

A conference reflection: Children as peacemakers in divided societies

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Summary: The authors of this article will share their reflections on the conference Children as Peacemakers in Divided Societies in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina which focused on intercultural and peace education with a special focus on the education of children. Key sessions highlighted language-focused discussions and the role of virtual intercultural exchanges in language classrooms.

Key words: language-focused discussions, virtual intercultural exchanges, global challenges and conflicts, fostering understanding, meaningful intercultural opportunities

Introduction

The *Children as Peacemakers in Divided Societies* conference held over several days in October was an enlightening experience that skillfully combined academic lectures and workshops. The workshops, which offered a space for interactive learning and skill development, were a focal point for schoolteachers and pre-service teachers. The chosen venue was the historic “Hotel Holiday,” which played a crucial role in housing foreign journalists during the Bosnian War (1992-1995). The setting, which was along the notorious sniper alley where many innocent lives were lost, provided a striking backdrop for talks about tolerance and peace.

The primary conference themes centered on intercultural education and peace education. According to the conference website, this “intersectional approach becomes all the more vital at a time when intolerance and challenges to democratic principles, as well as ongoing wars worldwide, threaten to unravel the fabric of societies everywhere” (*Children as Peacemakers in Divided Societies: Educational Approaches, 2023, para. 1*). Conference sessions also highlighted other relevant themes including multicultural education, human rights education, citizenship education, education for democracy and global education (*Children as Peacemakers in Divided Societies, 2023*).

The conference, held amid the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict, provided a thorough exploration of a variety of themes, including the particular difficulties posed by the war as well as more general problems in education. Notably, because of the events on October 7 some of the participants from Israel and Palestine were not able to attend, underscoring the complex realities in a region marked by historical tensions and armed conflicts for more than 75 years.

The conference continued discourse on the dynamics of teachers’ beliefs about education and experiences of contact

between groups in conflict in culturally responsive teaching practices. Discussions extended to educational work with refugee students, examining the intricacies of fostering meaningful connections, but also emphasizing the need for innovative approaches to support refugee students in their educational journeys.



The cover of the conference program October 2023

The authors' reflections

The authors of this article will share their insights from the conference. Andrea is an assistant professor of education from the United States and lived in South Korea for 11 years. She worked with North Korean refugees there. Amina is currently a Project Coordinator at the Jesuit Refugee Service in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where she has dedicated the past five years to the field of human migration, both forced and voluntary. In addition to her role in migration, she contributes part-time to the Education Sector at the War Childhood Museum in Sarajevo, highlighting her commitment to both humanitarian efforts and educational initiatives.

Insights from Andrea:

During the conference, I was intrigued by several sessions that centered on the role of virtual intercultural exchanges in education including *Intercultural Competence: Simulations in Virtual World*, *Global Learning Experience: Developing Intercultural Competence Through Virtual Exchange*, and *Peace Education through Virtual Exchange*. Opportunities for intercultural exchanges in language classrooms provide many valuable benefits for our students. It can be an opportunity for students to learn about other cultures in a personal and meaningful way, engage in intercultural dialogue, improve language skills, and broaden their understanding of the world. I want to provide valuable opportunities for my students to engage in face-to-face intercultural exchanges, but unfortunately, many of them do not have the time or money. As project coordinator, I am exploring ways to implement these types of virtual exchanges thus tying the curriculum and activities into the courses I am teaching. I also reflected on my own experiences living in South Korea for 11 years and teaching English to North Korean refugees. Americans are portrayed as the primary enemy in the North Korean media and education system. In the United States, we also view North Korea as an enemy and focus on its nuclear weapons and the Kim regime. However, North Korean people share many similarities with people around the world, and it is important to humanize their experiences. I will never forget the meaningful interactions I had with the North Korean refugees I worked with. It is challenging for me to imagine perceiving these kind-hearted individuals as my enemies. I learned so much about resilience, hope, and fortitude from them. These small but invaluable intercultural exchanges are critical in bridging divides and learning about our differences and the many similarities that bring us together.

Insights from Amina:

I benefited significantly from the contribution made by Kasumagić-Kafedžić and Clarke-Habibi (2023) who explored the connection between theory and practice in peace education in the Bosnian setting (2023). Their work sheds light on how the theoretical aspects of peace education are applied in practical settings in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In addition, the conference explored the subtleties of self-image, motivation,

and emotional intelligence while delving into the experiences of Arab teachers in the context of special education. Examining future teachers' depictions of cultural diversity both before and after taking intercultural education courses provided insights into the program's capacity for transformation. According to the presenters, future educators are better able to recognize the subtle differences across cultures after completing intercultural education courses. As a result of their enhanced understanding of cultural customs, values, and beliefs, they became more sensitive when engaging with others from different backgrounds. Being exposed to a variety of viewpoints and experiences resulted in a deeper and more nuanced knowledge of cultural differences. In the Arab education system in northern Israel, teachers' conflict resolution techniques, emotional intelligence, and empathy have come to light as crucial factors in creating inclusive and peaceful learning environments. The importance of mentor training in educating diverse university students to serve as mentors and promote positive educational experiences was emphasized, along with its role as a tool for social transformation.

In the session *Creating a Safe Space for Student Sharing in a Country in Conflict* by Jen Sundick and Manal Yazbak Abu Ahmad, the presenters described a course that was set up to bring together students from different colleges in Israel who come from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. The course was called 'Exploring Cultures through Literature in English.' The students were pre-service English teachers who came from religious backgrounds including Jews, Muslims, Druze, Bedouins, and Christians, as well as secular backgrounds. The students participate in a 1-year online course that includes one or two face-to-face classes with students working in small groups. Many of the benefits as well as challenges of this project were discussed. Fostering meaningful intercultural dialogue, especially between groups that have experienced division, is critical in promoting progress and understanding. Participants engaged in these discussions, gaining valuable insights and contributing to the collective effort of promoting peace, diversity, and education on a global scale.

Further resources to explore

The conference was co-sponsored by the War Childhood Museum (WCM), an institution that plays a crucial role in shedding light on the profound experiences of children affected by armed conflicts. Many of us who work as language educators have had the honor of working with refugee populations, but we might not have the specialized training necessary to completely understand the extent of trauma these people have experienced. Furthermore, there may not be as many resources available to help these students' social and academic development and to foster resilience. In light of this, we advise visiting the [War Childhood Museum's](#) website and getting involved with the programs they have put in place to promote a deeper understanding of the experiences

of kids during times of conflict. The Museum is an invaluable resource that offers educators perspectives, tools, and insights that can improve their capacity to support and relate to students whose early years have been impacted by war. It is interesting to note that the museum has refined its terminology, referring to the experience as “childhood marked by war” instead of “childhood in war.” This revision reflects a wider perspective, recognizing that individuals who have contributed to the museum collection, for example, may have been uprooted at birth and experienced a childhood shaped by war, even in cases where they were not directly involved in the fighting. This level of linguistic precision is essential to capturing the complexity of these experiences. Stressing that the Museum’s scope goes beyond this particular temporal and spatial framework is crucial. Although the museum’s initial research was conducted in Bosnia and Herzegovina,

it has since extended to 17 other conflict and post-conflict areas so far. The War Childhood Museum’s dedication to becoming a worldwide hub for studying and presenting the shared experience of childhood shaped by conflict is reflected in this international expansion. Lastly, the War Childhood Museum has achieved recognition on a global level as the winner of the esteemed Council of Europe Museum Prize. This award recognizes the museum’s dedication to quality work and its important role in enhancing the cultural and educational environment.

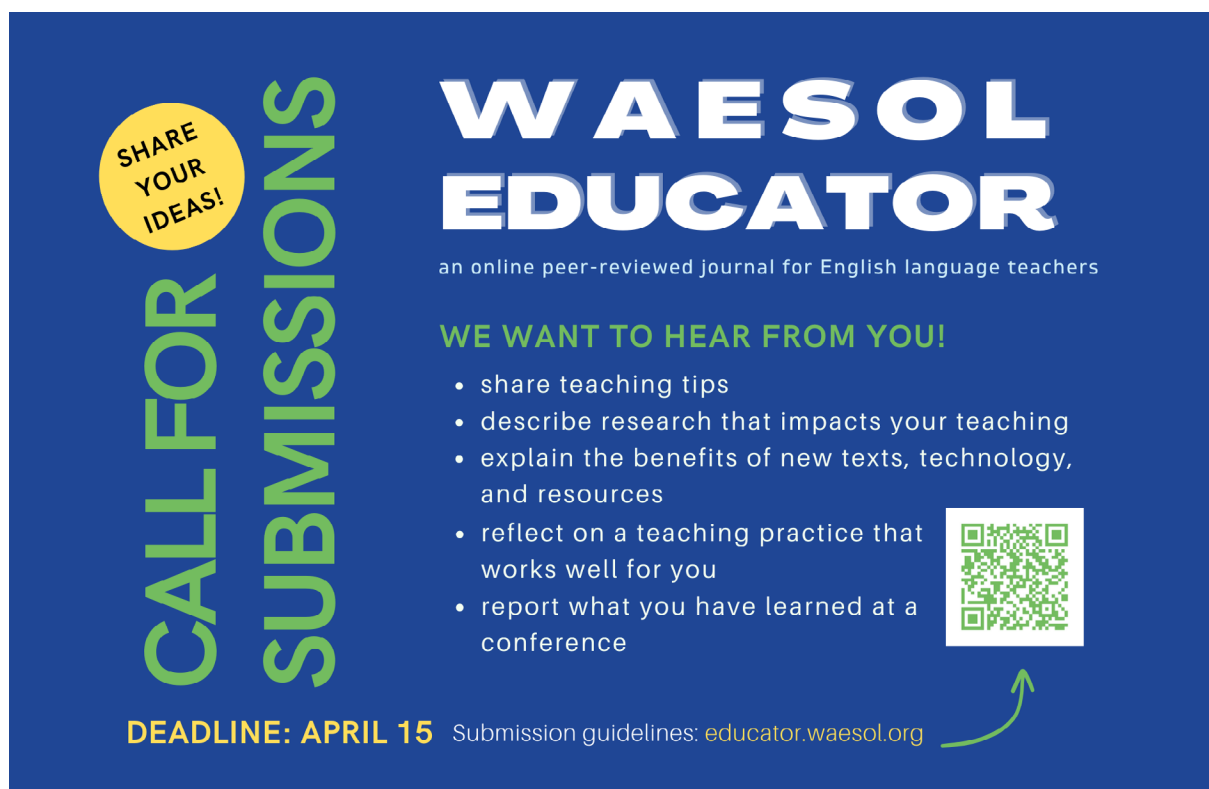
The [International Association for Intercultural Education](#) will be hosting another conference in Chemnitz, Germany on 26-28 March 2024 with presentation strands related to language. Although the conference does not focus explicitly on language education, there are presentation strands related to language.

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