The Role of Higher Education in Peacebuilding: A Literature Review and Potential Implications for Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 Quality Education

This systematic review was conducted of studies that investigate the role of higher education in peacebuilding, and how peace education is promoted in the higher education context. This study has examined the 26 peer reviewed articles published between 2017 and 2021, and the findings advanced the knowledge on the role of higher education institutions in developing practice in peace education. In reviewing the literature, this paper highlights the ways how higher education contributes to global peace, and concludes with implications of peacebuilding premises and practices in the higher education context for the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, which strives for quality education.

Keywords: peace education, quality education, higher education, sustainability, lifelong learning

Introduction

Replacing Millennium Development Goals in 2015 in a broader scope, Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) brought a renewed attention to the humanistic vision of education through the SDG 4. It understands “education as inclusive and as crucial in promoting democracy and human rights and enhancing global citizenship, tolerance and civic engagement as well as sustainable development” (Incheon Declaration, 2016, p. 26). Such an understanding enhances education beyond its utilitarian role embracing an integrated approach. The humanistic and integrated approach to education is imperative to high quality education in any educational context.

“Countries in the developing world cannot improve the living conditions of their populations and promote inclusive and sustainable development without quality education, including well-functioning higher education system and institutions that provide students with quality and relevant education, skills and knowledge as well as produce and disseminates new knowledge and research necessary for societal and human development and progress” (Heleta & Bagus, 2021, p. 177). Therefore, the revitalized role higher education institutions (HEIs) play in the effective implementation of the SDG 4 must be recognized. The higher education sector is diverse and within this “diversity resides opportunities to teach knowledge, skills and values associated with SDG 4 through multiracial, multicultural and multinational lenses” (Ferguson & Rooife, 2020, p. 965). To this end, integrating peace education into the curricula of the HEIs can be considered a necessary starting point.

Synott (2015) stated that “peace education is regarded as fulfilling a central role in establishing and sustaining nonviolent societies where conflicts...
are resolved through peaceful means”. Mochizuki (2019) emphasizes the importance of giving “a central place to strengthening education’s contribution to the fulfilment of human rights, peace, and responsible citizenship from local to global levels”. In line with these perspectives, adopting peace as an educational philosophy in higher education institutions is necessary to support learners developing their full potential for the transformation of global societies. As peace education proposed a distinctive interdisciplinary view, its implementation to the university curricula can be managed in a wide range of context including a course syllabus, a collaborative project, and even in the form of an extracurricular activity offered to the students on campus. The availability of rights based high quality learning settings in HEIs is one gateway that can lead to outcomes relevant to SDG 4 at multiple levels.

Given the critical importance of higher education in the implementation of the SDG 4, this study focuses on how peacebuilding practices within universities can significantly contribute to move the specific targets of SDG4 forward. It begins by providing a brief overview of sustainable development goals (SDG) and the role of higher education institutions to achieve them. The second part is guided by the research questions and moves on to describe in greater detail the peacebuilding practices and projects implemented in universities, which play an active role in achieving outcomes associated with SDG 4. The last part discusses the findings emerged from the systematic review and presents implications for the SDG 4 to be achieved by 2030.

Sustainable Development Goals

At the beginning of the millennium following the Millennium Summit of the United Nations, eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) with specific targets were established to be accomplished over the course of 15 years to improve conditions for people as a global movement to overcome the indignity of poverty. “They express widespread public concern about poverty, hunger, disease, unmet schooling, gender inequality, and environmental degradation” (Sachs, 2012, p. 2206). Despite the positive achievements attained on global levels, some targets were not met at some regions. Therefore, many see the MDGs as “unfinished business” (Lomazzi, Borisch & Laaser, 2014, p. 7). In the same vein, the Millennium Development Goals Report (2015) also acknowledges “uneven achievements and shortfalls in many areas confirming that the work is not complete, and it must continue in the new development era”.

Building on the MDGs to complete what has not been achieved, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) including a set of 17 global goals and 169 targets launched under the title of “Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” in 2015 by the United Nations to be accomplished by 2030. According to Ki-moon (2015), Secretary-General of the United Nations, the transition from the MDGs to the SDGs presents a “once-in-a-generation opportunity to advance prosperity, secure the planet’s sustainability for future generations, and unlock resources for investments in
education, health, equitable growth and sustainable production and consumption”. It is obvious that SDGs aim to transform the world and move it to a sustainable trajectory. To this end, it is important to bear in mind that they are interconnected, and education (SDG 4) is essential to accelerate the implementation of all 17 SDGs.

“The overarching 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development education goal (SDG 4) commits to providing inclusive and equitable quality education at all levels” (Incheon Declaration, 2016, p. 27). Different from the MDGs, the call within SDG 4 to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” focuses on universal education and a lifelong learning perspective. Its corresponding targets similarly promote inclusion, equity and quality of education in a broader context adopting a human rights based and humanistic approach. As stated in the Sustainable Development Goals Report (2020, p. 32), “there has been progress to ensure quality education, however; the world is not on track to meet 2030 education targets because the coronavirus pandemic is deepening the education crisis and widening existing educational inequalities worldwide”. It is important to note Owens’ (2017) suggestion in this respect that a collaboration among governments, multilateral agencies and universities targeting publicly-funded research and building partnerships across sectors is of necessity to truly form a part of the sustainable development agenda.

The Role of Higher Education

Higher education institutions (HEIs) play an important role in addressing the rapid changes characterizing today’s world for the individuals to equip themselves with necessary skills for quality life and success in the 21st century. For this to happen, the educational role of HEIs moves significantly beyond developing individual intellectual capacities. In this regard, Magalhães and Veiga (2013) comment that “the focus on the development of competences, defined as the acquisition of knowledge, experiences and attitudes to deal with specific social situations, has been reconfiguring education in higher education” (p.59). Radinger-Peer and Pflitsch (2017) investigating the role of the located Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the transformation towards sustainability argue that “HEIs have the potential to spur a regional transition towards sustainability via the channels of teaching, research and outreach” (p.181). Heleta and Bagus (2021) highlight the importance of “the contribution HEIs can make for the sustainable development and implementation of the SDGs through research, knowledge production, skills development and engagement” (p. 164).

Universities have a crucial role to play for the sustainability development of society as HEIs. Jaber, et al. (2018) emphasize “the responsibility of the universities as a higher education institution to present the society culture in an innovative and scientific frame of originality expected to support and contribute to the society by expressing the values (1) Equal opportunities for all, (2) Innovation and excellence, (3) Development and sustainable
improvement, (4) Quality assurance that gives equality of access and learning, (5) Social justice, integrity, and accountability, (6) Focusing on knowledge delivery and convenience of services, (7) Partnerships with related parties that should benefit education systems, (8) Transparency and credibility, in their mission and vision” (p.45). In much the same vein, bringing these values into practice help the HEIs retain their role for the quality of educational systems necessary for sustainability. At this point, it is also important to note that the role of higher education in meeting the sustainable development challenges is not limited to offering training and skills, because “it holds potential to educate excellent teachers, uncover ground-breaking research, and connect services to communities” (Owens, 2017, p. 5). This also means that universities are to demonstrate on these educational missions (teaching and learning, research and community) directly related to sustainability of quality education.

HEIs have the responsibility to foster a culture of diversity and inclusion by building culturally diverse communities on campus, and enrich the educational experience through different viewpoints people from different backgrounds would bring. Correspondingly, universities must act on their role of promoting education for peace by building key concepts such as peace, human rights, and interculturality across the curriculum. In the light of the guidelines presented in “Education for Peace: Planning for Curriculum Reform” (UNESCO, 2015), which is a document analysing the potential role of the education sector in peacebuilding, universities can develop their curriculum responses considering the four models ((1) integration across the curriculum, (2) Stand-alone subject, (3) Carrier subjects, and (4) Extra-curricular) suggested to strengthen the inclusion of education for peace in the curriculum. In the long run, these peacebuilding initiatives fulfilled by the HEIs appear to be highly promising for a more sustainable world.

Purpose

The aim of this systematic review was to provide a comprehensive review of the peer-reviewed articles between 2017 and 2021 that investigated peace education in the context of higher education with a focus on its applications and implications for the sustainable development goal 4, which is quality education. The central question was how quality education (SDG 4) is promoted through peace education in higher education context. To address this, the study sought to answer the following specific research questions:

1. What roles higher education institutions play in peacebuilding?
2. How is peacebuilding promoted in the context of higher education institutions?
Method

The process guided by the PRISMA principles (Liberati et al., 2009) was followed to identify articles that address the research questions. The database of ERIC was scanned for the literature on peace education limited to only peer-reviewed articles from 2017 to 2021 by using the search terms “Peace Education, Peacebuilding, Higher Education” in the titles, abstracts and keywords. The article selection process is illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Article selection process guided by PRISMA principles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identification</th>
<th>Records identified through the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) database searching (n = 57)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Screening</td>
<td>Records screened (n = 57)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eligibility</td>
<td>Full-text articles assessed for eligibility (n = 57)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Full-text articles excluded, with reasons (n = 31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Included</td>
<td>Final article selection based on the inclusion criteria (n = 26)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The initial search yielded 57 results. The records were reviewed and analyzed based on the exclusion and inclusion criteria presented in Table 2. Meeting a minimum of one inclusion but none of the exclusion criteria, 26 articles remained for the synthesis step of the review.

Table 2. Criteria for inclusion and exclusion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria for Inclusion</th>
<th>Criteria for Exclusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● Peacebuilding studies in Higher Education Context</td>
<td>● Book chapter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Classroom practices</td>
<td>● Dissertation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Curriculum Integrations</td>
<td>● Conference proceeding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Projects</td>
<td>● Peacebuilding at the times of war conflict, and terror</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the next step, the remaining 26 articles were divided into three thematic categories (the role of higher education in peace education (8), applicable peacebuilding practices (11), and peace education (7). In addition to the peer reviewed articles identified in the article selection process, some works including other peer reviewed articles found on different databases, books, and UNESCO reports were also reviewed to provide details to present a complete picture of peace education, sustainable development goals and roles of higher education institutions.

Results

Research Question 1: What roles higher education institutions play in peacebuilding?

This section presents the findings of the research, focusing on the two key themes emerged in light of the reviewed articles with respect to the first
research question. It was found that HEIs can be promoters of peace by providing facilities for theory, practice and research for the infusion of peace into the curricula (Oueijan, 2018; Veiga Ávila, et. al, 2019), and encouraging community engagement (Johnson, 2017; Olivares-García, et all., 2019; Bae, 2020).

In reviewing the literature, data was found on the role of HEIs to create space for peacebuilding studies in the course content and curriculum. Dietrich (2019) describes how the University of Innsbruck pioneered peace studies in the 21st century developing a curriculum for a Master in Peace, Development, Security and International Conflict Transformation by harmonizing the Transrational Peace Philosophy with the didactical practices. Lee, et al. (2020) suggest developing short-term unification classes and implementing curriculum and teaching methodologies that center on peace education in South Korean Universities by exploring students’ views and emphasizing its importance for peace development. Bruce, et al. (2019) investigated the pre-service teachers’ understanding of global citizenship through interviews as a data collection tool. Findings revealed that participants are uncertain of the term “global citizenship” mainly because of their limited multicultural experiences, and they have the desire for sameness. The fact that they had no exposure to the term global citizenship prior to the university indicates a significant role for the universities to help them gain deeper appreciation for diversity. Sabharwal (2020) claims that HEIs can promote equitable and nondiscriminatory learning environments by cultivating democratic values through the curriculum content imbued with the rights-based approach and pedagogical methods.

In his ethnographic case study, Kester (2017a) critically examines the role played by HEIs in peace education, and directs attention to the need for more caution of the universities for diverse hiring, decolonial curricular and pedagogic initiatives to promote peace through curriculum and teaching. In another research he conducted in the same year, he briefly covers three implications regarding the peacebuilding role of universities “(1) the continuation of structural violence through curriculum and teaching in a university that aims to combat direct, structural and cultural violence to build cultures of peace; (2) the need for the university to garner greater clarity of purpose concerning its role in promoting educational peacebuilding; and (3) the obligation for institutional introspection on coherence between the peace mission of the university and its governance practices” (p. 476).

“University as an institution has a long history, starting as an educational establishment, later assuming the knowledge creating (research) function and more recently the so-called third mission (engagement)” (Chankseliani & McCowan, 2021, p.1). The present literature review has provided evidence on an additional role related to the engagement mission played by the HEIs with respect to the development of a peaceful society. Johnson (2017) claims that “universities function in their role as a development apparatus through community engagement, an embedded aspect of the public service mission of the modern university, consistent at institutions around the world” (p. 63). Taken together, these findings suggest different roles for HEIs to promote
peace beyond the borders of university campuses to accomplish sustainable peace in a broader context.

How is peacebuilding promoted in the context of higher education institutions?

This section draws together the key findings about the application of peacebuilding practices in the context of HEIs addressing the second research question. Most of the studies reviewed here have documented successful integration of peace education into the HEIs. Results are presented in four main themes emerged from the reviewed articles: (1) Peace in HEIs as separate courses, (2) Integration of peace in university courses, (3) Promoting peace through projects in HEIs, (4) Promoting Peace through Teacher Education Programs in HEIs.

Peace in HEIs as separate courses

More recent attention has focused on the curriculum development processes for the promotion of peace in the HEIs. The critical step here is considered designing the curriculum through the articulation of learning outcomes regarding peace. Some examples have been found in the studies reviewed. Brantmeier and Webb (2020) presented an introductory peace studies course “Inclusive Leadership for Sustainable Peace” in an American university in their study. This undergraduate course was designed with the aim of creating sustainable peace leaders. In line with this, they conducted an exploratory qualitative study to find an answer to the question “what do students learn about themselves, others, and their ability to change the world from engaging in this course?”. Findings demonstrate that this university course was able to achieve its goals and significantly contribute to the sustainable peace efforts in the world. In another study, Carmichael (2018) introduced an interdisciplinary learning experience designed for the university students through the collaboration of three higher education institutions in the classes of Humanities, English, Peace Studies, and Political Science to promote global citizenship and peace from the perspectives of different disciplines, and the findings confirms that this course fulfilled its aims.

Integration of peace in university courses

Oueijan (2018) suggested the integration of peace-related learning outcomes into the courses as well as the separate courses provided by the HEIs. Rodriguez (2018) believing that live projects in architectural education can offer opportunities to become an agency for social construction and peacebuilding developed a method for experiential learning in architectural education through the applications of live projects into the curriculum to complement studio based projects. In her longitudinal study completed over the course of 4 years, 15 live projects were designed, implemented and tested
through the participation of 170 undergraduate students, a collaboration of the national and international teachers, sponsors from the construction industry and children’s foundations. Some of the implications inferred from the study might be limited to the national level because the project was designed and implemented specifically for the Colombian context. However, this method proved to be successful in its positive effect on problem solving skills and development of a diversity of cognitive dimensions. It is also apparent that the active involvement of the learners in the process in collaboration with the professionals from the sector enabled them to expose to different perspectives and expand their horizons. Eventually, this project opens up a potential venue for an effective pedagogical approach to architectural education as well as carrying out its role as a promoter of peace building in the higher education context.

Isihara, et al. (2018) present a general education course focused on the humanitarian utility of mathematics in their study. Having a backward design, this course aimed to (1) heighten student awareness of a variety of humanitarian issues; (2) show how a variety of mathematical models provide insight into these issues; and (3) develop basic proficiency in MATLAB and writing lab reports using the free, on-line LATEX editor Overleaf (p.359). In the end, it was reported that integration of humanitarian and social justice issues was found successful at improving awareness.

Promoting peace through projects in HEIs

Carmel (2018) describes the collaboration of two colleges on an educational intervention program designed for students in English Teaching Programs to develop mutual understanding through the English language creating a common ground. Findings obtained through the analysis of a variety of qualitative data reveal implications for the role of teacher education and universities on promoting peacebuilding.

“Conflict Kitchen” (Bae, 2020) is an assignment created for the preservice teachers taking “Art Methods Course” to give them the opportunity to develop global citizenship and contribute to world peace by exploring the art from different perspectives because they are likely to teach students from diverse cultures and social backgrounds. The collective dialogues in the implementation of the activity enabled them to think critically about the world and develop democratic behaviors, which is necessary for world peace. This initiative of integrating peace into the curriculum expanded through the event called “Taste of Nations” monthly held in the university where preservice teachers present their findings and food wrappers. This event also illustrates how HEIs can provide a space for enhancing intercultural understandings in different ways.

The project ‘Córdoba, through Children’s eyes’ (Olivares-García, et all., 2019) was developed by the collaboration of the three different institutions (the university, Teachers’ Center and the Early Childhood Education Schools) in the city of Córdoba where three cultures peacefully coexist. This innovative
educational project experience also demonstrated that HEIs can play a big role to promote peace through community engagement by creating opportunities connecting stakeholders of different institutions.

Gelot (2019) hypothesized that implementing Problem-based Learning (PBL) as a pedagogy into the context of HEIs can help establish an experiential learning environment and conscientize students about the social and political conditions. A mixed study was designed to explore the effectiveness of this approach using a case of simulation created through a website. In the role plays, students applying different theoretical perspectives recommended solutions for peace. In this way, the simulation process enabled them to improve key professional skills. Findings confirmed the contribution of PBL to bridge the gap in knowledge, skills and abilities as well as its leading role to socio-political transformation toward a peaceful society.

Promoting peace through teacher education programs in HEIs

Wang, H. (2018) carried out a qualitative teacher research to explore “how and why students in teacher education respond to nonviolence and nonviolence education in their particular ways and what pedagogical conditions can be created for shifting students’ relational orientation toward integration and compassion” (p.218). Participants were engaged in emotional work through autobiographical journaling, writing and mindfulness practices to deepen their understanding of nonviolence beyond the absence of violence, and promote nonviolent relationships. This study provides valuable implications for teacher education at universities.

An alternative approach was adopted in a narrative inquiry study conducted in a Colombian university with English Language Teaching program “to understand how student-teachers develop agency when narratively inquiring their community by planning and conducting community-based pedagogy projects on issues they found pertinent to investigate” (Varona and Alvarez, 2020). Through their interactions with the community, student-teachers had the chance to critically think about their roles as transformative members of the communities.

Even if human rights are considered a universally important concept, students lack human rights education mainly because teachers are not given training on integrating human rights into their teaching context. Addressing the gap identified, Daly (2019) mentions an online graduate education course offered to International Baccalaureate (IB) teachers to help them facilitate the process of incorporating human rights instruction into their own personal contexts. For those wanting to infuse human rights into a course, she offers four suggestions: (1) start small (2) be mindful of your students (3) seek meaningful and engaging materials; and (4) keep learning (p.169).
Implications for SDG 4 Quality Education

These results have important implications for the understanding of how peacebuilding practices in the HEIs contribute to quality education corresponding to Sustainable Development Goal 4 “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.” (United Nations, 2015). The principal implication of this study is that the crucial role HEIs play in the implementation of the SDG 4 must be recognized.

The availability of rights based, humanistic and integrated approaches in peace education can lead to outcomes regarding SDG 4 at various levels. More specifically, two associated targets (4.5 & 4.7) of SDG 4 can be achieved through the effective implementation of peace education because recent research reviewed in the study demonstrate that infusion of peacebuilding in HEIs produce positive outcomes such as inclusion of diversity, global citizenship, sustainable development which are directly linked to quality education. These concepts are considered integral parts of the SDG 4 associated targets presented in the Incheon Declaration (2016):

- **Target 4.5.** By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations.
- **Target 4.7.** By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and nonviolence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development (p. 21).

The integration of peace can happen in the educational philosophy, content, teaching and assessment. As with any curriculum adaptations, it requires a well-planned process in which the competences required are identified, and educators with a great level of both content and pedagogical knowledge for its effective implementation. Likewise, they are considered requirements for quality education that will lead to sustainable development.

The interdisciplinary nature of peace education allows educators to expand their knowledge at the intersection of different disciplines, which leads to a more sophisticated model of integration. “The connections between higher education, peacebuilding, and higher education for peacebuilding indubitably rely on individual lecturers to form and model the foundations of stability and justice within educational institutions” (Kester, 2017, p.478). In the same vein, “the SDGs call for inclusive and accessible education for all, but this might be difficult to attain if teachers are unaware of how to achieve this through their own work” (Boeren, 2019). There is, therefore, a necessity for educators to take thorough teacher training for peace to be successfully implemented. To
move in this direction, HEIs should provide meaningful training facilities that benefit educators to develop appropriate pedagogies and strategies on their ambitious endeavors. Implementation of peace in a variety of disciplines can also be facilitated by further collaboration of the “Peace Education and Research Centers” and “Teaching and Learning Development Units” at universities.

Conclusion

The main goal of this study is to provide a comprehensive review of the literature on the role of HEIs to promote peace, and its implications for the SDG 4 to be achieved by 2030. Returning to the research questions posed at the beginning of the study, it is possible to state that HEIs play an important role for the transformation of the society towards sustainable development, and the implementation of peace in HEIs is a promising start for quality education. At this point, it is important to note that SDGs are interconnected, and quality education (SDG 4) is acknowledged to accelerate the successful implementation of the remaining goals. HEIs, therefore, should have a systematic plan to move the society towards a sustainable state. In this regard, the reviewed articles synthesized in this study highlight the need for HEIs to embrace a participatory approach, and facilitate this transformative process through the collaboration with stakeholders, educators, learners and community. Furthermore, findings provide strong empirical evidence that peace has a place in both formal and hidden curricula in education. Consequently, HEIs should take initiatives for the effectiveness and sustainability of peace education, and provide the necessary support for the implementation of the theory, research and practice. It is one of the necessary starting points for the transformation of global societies.

References


Sabharwal, N. (2020), Caste relations in student diversity: Thinking through Dr Ambedkar’s perspective towards a civic learning approach in higher education. The International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives, 19, 30-43.


13