

Peace Literacy:
Contributions of Building Reconciliation in City Center in Plateau State
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Abstract

Jos has suffered from widespread inter-communal violence for over ten years, resulting in the schools being segregated along religious lines. To address these problems, Building Reconciliation in City Center (BRiCC) has recently begun extramural lessons in one of the few neighborhoods where Christians and Muslims still live in close proximity. One component of the extramural lessons is a peace literacy program where children read storybooks with messages related to peace. The two key goals of the peace literacy program are to improve children's literacy skills and to help children develop attitudes and skills that foster peaceful co-existence. This paper described the peace literacy program. An evaluation of the program through interviews with the leaders of the program revealed that the program has made modest success in achieving these two goals in its first year of programming. In conclusion, reading storybooks with peace-related themes can be a good tool for fostering the development of skills and attitudes related to peaceful co-existence.

Introduction

Plateau State is currently one of the main sites of ethno-religious violence in Nigeria (Higazi, 2011). In over ten years of ethno-religious violence, more than 3,800 lives have been lost (Human Rights Watch, 2011). Plateau State experienced its first widespread violent crisis in September 2001 in the state capital of Jos. During six days of destruction and killing, about 1,000 people were killed (Human Rights Watch, 2001). Jos experienced another violent crisis in November 2008 when around 700 people were killed and countless houses, churches, mosques, and businesses were destroyed (Ostien, 2009). Another crisis sparked in January 2010 (Higazi, 2011). After bombs exploded in Jos on Christmas Eve 2010, killing at least 80 individuals, a cycle of tit-for-tat violence continued for months with over 200 fatalities in the month of January 2011 (Human Rights Watch, 2011). The factors underlying the conflict in Jos are multifaceted and complex, including elements of ethnicity, politics, and religion (Ostien, 2009).

In addition to the Jos crises, the Boko Haram Islamist militant group has also contributed to violence within Plateau State, particularly through suicide bombers that attacked three churches in Jos in early 2012. These bomb attacks lead to immediate reprisal attacks (BBC News Africa, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c). Furthermore, ongoing clashes between the Berom and Fulani ethnic groups in rural areas currently constitute the highest levels of violence in Plateau State (A. Higazi, personal communication, 23 October 2012).

The continuous cycle of violence has resulted in the segregation of Jos metropolis into Muslim and Christian areas with little interaction between individuals of the two religious groups (Y. Pam, personal communication, 4 July 2012). This highly segregated atmosphere has substantially increased mistrust, suspicion and stereotypes between the two religious groups, a potential trigger for future violence.

Educational institutions have been particularly affected by the segregation, especially at the lower levels of education (Dajahar, 2012). In 2000, a government secondary school in a predominantly Muslim neighborhood in Jos had 74% Christian students and 77% Christian teachers. By 2011, the school population had reduced to 0% Christian students and 29% Christian teachers. A secondary school in a predominantly Christian neighborhood in Jos had a Muslim population of 24% students and 9% teachers in 2000, but virtually all of the Muslim students and teachers had left the school by 2011. Dajahar concludes, “It is obvious...that the emergence of exclusive educational institutions in Jos as a result of the social segregation that has polarized the city portends grave consequences for peace especially in the future when the children that were raised with very little knowledge of the other will have to reside and work together in the same environment. Steps must be taken if the violence that can only best be imagined will be averted” (2012, p. 13).

The segregation of educational institutions is particularly disturbing due to the fact that intergroup contact is well known to reduce prejudice, even among children from ages 1 to 12 years (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Interaction with individuals from the other group may help improve attitudes for three reasons (Pettigrew, 1998). First, interacting with members from the other group helps one learn about that group. For example, a common stereotype is that all members of another group are terrorists. Thus, interacting with a friendly member of that group can help one learn that their belief is mistaken. Second, a pleasant interaction can lead to positive emotions toward that other group. Finally, the interaction can help one re-assess their own group, and understand that one’s customs and beliefs may not be the only customs and beliefs that are acceptable. Therefore, it is important that children engage in intergroup contact from an early age, particularly in a nation like Nigeria with a broad diversity of cultures.

In addition to intergroup contact, peace education has been found to be effective in enabling learners to acquire the skills, knowledge and attitudes necessary for peaceful coexistence (Cabezudo & Haavelsrud, 2007). Indeed, peace education assumes that all human beings can learn the way of peace (Clarke-Habibi, 2011). Peace education programs typically include a range of objectives, including a better understanding of conflict and developing skills that are necessary to manage and resolve conflict in positive ways (Lieber, 1998). In addition, peace education can also foster better understanding of the similarities and differences between human beings, inherent human rights, principles of cooperation and trust, alternatives to violence, and the nature of forgiveness. A key purpose of peace education is to help students build visions of peaceful futures where diverse cultures can be celebrated without fear and threat (Cabezudo & Haavelsrud, 2007).

Creating sustainable peace requires a variety of approaches that focus on many different aspects of society (Schirch, 2004). Utilizing formal education to foster peace is one of the key strategies that is necessary to develop a sustainable peace. In Plateau State, the oldest students in non-tertiary education were only eight years old when the first major crisis occurred in 2001. Therefore, most students currently in the Plateau state education system cannot remember a peaceful time free from violent conflicts. Instead, the children of Plateau state have lived most of their lives in an atmosphere saturated by violence, mistrust, and negative stereotypes between Christian and Muslims. Peace education is vital to help the children of Plateau state develop the knowledge skills that are required for the next generation to be marked by peace and justice.

BRiCC Peace Literacy Class

In an effort to envision an educational program that fosters peace, Building Reconciliation in City Centre (BRiCC) has developed an integrated peace program with a component for pupils in primary and secondary school. BRiCC is a Non-Governmental

Organization (NGO) that works in the Kwararafa community of Jos North, one of the few areas in Jos where Christians and Muslims still live in close proximity. BRiCC's goal is to bring community members together for programs that foster reconciliation and development within the community. One such program is non-formal extramural tutoring offered free of charge for children in primary school classes 1 to 3; primary classes 4 to 6, and secondary school. This program was designed to improve the talent and knowledge of students in the primary and secondary levels. There are four subjects taught in the extramural tutoring, including writing skills, computer, mathematics and English.

One component of the English subject for children in the primary 1 to 3 class is a peace literacy class that was formed to combine peace education with literacy training. The peace literacy class has three specific goals. Since intergroup contact reduces prejudice, the first goal of the peace literacy class is to bring together Muslim and Christian children to foster inter-religious relationships. The second goal is to train pupils to become peace ambassadors by reading storybooks that have strong peace-related themes, such as sharing, cooperation, and integrity. The final goal of the class is to improve children's literacy skills through a holistic approach.

In order to bring this vision into reality, BRiCC mobilized parents to release their children, irrespective of their ethnic or religious background, for ten weeks of extramural classes to engage in literacy training. In these ten weeks of lessons that last for one hour per week, the children are expected to improve their literacy skills and attitude towards reading, as well as develop skills and attitudes that will foster peaceful co-existence.

Each class session has two components: group reading and individual reading. The class begins with a group reading component whereby the children are integrated irrespective of their particular learning needs. In this session, one of the teachers reads a picture storybook with a peace message to the children, showing the children the pictures as the story

progresses. While reading the storybook, the teacher explains difficult words to the comprehension of the learners, which helps to expand learners' vocabulary.

After finishing the storybook, the teacher engages in a discussion with the learners. The purpose of the discussion is twofold. First, the teacher asks the learners questions about the story to ensure that the pupils understand the story. This helps learners develop their reading comprehension skills. Second, the peace theme of the story is highlighted through discussion so that the learners understand the peaceful knowledge or attitude that the story highlights. The teacher also asks questions to guide learners to an understanding of how the peace lesson can apply to their experiences living in the conflict situation within Jos.

For example, one storybook in the curriculum is called It's Mine (Lionni, 1986). In this story, three frogs are continually quarrelling because they claim the water, air, and earth as their own. However, a storm drives the three frogs together for protection. After coming together, the frogs realize that life is much more enjoyable if they cooperate, and subsequently declare the resources as "ours" instead of "mine." This story highlights that life is more pleasant when there is peace that results from sharing and cooperating.

After the group reading, the second component of the peace literacy class is the individual reading session where the learners are divided into smaller groups based on the learners' needs and abilities. The goal is to have no more than three students per teacher to foster individualized instruction. For example, one group of learners practices identifying letters of the alphabet. Another group practices reading high-frequency words (see Eldredge, 2005, as cited in Tompkins, 2011). Those learners who have already developed a baseline reading fluency practice their reading and comprehension skills by reading a storybook together with a teacher. Through the individualized reading sessions, closer attention is given to the learners to help them develop their literacy skills based on their learning level.

Evaluation of the Peace Literacy Class

The first goal of the peace literacy class is to bring together Muslim and Christian children to foster inter-religious relationships. Improving the degree of interaction between individuals of religions is important in order to foster integration of ideas and to understand others better irrespective of their religion. This success of this goal in the BRiCC peace literacy class is mixed. Because BRiCC was initiated by a Christian missionary, there was an initial challenge because the Muslim community believed that the program was founded by missionaries to convert Muslims to Christianity. To resolve the problems, Garba Hassan, the BRiCC educational coordinator, used diplomatic measures by talking to the Muslim community leader and inviting him to the class. When the Muslim leader observed the program, he was pleased and then prayed for the program to progress.

A second challenge has been that many neighboring Christians fear coming to the program because they say that the location of the BRiCC classroom is in a Muslim-dominated area so it might not be safe for their children. BRiCC leaders are currently working in consultation with local churches to dispel this fear. The most recent cohort of the BRiCC primary class had approximately 20% Christian pupils.

The second goal of the peace literacy class is to train pupils to become peace ambassadors by reading storybooks with peace themes. Garba Hassan reports that this goal has achieved success amongst the learners. He said, “When someone is educated, he will not engage in some of the vices that threaten the peace of the land.”

The final goal of the class is to improve children’s literacy skills through a holistic approach. In other words, this goal is to improve the reading skills and knowledge that the students may not have developed in their various schools. Garba Hassan reports that BRiCC has broadened the mental horizon of students. A student who graduated from the program testified that her exams were easier because of what she has learnt in BRiCC.

There are a number of ways that the peace literacy class can be improved. According to the original proposal, the peace literacy class was supposed to involve both pupils and community members. The community members were intended to serve as teaching assistants in the class, including both students training to become teachers in the Faculty of Education at the University of Jos, as well as parents and other concerned adults within the Kwararafa area.

There were a number of reasons why community members were intended to serve as teaching assistants in the peace literacy class. First, community members serving as teachers would lower the teacher-student ratio to provide individualized literacy instruction for the learners. Community members could also benefit from the peace lessons taught by the stories. Furthermore, community members would also learn how to participate in shared storybook reading with children, which is a key element of a holistic literacy education. Community members could take this skill of shared storybook reading home to their own children and wards, which would improve the reading culture within the community.

Currently, education students from the University of Jos are faithfully participating as teachers in the peace literacy class. However, the origin intention of including parents and older relatives of the pupils as teachers has yet to be fully implemented. These community members have participated as teachers on occasion, but only when the education students have been unable to attend due to their commitments at the university. In the future, local community volunteers should be identified and participate in a brief training about the goals and methods of the peace literacy class.

Second, the program can be improved by expanding the size of the classes to cater for the number of students who apply for the program. Currently, the maximum number of students is 18 because of the size of the classroom. Furthermore, the ratio of Christian and Muslim pupils needs to be better balanced.

Benefits of the Peace Literacy Class to Faculty of Education Students

As previously mentioned, one key element of the peace literacy class is the use of education students as volunteer teachers. The potential benefits for including education students as volunteer teachers is threefold. First, the education students can benefit by the practical teaching experience in the program. The more that teachers-in-training practice their teaching skills, the better teachers they will become. Second, since the education students are teaching simultaneously with participating in lectures at the university, the education students are in a better place to understand how the theories they are learning in lectures apply to an actual teaching-learning situation. Finally, the volunteer teaching experience should be an advantage when applying for jobs after their training in the university.

The education students who have been faithfully volunteering testified to the effectiveness of these three goals, as well as unintended extra benefits. “We have learnt how to motivate children to learn by appreciating every effort the students make such as answering questions. The experiences we have had will help us in our practice as future teachers, because we will be able to apply the experiences we have gathered, including patience with students and motivating students to learn no matter their cognitive level, and it will enable us to be peace ambassadors everywhere we go.”

Furthermore, the education students report that the peace literacy class is exposing them to concepts of peace. They report, “Literacy is creating awareness that saves one from the danger of ignorance, especially in the context of the literacy class. We introduce them to pictures and stories that portray peace and then let learners know the dangers of violence. Peace makes people freely move about for their daily activities which results in national development and as well as allows people even from different countries to come and freely invest in another, thereby building international interaction.”

Conclusion

The purpose of the BRiCC peace literacy class is to enable Muslim and Christian children to become peace ambassadors through peace messages that can be learnt by reading storybooks. Literacy is a good tool for fostering the development of skills and attitudes related to peaceful co-existence, if properly used by the teacher. This is particularly true for younger children in their formative early childhood years.

After about one year of implementation, the BRiCC peace literacy class has achieved modest success in meeting its goals of fostering inter-religious relationships amongst children, teaching peace education through storybooks, and improving children's literacy skills. It is important to continue working towards these goals in order to overcome the challenges faced by the segregation of the educational system within Jos. Through inter-religious contact and peace education, the next generation of children in Plateau state can develop the peacebuilding skills that are necessary for a society marked by peace and justice.

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