a society where coexistence and human dignity are ensured.

The UN Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training presents the aims of HRE as:

'promoting universal respect for and observance of all human rights and fundamental freedoms and thus contributing, inter alia, to the prevention of human rights violations and abuses by providing persons with knowledge, skills and understanding and developing their attitudes and behaviours, to empower them to contribute to the building and promotion of a universal culture of human rights' (United Nations General Assembly 2011, Article 2(1)).

It is interesting to note that this definition of HRE does not refer to peace, though the converse is the case with PE, that is, there is a reference to human rights. Further analysis in Table 1 shows some similarities and differences between elements of PE and HRE.

There are alternative ways of presenting both PE and HRE, but Table 1 illustrates the complementary natures of PE and HRE, particularly in terms of personal and social transformation. Other literature on PE and HRE expands on these similarities. Yet we also see some differences. The wide frames of PE incorporate both inner and outer dimensions of peace and peacebuilding (e.g., inner peace, interpersonal peace and national/transnational peace). Some PE approaches are psycho-social while others are more structural, dealing with larger systems and dynamics. While HRE might recognize the importance of personal transformation, this is presented as instrumental for the wider goal of justice – both interpersonally and in society. Thus, we might conclude that although human rights may be seen as foundational to peace and peace education, the opposite is not necessarily in the immediate interest of human rights educators. Rather, HRE is focused on non-discrimination, equality and justice, and in a world that respects human rights, peace will ensue.

In the following section we explore UNESCO's most recent policy on PE, how peace is conceptualized and the status of human rights in this renewed vision.

Table 1. Comparison of Peace Education and Human Rights Education Approaches (UNGA 2011)

	Peace Education	**Human Rights Education**
About	knowledge and understanding of key themes, concepts, and theories related to peace, conflict, violence, war, and power	providing knowledge and understanding of human rights norms and principles, the values that underpin them and the mechanisms for their protection
Through	the applied skills and behaviours vital for transforming conflict through nonviolent direct action, community engagement, coalition building, public speaking, project management, fundraising, and advocacy	learning and teaching in a way that respects the rights of both educators and learners
For	experiential and relational aspects such as values of love, hope, equality, freedom, human rights, democracy, and solidarity; attitudes of compassion, empathy, diversity, inclusivity, and respect; intrapersonal skills like self awareness, emotional regulation, reflective practice, and resilience; and interpersonal skills such as active listening, nonviolent communication, and conflict transformation	empowering persons to enjoy and exercise their rights and to respect and uphold the rights of others

2. UNESCO's Soft Policy Treatment of PE and HRE

Over the past 20 years, there have been several key developments related to PE and HRE within the UN: the conclusion of the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence (2001-2010), the World Programme for Human Rights Education (2005 – ongoing), the UN Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training (2011) and, most recently, UNESCO's 2023 Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights, and Sustainable Development (UNESCO 2023)[2].

The 2023 *Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Sustainable Development* is described by UNESCO as 'the only global standard-setting instrument that lays out how education should be used to bring about lasting peace and foster human development.' This document

[2] These policies do not reflect comprehensively other efforts within the UNGA, for example, the Declaration on the Right to Peace adopted by the UN General Assembly on December 19, 2016.

emphasises integrating peace education into curricula worldwide to cultivate a culture of nonviolence, tolerance, and respect for human rights. In the remainder of this sub-section, we briefly analyse the differences between the 2023 Recommendation and its forerunner, the *1974 Recommendation concerning Education for International Understanding, Co-operation and Peace and Education,* with special attention to conceptions of peace and the positioning of human rights in promoting peace.

To summarize the comparison, Table 2 below highlights key differences between the 1974 and 2023 UNESCO recommendations in their treatment of Peace and Human Rights education:

Table 2. Summary of Key Differences between 1974 and 2023 Recommendations (UNESCO, 2021, 2013)

	1974 Recommendation	**2023 Recommendation**
Peace	Implicitly defined as inseparable from international understanding and cooperation, grounded in friendly relations among nations and the elimination of injustice. Emphasizes opposition to colonialism, racism, etc., as essential for peace	Explicitly redefined as more than the absence of war: it is a ‘ positive, participatory process’ of building just, inclusive, sustainable societies . Peace is linked with human security, dialogue, solidarity, and sustainable development (echoing ‘ no peace without sustainable development’)
Human Rights	Explicitly defined by reference to the UN Charter, UDHR, and 1966 Covenants; treated as universal values that education must promote and respect. The focus is on justice, freedom and fundamental freedoms as the foundation for peace	Framed in an expanded, inclusive context, referencing a broad range of international human rights instruments (e.g. women’s rights, indigenous rights, rights of persons with disabilities). Emphasizes the right to education itself and contemporary human rights issues (e.g. gender equality, non-discrimination) as core to the education agenda. Overall, peace and human rights are integrated with sustainability and global citizenship, reflecting current global norms
Curriculum guidance 1	Urges a global perspective at all levels of formal and non-formal education	Stipulates integration of peace, human rights, and sustainable development education across the entire curriculum and in all learning environments (formal, non-formal, informal) from early childhood through higher education
Curriculum guidance 2	Key content themes include world problems (war, inequality, racism, environmental issues, etc.) and cultural understanding	Updated content priorities include climate change education, environmental sustainability, digital/media literacy, gender equality, and other contemporary issues woven into curricula

Curriculum guidance 3	Promotes active learning: e.g. student participation in school life, use of creative methods, and daily practice of rights and duties. Out-of-school programs (media, community activities, UNESCO Clubs) are encouraged to reinforce learning	Endorses a transformative education approach, embedding multidisciplinary content and emphasizing competencies (critical thinking, empathy, intercultural understanding, etc.) needed for global citizenship. Updated content priorities include climate change education, environmental sustainability, digital/ media literacy, gender equality, and other contemporary issues woven into curricula . Calls for a whole-institution approach, meaning the school culture and ethos (not just lessons) should reflect peace and human rights values
Policy language 1	Non-binding but directive tone – uses ‘ should’ for Member States throughout, Lays out expectations in principle while allowing for each state’s constitutional practices. Language reflects 1970s context: strong moral stance against war and oppression (e.g. ‘ inadmissibility of recourse to war’ and the duty to fight ideologies of hatred).	Similarly non-binding but with a more specific and assertive tone. Reinforces that states have existing obligations under international law (e.g. cites the UN Declaration on Human Rights Education, SDG 4.7) to justify the recommended actions. Continues to use ‘ Member States should…’ but often coupled with qualifiers ‘ in line with international commitments’
Policy language 2	Member States are called upon to report on implementation, indicating an expectation of accountability albeit without enforcement.	Overall, the 2023 text is more detailed about what states are expected to do (e.g. integrate into curricula, train teachers, partner with stakeholders) and ties these expectations to global agendas, thus using a more accountability-oriented tone than 1974.

2.1 Conceptual Framing

The conceptual framing in 1974 portrays peace as the product of international solidarity and justice, and human rights as universal principles to be understood and applied by all. Notably, it highlights opposition to colonialism, racism, and other ideologies of hatred as integral to peace education. The updated 2023 recommendation expands and modernizes these concepts. Peace is reconceptualized not merely as the absence of war, but as a ‘positive and participatory process’ of building just, inclusive, healthy, and sustainable societies on a daily basis. Moreover, it links peace with sustainable development, stating that true peace is contingent on achieving sustainable development in all dimensions, eradicating poverty, and upholding *all* human rights for everyone.

In the 2023 text, *human rights* are reaffirmed as universal and are situated within a much broader framework of contemporary international instruments. The preamble acknowledges states' responsibility to respect, protect, and promote the right to education for all – highlighting education as not only a vehicle for human rights but a right in itself. It references numerous post-1974 instruments (e.g. treaties on refugees, discrimination, women's rights, children's rights, rights of persons with disabilities, indigenous rights, and the 2011 UN Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training) to encompass an expanded understanding of human rights. This reflects how the concept of human rights by 2023 includes diversity and inclusivity, emphasizing gender equality, nondiscrimination, and the rights of marginalized groups as essential to peace

In short, the 2023 recommendation frames peace, human rights, and sustainable development as deeply interdependent.

2.2 Guidance on Curriculum and Education Context

The 2023 recommendation continues to insist that peace and human rights education be embedded across formal, non-formal, and informal education, but it updates the guidance with contemporary educational concepts and a focus on transformative learning. It explicitly states that a 'transformative approach to education should be embedded into curricula and across all areas of study and at all levels of education,' implemented through holistic, multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary methods. This means curricula are expected not just to add peace and human rights as topics, but to infuse those values throughout the education system's content and pedagogy. Importantly, it calls for a 'whole-institution' approach in schools and universities, meaning that the ethos of peace and human rights should permeate not just the curriculum but the overall culture and practices of educational institutions.

2.3 Policy Recommendations

As a UNESCO recommendation, the 1974 document is not legally binding; instead, it 'suggests a line of action without imposing legal obligations' on states. The tone of the text, however, is directive and normative. It repeatedly uses the phrase 'Member States should…' to outline expected actions. For example, upon adoption the General Conference formally 'recommends that Member States should apply the following provisions' by taking legislative or other steps in accordance with their constitutional practice. This establishes an expectation that governments will align their national education policies with the recommendation's principles. The 1974 text also explicitly asks states

to report on actions taken to implement the recommendation, instituting a monitoring expectation (though reporting was voluntary and at intervals decided by UNESCO).

In terms of specificity, the 1974 recommendation provides detailed guidance on what should be taught and how, but it leaves flexibility in implementation. It recognizes diversity of national contexts by couching obligations with phrases like 'consistent with [each country's] constitutional provisions.' Thus, the policy language is advisory yet firm in its vision: it expects Member States to earnestly strive toward the outlined educational aims, but it does not create hard law.

The 2023 document maintains the recommendation format – its operative language similarly uses 'Member States should…' and 'recommends that Member States…' throughout, but with some notable updates in tone and references. Right from the outset, the General Conference urges states to take 'appropriate steps, including legislative or other measures' to implement the recommendation in line with their governance structures. It also 'recommends that Member States bring this Recommendation to the attention of all relevant education authorities and stakeholders' – explicitly listing formal, non-formal and informal education from early childhood through higher education and teacher training. This mirrors the 1974 dissemination clause but uses more inclusive language (e.g. mentioning informal education and a broader span of educational settings).

The tone of the 2023 text is forward-looking and urgent, reflecting current global concerns. For instance, it acknowledges phenomena like the 'global rise in disinformation, hate speech and online harassment' as threats to peace and human rights, thereby justifying stronger educational responses . The language around member state obligations is often tied to existing international commitments. The recommendation explicitly recalls that states have responsibilities under instruments like the UN Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training and even under the Sustainable Development Goals (Target 4.7) to educate for peace and human rights.

3. Reflections on the Implications for PE with a Human Rights Perspective Moving Forward

The 2023 UNESCO Recommendation reflects an expanded notion of peace – that is, sustainable, 'positive peace' founded on human rights, not just the absence of war and conflict. Human rights is seen as an essential basis for this peace, and the specific commitments of countries through their legal human rights obligations, the normative guidance provided by such

treaties as well as the evolving practice of 'transformative' human rights education are highlighted in this 2023 policy document. The integration of human rights within a vision of peace also recognizes that sustainable peace – evidenced both through a lack of national and international conflict as well as respect for diversity and human dignity – the long view, depends on justice, as imagined through human rights.

Two questions naturally arise from these findings:

What are the impacts of UNESCO's soft policies and efforts?

How can we help ensure that human rights education will be used in its full power to support a just, and sustainable peace?

Through global frameworks and guidelines, technical assistance, and partnerships, UNESCO's peace education initiatives have influenced many countries' curricula to include themes of peace, non-violence, human rights, conflict resolution, and global citizenship. Evaluating the impact of peace education interventions is complex, but multiple forms of evidence attest to the outcomes linked with UNESCO's efforts on curricula. One clear indicator of impact is the number of countries adopting official policies or curriculum mandates for peace education, often explicitly referencing UNESCO frameworks. Between 2005 and 2025, at least several dozen countries instituted policies or curriculum reforms citing ' peace education,' ' culture of peace.' In 2023, UNESCO reported that 85% of countries globally have education policies that include commitments to human rights and peace (Schurugensky 2018)– a dramatic increase in policy uptake since 2005. While policy alone doesn't guarantee implementation, it shows UNESCO's normative influence translating into formal government agendas.

The institutionalization of HRE is also reflected in the expansion of HRE within curricula and teaching materials. In the area of curricula, more than 83 countries across different regions of the world have adopted HRE in legislation, policy documents and curricula since the 1990s (Moon 2009). Studies of textbooks have also shown a dramatic increase in the number of times that human rights is mentioned, with increases most pronounced in Africa, Asia and the West, and least pronounced– though still improved– in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, as of 2017 (Russell and Suarez 2017).

These results suggest that there is in most countries already an educational foothold for addressing the right to peace, with attention to human rights. Yet, this finding is a qualified one, if an interest in peace shows up in key education legislation or policy documents but are not integrated into specific, required subject matter curriculum. Indeed, a more nuanced picture of peace education in schools is provided by textbook analysis. A UNESCO analysis in 2016–2017 noted that only 10% of textbooks explicitly mention concepts like conflict prevention or resolution (Schurugensky 2018), and many still

contained militaristic or biased narratives. This indicates that while curricula on paper may endorse peace education, the actual depth of content can be limited – a gap UNESCO has identified for further action. Still, the increase in the presence of peace topics in official curricula from 2005 to 2025 is a measurable outcome of UNESCO's global push.

For those interested in advocating PE and HRE within their education systems, there are ample UNESCO (and other UN) policies to cite. In reality, many things need to be in place for such policies to be realized in national curriculum frameworks in ways that move beyond general references in education policy documents:

- Political will
- Thematic ' access points' in subject matter curriculum that peace and human rights themes can be linked with, since separate courses on PE and HRE are rare in the formal education curriculum (though more likely in non-formal education settings)
- Localization of PE and HRE themes (not just universal treatment of these themes and values)
- Resources for teacher training and resource development
- Teacher motivation, as well as school community interest
- Links between top-down and bottom-up educational efforts (including partnerships with NGOs).

In conclusion, a review of UN policies shows that peace education is intricately linked with human rights and - as evidenced through the 2023 recommendation – this link has been strengthened and expanded. This means that the existing footholds for peace education in national curriculum – however superficial some may be – offer an opportunity for greater thematic and pedagogical treatment of the right to peace, with human rights education as an integral element of formal and nonformal education. Such efforts, as always, will require the concerted efforts of visionary change agents in each country including, hopefully, some of the readers of this article.

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